PATTERNS OF EFL LEARNERS' AND INSTRUCTOR'S INTERACTIONS IN ASYNCHRONOUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS ON FREE WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The aim of the present study was to examine peer interactions and the instructor's facilitation of online asynchronous group discussions on free writing among 20 learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) joining one Saudi university over one academic semester. The study also attempted to explore the views of the learners on the online interactions.
Background	Peer interaction has been one of the interesting topics for research on the applications of computer mediated communication (CMC) tools among learners in different domains, including language learning and writing. However, most of the EFL classroom practices lack such peer interactions and are dominated by teacher-centered approaches. Moreover, although CMC tools serve as interactive platforms for online peer interaction, such interaction needs to be cultivated and maintained by instructors.
Methodology	The study was conducted among 20 learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in one Saudi university over one academic semester. The instructor of the writing course facilitated the asynchronous group discussions of free writing. The data was collected from (1) learners' peer interactions, (2) instructor's comments in the discussions and (3) learners' follow-up individual interviews. A qualitative content analysis of online interactions and a thematic analysis of the students' responses to the interview questions were performed.
Contribution	The use of technology reported in this study maximizes the opportunities for teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions, which are restricted or almost lacking in the EFL writing classroom. The findings of the present study also contribute to previous research on learners' peer interactions and instructors' facilitation of asynchronous group discussions. More specifically, the study informs us of the role of peer interactions through asynchronous tools in language learning,

including writing. It also highlights the role of instructors in facilitating asynchronous group discussions.

Findings	The findings showed that the EFL learners posted 1702 comments distributed among eleven patterns in terms of its language functions: evaluation, problem identification, alterations, clarification, suggestion, justification, agreements and disagreements, comprehension check, procedural, error acknowledgement and others. Analysis of the foci of peer interactions illustrated that the learners engaged in task-oriented interactions: content, organization, purpose, grammar, vocabulary and spelling and punctuations and non-task-oriented interactions: task management and socialization. Based on the analysis of the instructor's comments, the instructor played an important role in facilitating the group discussions as indicated through his various comments (n=852) on the learners' discussions. Although the learners expressed their positive views on the role of peer interactions and learner-instructor interactions in enhancing language learning, including writing, grammar and even reading, some of them were challenged by the flow of online interactions, weak net connection and sensitivity to peer feedback.
Recommendations for Practitioners	The findings of the study provide valuable recommendations to both learners and instructors who are interested in using asynchronous tools for language learning and, in particular, writing through interactions. The application of such tools is promising, and its value is maximized with instructor's facilitation of peer interactions.
Recommendations for Researchers	The study provides valuable insights into how peer interactions and instructor's comments are both important when investigating asynchronous group discussions in EFL learning. Therefore, researchers should search this interesting research topic further to enrich our knowledge of it.
Impact on Society	Since the study focuses on one country of the EFL context, it is expected to have an impact on the society, particularly university learners and instructors by raising their awareness of the role of technological applications in learning and teaching.
Future Research	Future researchers should focus on how peer interactions are distributed among individual learners and how the instructor's facilitation affects peer interactions in asynchronous group discussions over time.
Keywords	peer interaction, instructor's facilitation, asynchronous tools, EFL writing

INTRODUCTION

Peer interaction is recognized as an important component of the learning process. Being researched from the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky (1978), peer interaction has been theorized as a reciprocal process in which learners scaffold or assist each other (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Saeed & Ghazali, 2017), mediate and mentor their own learning (Grabinger & Dunlap, 1995). The increasing application of computer mediated communication (CMC) tools in learning in general and language learning in particular, including writing, has provided evidence of the role of such tools in facilitating peer interactions among learners of English as second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) (Bradley, 2014; Huang, 2002; Razak & Saeed, 2014; Saeed & Ghazali, 2017; Schrire, 2006).

Studies into online asynchronous group discussions have focused on peer interactions as an important area of investigation of learners' learning dynamics (Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000; Liou & Peng, 2009; Pham & Usaha, 2015; Saeed & Ghazali, 2017; Zhu, 2006). These studies indicate that peer interaction is a way for learners to collaborate, negotiate meanings, scaffold each other, evaluate what they learn, exchange suggestions, and clarify and identify problems in their learning tasks. These

studies also point at the effect of peer interactions on enhancement of their learning, particularly language learning and writing.

Although the above studies have contributed to our understanding of the role of peer interactions in asynchronous group discussions in enhancing learners' learning, including language learning and writing in particular, these studies have not looked at the role of instructors' facilitation in cultivating peer interactions. Another group of studies (An, Shin, & Lim, 2009; Nandi, Hamilton, & Harland, 2012; Ng, Cheung, & Hew, 2011) taking into consideration instructor's interaction with learners argued for the importance of such instructional facilitation in maintaining learners' active interactions and keeping them on the track in asynchronous group discussions. This is especially important as learners' peer interaction using asynchronous tools may not take place just by simply involving learners in asynchronous group discussions, but it needs to be appropriately facilitated, cultivated, and maintained by instructors. Moreover, the EFL learning environment still restricts the opportunities for teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions and peer learning activities, especially in writing classrooms (Razak & Saeed, 2014).Therefore, based on the documented role of asynchronous peer interactions in ESL/EFL learning and writing and the argument for the existence and facilitation of instructors in online discussions, the current study aimed to investigate EFL learners' peer interactions and the instructor's facilitation of the asynchronous group discussions of free writing in a Saudi university over one academic semester of 2016-2017. Specifically, the study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the EFL learners' patterns of peer interactions in asynchronous group discussions of free writing?

2. In what ways does the instructor facilitate the EFL learners' interactions as implied through his comments in the asynchronous discussions of free writing?

3. How do the EFL learners view their interactions in the asynchronous discussions of free writing?

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE OF PEER INTERACTIONS

Social constructivists, such as Vygotsky (1978), emphasize that learning is a process of knowledge construction and meaning negotiations. Such constructive learning does not occur in isolation, but through social interactions or dialogues. Vygotsky placed an emphasis on the role of social interactions in mediating the cognitive development of learners, which is also called the zone of proximal development (ZPD), that refers to the difference between what is done by an individual learner independently and what is done by him/her with the assistance of others. Such assistance of others who are usually more capable peers or teachers is called scaffolding (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Saeed & Ghazali, 2017; Shooshtari & Mir, 2014; Storch, 2017). In order for scaffolding to take place, interactions, either peer interactions and or learner-instructor interactions, should be cultivated in a given learning environment. From this theory, peer interaction is claimed to play an important part in mediating and significantly affecting the process of learning (Vonderwell, 2003). As stated by Grabinger and Dunlap (1995), learning is the result of peer interactions because it is only through interaction that they can negotiate meanings, debate, collaborate, cooperate and mentor their learning. According to Grabinger and Dunlap (1995), it is through interaction with peers and instructors that learners get the necessary support in achieving their goals of learning, which may not be achieved by them independently. In addition, scaffolding, as part of peer interaction or learner-instructor interaction, enables learners to perform learning tasks smoothly, motivate them to be active learners, and reduce their tension or anxiety (Vonderwell, 2003). Studies on ESL/EFL learners' participation or engagement in asynchronous discussions from this theory highlight the role of asynchronous tools in facilitating peer interactions and collaborative learning (e.g., Bradley, 2014; Huang, 2002; Schrire, 2006).

PEER INTERACTIONS IN ASYNCHRONOUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

There has been a wide body of research on the use of asynchronous technologies in various learning contexts and domains. Being grounded on the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky (1978), empirical studies have embarked on identifying the patterns of peer interactions in asynchronous discussions with the purpose of measuring their depth of learning of the courses where such technologies were implemented and integrated. Starting with those studies that focused on the patterns of peer interactions in asynchronous group discussions in learning, including language learning in general, Hara et al. (2000) reported that learners engaged in different patterns of interactions in asynchronous group learning, including clarifications, sharing ideas, suggestions, and judgment. The study also pointed at the depth of learners' interactions through the length of their messages exchanged in asynchronous group discussions over time. According to Zhu (2006), as learners engaged in asynchronous discussions in one science course, they exchanged comments functioning as statements, questions, reflection on learning, explanation, evaluation, scaffolding, and mentoring. Yet, the frequencies of such patterns of peer interactions varied from one class to another, which reflects the varying depth of learners' cognitive engagement in such discussions. In a more recent study by Nandi et al. (2012), the researchers identified six patterns of peer interaction: question-answer exchanges, clarifications, opinions, suggesting solutions, sharing ideas, and acknowledging understanding.

There are also many previous studies which have identified the patterns of peer interactions in group writing using asynchronous tools. For instance, Liu and Sadler's (2003) study reported four patterns of peer interactions: suggestion, evaluation, alterations, and clarifications. Regarding the frequency of occurrence of peer interactions in the asynchronous discussions, the highest pattern was alterations by which learners made suggestions on changing or editing their written texts, followed by evaluations, suggestions, and finally clarifications. Similar results on the same patterns of peer interactions were reported by other studies (Bradley, 2014; Chang, 2012; Ho, 2015). However, the number and frequencies of these patterns of peer interactions differed. For instance, while the highest number of interactions was scored by suggestions and the lowest number of interactions accounted for clarification in Bradley's (2014) study, suggestion was the highest and response was the lowest in Ho's (2015) study. Liou and Peng (2009) also identified the same patterns of peer interactions except for alterations. In a study by Razak and Saeed (2014), the researchers identified several patterns of peer interactions: clarification, confirmation checks, justification, the use of first language, and scaffolds used by EFL Arab learners in online asynchronous peer review. Two other subsequent studies (Saeed & Ghazali, 2016, 2017) supported such findings in relation to justification, agreement and disagreement, clarifications, and scaffolds posted by EFL learners in online peer review.

While the above pasterns of peer interactions were identified by previous researchers by analyzing the language functions of online interactions, there are also other patterns of peer interactions in asynchronous group discussions that were identified based on the foci of interactions. In this regard, researchers attempted to look at the focus areas of peer interactions in order to see whether learners focus on the task or deviate from the task. For example, Liu and Sadler (2003) identified the patterns of peer interactions in terms of the foci and categorized them as revision and non-revision-oriented interactions. While the first category of peer interactions refers to those comments by which learners identify various issues in their texts, the latter category of peer interactions refers to those comments which do not target any issue in their texts. The same researchers identified the sub-categories under the revision-oriented interactions: global and local. So, while global peer interactions target global issues in texts such as content, organization and purpose of writing, local interactions target local issues, including the language such as vocabulary and grammar and spelling and punctuations. The researchers concluded the study by highlighting the role of technology in assisting learners to engage more in revision-oriented interactions.

Other studies (Bradley, 2014; Liou & Peng, 2009; Pham & Usaha, 2016) also reported that as learners engaged in asynchronous group discussions in writing, they produced a higher number of revisions-oriented interactions. Moreover, most of their peer interactions targeted global issues of written

texts. In other two studies on EFL Arab learners' peer interactions in asynchronous groups (Saeed & Ghazali, 2017; Saeed, Ghazali, Abdulrab, & Sahuri, 2018), the researchers found that the learners engaged highly in revision-oriented interactions that focused on global issues and local issues in their writing. However, in the two studies, the frequency of global and local interactions differed. While Saeed and Ghazali (2017) reported that peer interactions focused on more global issues of texts than local issues, Saeed et al. (2018) found that learners' local interactional comments outnumbered that of global comments. Both studies support the role of asynchronous tools in providing learners with ample time to read and think well, and, therefore, they focus their interactions on their texts. The results reported by Chang (2012) indicate that in asynchronous group discussions, the learners made less interaction on global issues as compared to interaction on local issues. In brief, the results of some previous studies attributed such encouraging results as above regarding the higher number of revision-oriented interactions in asynchronous group discussions to the role of training and instruction on peer interactions that learners received prior to their engagement in asynchronous peer interactions (Liou & Peng, 2009; Pham & Usaha, 2015). This suggests that instruction is important for directing peer interactions towards global issues rather than local issues in writing. However, the role of instructors' facilitation in these studies during peer interactions has not been reported. Therefore, there are several other studies which have attempted to identify instructors' roles in facilitating peer interactions online which are discussed in the following sub-section.

Instructor's facilitation of peer interactions

Many previous studies have emphasized the role of the instructor and his/her social presence in facilitating learners' peer interactions online. For example, Paulsen (1995) categorized the roles of the instructor in online discussions into three main categories: organizational, social, and intellectual. For the first category, the instructor or moderator plays a role in setting up the goals and organizing the learners' interactions and discussions. In the social category, the moderator reinforces learners' learning behaviors through thanking and welcoming comments. In the intellectual category, the moderator keeps asking questions that stimulate learners' minds through their responses, creates an intellectual atmosphere, and makes a synthesis of online discussions. According to Anderson, Liam, Garrison, and Archer (2001), the instructor's role is realized in designing, facilitating, and directing learners' interaction and meaningful learning online. The same researchers identified three roles of the instructor: facilitator, organizer, and director of learners in online learning activities. The researchers emphasized the instructor's facilitation as it is crucial to foster learners' engagement in online discussions through his/her messages and comments that function as encouraging learners, prompting their discussions, creating an active learning climate, and acknowledging and reinforcing their contributions. According to Zhu (2006), the assumption that putting learners in online group discussions will lead to their interactions without being initiated, maintained, and nurtured by instructors would be unrealistic. Similarly, An et al. (2009) argued that the mere inclusion of learners in asynchronous online discussions will not guarantee learners' active peer interaction without an appropriate facilitation of instructors.

Ng et al. (2012) attempted to identify the types of facilitation comments in online group discussions. The most important techniques as suggested through comments are invitation to participate in discussions, questioning, establishing grounds and focus for discussions, showing appreciation of contributions, elaboration, clarification and synthesizing or summarizing. As reported by Nandi et al. (2012), the instructors had active roles in facilitating learners' peer interactions by initiating and carrying forward the discussions. The learners also seemed to prefer instructor's periodic feedback because it allowed them to keep on track and even had opportunities to ask the instructors questions related to the course. In Hew's study (2015), students preferred to have an instructor facilitate their online discussions in forums because they believed that the instructor would be more capable of guiding them in such discussions, especially when they interact and discuss challenging and complex issues in the course. Moreover, the existence of an instructor would keep learners' interactions and discussions on track due to his/her authority over them. In addition, this study suggests that the in-

structor is needed in online discussions since he/she plays a role in motivating learners to interact and actively discuss learning tasks.

To sum up, most of the above studies on both peer interactions and instructors' roles in facilitating interactions (see Table 1) have highlighted the advantage of using asynchronous technological tools for the delayed time between one learner's comment and another learner's response to a given comment.

Table 1. A summary of the literature review

Authors	Findings
Anderson et al. (2001)	The instructor acts as a facilitator, an organizer and a director of learners in online learning.
Bradley (2014)	Functions: clarifications, alterations, evaluation and suggestions
	Foci: A higher number of revision-oriented than non-revision oriented and more global comments than local comments.
Chang (2012)	Functions: clarifications, alterations, evaluation and suggestions with evaluation as the highest and clarification as the lowest.
	Foci: More revision-oriented than non-revision-oriented and more local comments than global comments in the asynchronous peer review.
Ho (2015)	Functions: clarifications, alterations, evaluation and suggestions with alterations as the highest and clarifications as the lowest in the online peer review mode.
	Foci: A higher number of revision-oriented than non-revision-oriented comments.
Hara et al. (2000)	Functions: suggestions, clarifications, judgment and sharing ideas that helped students to process the information of the course.
Liou and Peng (2009)	Functions: clarifications, evaluation and suggestions as well as chatting with chatting as the most dominating category and clarification as the least dominating one.
	Foci: A higher number of revision-oriented than non-revision oriented and more global comments than local comments.
Liu and Sadler (2003)	Functions: clarifications, alterations, evaluation and suggestions
	Foci: Revision and non-revision oriented. Global: content, organization and purpose and local: language, spelling and punctuations. More revision-oriented
Nandi et al. (2012)	Functions: question-response, proposing solutions, clarifications, admitting understanding, sharing ideas and expressing opinions.
	The instructor acts as a facilitator of online discussions by initiating and carrying forward the discussions.
Ng et al. (2011)	The instructor posts comments that invite learners, clarifying, elaborating, questioning, synthesizing information, acknowledging contribution and establishing grounds for online discussions.
Pham and Usaha (2016)	Foci: A higher number of revision-oriented than non-revision oriented and more global comments than local comments.
Razak and Saeed (2014)	Functions: Scaffolding, using L1, justification, clarifications and confirmation checks.

Authors	Findings
Saeed & Ghazali (2016, 2017)	Functions: problem-identification, scaffolding, agreement, disagreement, clarifications, evaluations, justification, confirming understanding, acknowledging errors and procedural.
	Foci: More global comments than local comments in online peer review of writing
Saeed et al. (2018)	Foci: More revision-oriented comments than non-revision-oriented comments and more local comments than global comments.
Zhu (2006)	Functions: evaluation, scaffolding, mentoring, explanation, statements, questions and reflection

In other words, asynchronous technological tools provide learners with enough time to read and reflect on their peers' or even instructors' comments and then respond to them, thus showing better processing or understanding of the information shared among learners. This implies that the delayed time in such asynchronous discussions allows for better and deep discussions that reflect learners' deep cognitive processing of what they discuss online. Moreover, the necessity of instructor's facilitation has been highly emphasized in the latter group of the above-reviewed studies.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The present study used a qualitative research approach. Specifically, the study used a case study approach since it suits the purpose, which is investigating peer interaction as a process in one particular group of EFL students in one Saudi university. Such case study is suitable to explore a particular phenomenon, including knowledge construction of participants (Yin, 2013). Such qualitative approach suits an investigation of peer interactions from the Vygotskian or socio-cultural theory (1978) in an attempt to understand the interactional dynamics of learners (e.g., De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000).

THE PEER WRITING AND ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

The study was conducted during the second semester of the academic year of 2016-2017. The first stage of the study procedure was announcing the activities of peer writing and online group discussions to the students. Then, they were informed of the purpose of the study and that their participation in the activities would be voluntary and for enhancing their writing in English. This stage also included discussing the students' choices of the topics for writing, and it was decided that they would have free writing. Following this was training the participating students in how to review their writing through peer interactions. They were asked to write one sample task and requested to interact and discuss it by identifying the issues. The training stage focused on raising the EFL learners' awareness of how to identify and suggest solutions to the main issues in their writing, specifically in relation to the content, organization, purpose, grammar, vocabulary, and spelling and punctuations based on instruction prepared by the lecturer. In other words, the instruction guided the learners to comment on the sample written texts and detect issues locally (grammar, vocabulary, and spelling and punctuations) and globally (content, purpose, and organization) as in the majority of earlier studies on peer review of writing. These questions were formed within the literature review of previous studies on learners' interaction and text revisions in peer review in general (e.g., Liou & Peng 2009; Liu & Sadler 2003). During this stage, the learners were asked to join the forum created by the researcher and log into using their email accounts.

The third stage was the writing stage in which each individual was assigned to write one task on free writing or on a topic of his choice. They wrote the tasks inside the class, and they were asked to email the tasks to the lecturer of the course. The lecturer informed them that they would have weekly online discussions (one group discussion each week) and decided on the day that the discussions

would be carried out each week. During this stage, the students were prepared for the online discussions and encouraged to be active. The last stage comprised the online group discussions. In each weekly, discussion (almost 2 hours), the lecturer posted one task of free writing written by one student in the forum and asked the students to interact and discuss its issues following the instruction given to them during the training stage. They were also encouraged to suggest ideas or solutions to these issues in writing and re-write the task in a better way. In other words, they did not only comment on the task or first version of the task, but they also revised it and improved it. As the students interacted in the group discussions, they posted comments. The instructor was also present online and acted as a facilitator of the students' peer interactions. Overall, the students spent 14 weeks during which they had 14 online group discussions on their free writing.

THE STUDY SETTING AND THE PARTICIPANTS

The present study was conducted in the Department of English at one Saudi university. The university is located in a middle socioeconomic status area in the central part of Saudi Arabia. It is considered one of the largest universities, hosting approximately 20,000 students enrolled in different majors. There are many undergraduate and graduate degrees offered throughout the university departments such as Arabic language, English language, Math, and Physics.

A total of 20 full-time third-year students (11 male and 9 female) majoring in English (4-year diploma) were selected as the participants in the present study (see Table 2). The four-year English program consists of eight levels, each of which is one semester-long and lasts for three months. The participants' ages vary from 20 to 23 years old. According to the department entrance exams, the students at the third year are considered to have an upper-intermediate level of English proficiency. They are all Saudi citizens and have Arabic Language as their mother tongue, while English is a foreign language for them.

Table 2. Profile of the Participants

Pseudonyms	Age	Gender
S1	20	M
S2	20	M
S3	21	M
S4	22	F
S5	23	F
S6	20	F
S7	21	F
S8	22	M
S9	23	F
S10	20	M
S11	20	M
S12	21	M
S13	23	F
S14	20	F
S15	22	M
S16	22	M
S17	22	M
S18	20	F
S19	21	F
S20	23	M

DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

Data collection began at the start of the online group discussions. The study used three types of data. The first type of data is the online peer interaction. The second data was the instructor's online interaction as demonstrated through his comments on the students' discussions. Both types of data were collected each week at the end of each online discussion. The instructor, who is the researcher of the current study, organized such data in word files along with the date and day of each discussion.

For the third type of data, the follow-up-interviews, the data was collected after the students completed the online group discussions and revised all their free writing tasks. The interview was conducted in several individual meetings between the researcher and individual students. The questions of the interviews were developed based on the literature review and the researcher's observation of the online group dynamics since he was present online during the discussions. During the interview meetings, the students were asked several questions (see Appendix) that captured their views on the online group discussions with a focus on their peer interactions and instructor-learner interactions. The interviews were recorded by the researcher. Each interview took almost 10-15 minutes.

Our qualitative analysis of the data specifically content analysis and thematic analysis were performed following various phases and stages documented in previous studies (Creswell, 2008; Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Gibbs 2002). The main phases are (1) preparing the data, (2) coding the data, (3) defining the themes and (4) reporting findings as shown in Figure 1.
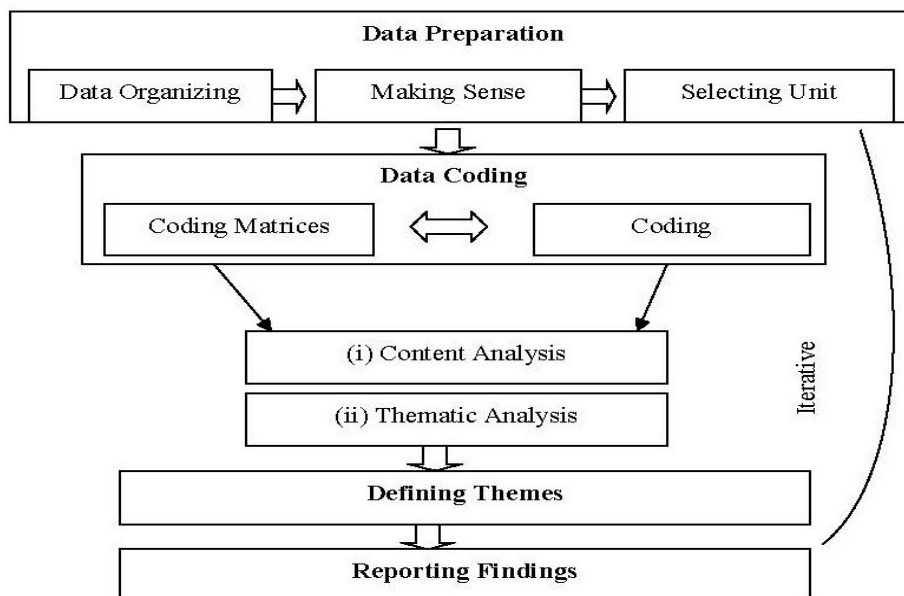

Figure 1. Procedure of the Data Analysis

The data preparation phase started during the data collection as it assisted in moving backwards and forwards between the emergent categories and themes and data collection. It included three steps: organizing the data, making sense of the data, and selecting a unit of analysis. The data generated from the online interactions and the interview transcripts were all organized in MS Word files and were read by two coders: the researcher of this study and another colleague who is a researcher in the same field to get familiar with it. Then, a unit of analysis was selected. It can be a linguistic unit such as a word, phrase or sentence, or a theme/idea. So, for the present study, idea was selected as a unit of analysis. Regarding this, Gere and Abbott (1985) define idea units as "brief spurts which reflect the speaker's object of consciousness" (p. 367). A comment may consist of one or more idea units. For example, the comment "Oh, yes, this is a good idea you suggested. But I can see that this needs

to be corrected in terms of structure" consists of two idea units: evaluation and problem-identification.

The second phase included data coding, which is defined as a process of identifying bits of data and labeling them based on matrices that were either developed from earlier research or generated from the data and defined by the researcher. For this study, most of the matrices were developed from previous research. For the peer interactions, the matrices were adopted from Liu and Sadler (2003), which was also used in most previous studies reviewed above. Thus, online peer interactions and instructor's comments were coded using a qualitative content analysis. For the online peer interactions, two rounds of coding were performed based on the literature review of peer interactions in online peer writing. The first round focused on coding the peer interactions in terms of the language functions as seen in the example below where the comment was coded in terms of the language function as justification:

> S10: I think it should be "had" because we are talking about two events. Both happened in the past but, if you say that it's a completion to the thought of being late, then it makes a good sense!

During the first round of coding the online peer interactions in terms of the language functions, we coded an overall 1702 comments exchanged by the learners on their free writing. However, since there were some comments with more than one language function, each comment was coded twice, thus accelerating the number of comments to 1799 comments in terms of its language functions. An example of such comment that has two different language functions is provided below in which the learner posted a comment that functions as a suggestion and a comprehension check:

> S1: We should say "I arrived at 8:30 am to university." You got me?

However, since Liu and Sadler (2003) and most consequent studies identified only four patterns of the foci of peer interactions, in this study, other categories were observed in the data and, therefore, other two studies (Saeed & Ghazali, 2016, 2017) were used to code the remaining part of the data. Thus, based on this round of coding the learners' language functions of peer interaction, we generated 11 patterns of language functions presented in the Findings section along with the number and percentage of each pattern of peer interactions.

The second round of coding focused on coding the peer interactions in terms of the foci-the focus area of writing that each comment targeted based on Liu's and Sadler's (2003) study. Regarding this, we found that each comment of the overall number comments (1702) had one idea or focus area. An example illustrating coding the peer interactions in terms of the foci is presented below where S15 attempted to target the issue of spelling in one of the posted paragraphs:

> S15: Hi dear I checked your corrected paragraph and here are some points: Bowling>>> bowling// Their >>their.

Based on our coding of the learners' peer interactions in terms of the foci within Liu and Sadler's study (2003), five patterns of the foci of peer interactions were identified. However, for the other part of this data that does not suit these categories, it was coded based on Saeed and Ghazali's (2017) study and two more categories were identified. In brief, eight patterns of peer interactions in relation to the foci were identified and they are all presented in the Findings section in conjunction with the number and percentage of each pattern as well as samples extracted from the online discussions.

The instructor posted 852 comments in the online discussions over the study period. A qualitative content analysis of the comments was also performed in this study to code the patterns of comments posted by the instructor. Regarding this, some previous studies on instructor's facilitation of peer interactions online (Anderson et al., 2001; Ng et al., 2012; Paulsen, 1995) were used as guidance for our analysis and identification of the instructor's roles as implied through his comments. For instance, the following comment posted by the instructor in the online group discussions functioned as an invitation of the learners to comment on one paragraph corrected by one learner:

Instructor: Any comment on the last corrected paragraph posted now please?

Based on our entire coding of the instructor's comments in the online group discussions, we identified various patterns of comments exemplifying his roles in the discussions. These patterns of comments showing how the instructor acted in the online discussions along with the numbers and percentages and examples extracted from the online discussions are all provided in the Findings section.

The students' responses to the interview questions were analyzed using a thematic analysis. Regarding this, the two coders read the transcripts of the students' follow-up interviews several times. Then, they continued coding and re-coding the data till they defined the themes emergent from the interviews that describe the learners' views on their experiences in the online group discussions. This analysis of such data aimed to answer the third research question. The themes emergent from our analysis are reported in the Findings section with examples taken from the students' voices in the interviews.

FINDINGS

RQ1: WHAT ARE THE EFL LEARNERS' PATTERNS OF INTERACTION IN ASYNCHRONOUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS OF FREE WRITING?

Language functions of peer interactions

The present study aimed to identify the patterns of EFL learners' peer interactions in asynchronous group discussions of free writing. Based on our content analysis of the language functions of peer interactions over the study period, the learners exchanged an overall 1799 comments in terms of its language functions. The learners' peer interactions were classified under seven main categories along with the number and percentage of each category as well as samples extracted from the EFL learners' asynchronous group discussions. The highest category of peer interactions was the evaluation category with 309 comments, thus rating the highest percentage of 17%. In exchanging evaluation comments, the EFL learners assessed or expressed their opinions and judgment about several aspects of their writing posted in the group discussions. The evaluation pattern of interactions is illustrated by the sample comments exchanged by S4 and S12 about their evaluation of the paragraph corrected by one of their peers in terms of ideas and editing. The second highest category of peer interactions is identification of various problems and issues in the EFL learners' free writing (N=296) and with a percentage of 16%. As the learners worked together in the group discussions, they used this category of interactions as a way to detect or identify different issues and errors in their free writing. For instance, the comment by S8 is an example illustrating how the learner could identify or detect the error in one peer learner's use of the verb embarrassed in the revised paragraph (see Table 3).

It is interesting that alterations assumed the third highest category of peer asynchronous interactions since the EFL learners posted 206 comments functioning as alterations with a rate of 11%. Regarding this, S7 suggested alterations to peer's writing, particularly the use of the verb *disturb* in the past by changing it into the past simple or past continuous tense. This is followed by clarifications and suggestions which accounted for 182 comments and 173 comments, respectively with the same percentage of 10%. These two patterns of asynchronous peer interactions indicate how the EFL learners attempted to seek and provide information clarifying their intention and suggesting ideas to each other. As shown in the same table, the exchanges between S5 and S3 are examples of seeking and providing clarifications about the use of the adverb of "nowadays", whereas the exchanges of comments posted by S2 and S6 function as a reciprocal way of seeking and giving suggestions or advice on the use of "teaching career". Another interesting pattern of peer interactions, which was found to be in the form of a combination of question-response exchanges, was justification. In this study, the EFL learners posted 144 comments by which they sought and gave justifications about their various points. For example, S15 postdated a question seeking S11's justification of her revision, which was answered by S11 giving a mini explanation of the use of the past continuous tense.

Table 3. Patterns of Peer Interactions in Terms of the Language Functions

Patterns	Percentage	Samples
Evaluation	309 (17%)	**S4** I think that this paragraph is good as it is, it's my opinion. What about you?
		S12 Yup I think so for me for ideas. Just it needs editing.
Problem identification	296 (16%)	**S8** but when you say "I embarrassed", it means that you caused somebody else's embarrassment. So I was embarrassed.
Alterations	206 (11%)	**S7** Hey: He really disturbing me>> He really (disturbed or was disturbing) me.
Clarifications	182 (10%)	**S5** what do you mean?
		S3 I meant she used Nowadays and did not change the tense that she used.
Suggestions	173 (10%)	**S2** One last question: what do you suggest? To say: a teaching profession or a teaching career?
		S6 I suggest the word "CAREER" since it is better.
Justifications	144 (8%)	**S15** Just a question: Why did you say "the bell was ringing"? Thanks a lot for your correction.
		S11 I said the bell was ringing because we have the present progressive here =>the verb (TO) RING+ing.
Agreements and disagreements	138 (10%)	**S14** Hello do you agree with that comment?
		S18 Yes totally agree with what she said.
		S1 I do not agree that the 1st sentence can be your topic sentence. It usually does, but not necessary in all cases.
Compression checks	109 (6%)	**S20** Yup but you know better to use ing here in order to make the situation of losing grammar increase more. Got me?
		S6 Yeah I got it now.
Procedural	81 (4%)	**S10** Hi TI and TS. I checked both of your posts.
Acknowledging errors	53 (3%)	**S19** I made mistakes because I was in a hurry but I am waiting for the correct answer.
Others	108 (6%)	**S9** hahaha I guess I need a cup of tea too because it seems like going to be a long day.

The EFL learners, through peer asynchronous interactions, negotiated their agreements and disagreements about various aspects, suggestions, and even revisions of their writing (138 comments scoring 10%) and exchanged comments checking their comprehension or understanding (109 comments with a percentage of 6%). These two patterns of peer interactions are illustrated by the comments posted by S14, S18, and S7 for agreements and disagreements and by S20 and S6 for checking comprehension. All these above-mentioned categories of peer interactions reflect how the EFL learners made cognitive effort on their tasks and how they remained on the task itself.

The final three patterns of EFL learners' peer interactions in the asynchronous group discussions are procedural (81 comments rating 4%), acknowledgement of errors (53 comments scoring 3%) and others (108 comments scoring 6%). The procedural comments as represented through S10's com-

ment on handling the task of checking her peers' posts. The learners also acknowledged errors or mistakes made by them in their posts as indicated by S19's comment. They also posted comments which were categorized as others since they show how the EFL learners were deviating from the learning task by commenting on other irrelevant matters. This is exemplified by S9's comment.

Foci of peer interactions

In this study, we also analyzed the EFL learners' peer interactions in relation to the foci of each comment. For the foci of peer interactions, each comment was found to focus on a single aspect, so there were 1702 comments that fall under eight categories of learners' peer interactions in relation to its foci. These categories are presented in Table 4 along with the number and percentage as well as samples extracted from the asynchronous group discussions illustrating each category.

Table 4. Patterns of Peer Interactions in Terms of the Foci

Patterns	Percentage	Samples
Content	89 (5%)	**S9** These ideas are irrelevant as some talk about different educational systems not about the equality in education.
		S2 Ideas do exist but I think they are awkwardly expressed for example: difficulty in distributing efficiency to everyone equally.
Organization	128 (8%)	**S16** There is a sort of jumping from one idea to another! I changed the organization of the sentences, but the idea is still the same!
Purpose	65 (4%)	**S11** I like the clear position they took in the concluding sentence which is arguing against using it generally.
Grammar	527 (31%)	**S18** When we say: I have to do something, it means it is necessary or I am obliged to do it?
		S6 It is for necessity.
Meaning/vocabulary	501 (29%)	**S15** I think alone is more suitable as it means no one else was there except the writer of the paragraph.
		S14 Of course agree with you as it makes the meaning clear now.
Spelling and punctuation	203 (12%)	**S8** Nothing wrong dear u just misspelling two.
		S12 We need also to put a comma before 'and' in a series of things!
Task managing	81 (5%)	**S10** What paragraph r u talking about?
		S4 paragraph 12. You can look at grammar and other aspects.
Socialization	108 (6%)	**S17** Hi all. Hope you are fine. I miss you and you sweet comments.
		S4 Hey take it easy and was just kidding.
		S13 Really it's her time now. Have a nice day & see you.

The highest category of the foci of peer interactions is the grammar since there are 527 comments that were identified to be focusing on grammatical issues in the EFL learners' writing with a percentage of 31%. For instance, the comments exchanged by S18 and S6 represent a sample of peer interactions focusing on grammar. The second highest category is the peer interactions focusing on

meaning or vocabulary choice as the learners exchanged 501 comments accounting for 29%. This is demonstrated by how S15 and S14 were commenting on using an adverb that accurately and clearly conveys the intended meaning. Peer interactions oriented towards spelling and punctuation errors accounted for 203 comments with a percentage of 11%. This is drawn in the examples of comments provided by S8 and S12. Following this are the organization-oriented interactions (128 comments with a rate of 8%) by which learners focused on issues related to organizations of ideas in the texts as seen by S16's comment. There were also 108 comments which reflect how the EFL learners engaged in socialization and communication. For instance, they focused on social matters like friendships and greetings as it is clear in the case of the sample comments by S17, S4, and S13.

Content was also another aspect of the foci of peer interaction which received a considerable attention from learners as identified in 89 comments (5%) and evidenced by S9's and S2's comments. The last two categories of the foci of peer interactions in the asynchronous group discussions are task managing and purpose of writing with 81 and 65 comments and a percentage of 5% and 4%, respectively. In task-managing-related interactions, the EFL learners were observed to comment on how to handle the task of group discussions as seen in the comments by S10 and S4. For the purpose, the learners exchanged comments showing their awareness of the purpose of writing in the texts they discussed. An example of this is the comment posted S11 in which she pointed at the position of the author as part of the purpose of writing, which is argumentative writing.

RQ2: IN WHAT WAYS DOES THE INSTRUCTOR FACILITATE THE EFL LEARNERS' INTERACTION AS IMPLIED THROUGH HIS COMMENTS IN THE ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSIONS OF FREE WRITING?

In this study, a content analysis was also performed to analyze the instructor's comments. Our interest was to identify the various ways in which the instructor and his online presence facilitated the EFL learners' asynchronous interactions. The findings revealed that the instructor played an important role in facilitating the EFL learners' peer interactions in the asynchronous group discussions. This is evidenced by the number of comments (852) posted by the instructor to the students and its patterns which varied from to inviting the learners to participate in the activities to synthesizing or summarizing the main points of the discussions. Specifically, the content analysis of the instructor's comments shows his relentless role as a facilitator as indicated by his posts and comments which functioned as organizing the peer interactions in the asynchronous discussions (112 comments), thus scoring 13%. The instructor also commented on individual learners who remained silent for some time by checking their social presence (109 comments with a percentage of 13%). It is also interesting that a large proportion of the instructor's comments (108 and a percentage of 13%) was devoted on questioning the EFL learners as a way to scaffold them especially in cases when they did not pay attention to important issues in their writing or when they failed to detect such issues and fix them. This is followed by those comments that served as invitation to all learners as a group or even specific individual learners to take part in the asynchronous discussions (106 comments rating 12%). In each weekly discussion, the instructor invited them to the activities (see Table 5).

Table 5. The instructor's patterns of comments

Patterns	Percentage	Samples
Inviting learners to participate	106 (12%)	Hi all. You are invited to read this paragraph well and comment on it.
		Hi sure no more comments on that paragraph?
Checking social presence	109 (13%)	Hi Are you here?
		S4 Yes I am reading the 2 topics now.
Organizing	112 (13%)	Ok see the 1st paragraph above and read it well and then, start pointing out at the errors please.

Patterns	Percentage	Samples
Giving a mini instruction	63 (7%)	So the verb "peep" can be also used to look secretly through the window.
Questioning	108 (13%)	Hi but amount pluralized or a singular with the indefinite article "a" as done by you above? S10: Sorry to a huge amount of information.
Establishing a focus	52 (6%)	Great and now you should focus on the language used in your written paragraphs.
Encouraging peers	94 (11%)	Great you all and you have done a great job. Go ahead.
Acknowledging peers' contributions	73 (9%)	Bravo all for you and proud of you as you posted constructive comments on this paragraph.
Answering questions raised by peers	84 (10%)	S5 what do I do in this paragraph? Ok answer the other 3 questions about the paragraph one by one please.
Synthesizing or summarizing	51 (6%)	And thanks all. Based on your comments above, we can say that you have addressed many issues and errors that we can group them under: content, organization, purpose and language as well as punctuations.

Moreover, 94 of the instructor's comments functioned as a means of encouraging or motivating the EFL learners to engage deeply and actively participate in the discussions. In many cases, individual learners kept posting questions asking answers from other peers. However, when other peers failed or seemed to be hesitant about their answers, the instructor replied to them. Regarding this, the comments which were posted as answers to learners' questions accounted for 84 comments with a percentage of 10%. The instructor also played an important role in fostering the EFL learners' contributions by acknowledging their peer interactions (73 comments rating 9%). Sometimes, the instructor posted comments as mini lessons on several aspects of EFL writing, including grammar rules and vocabulary use (63 comments scoring 7%). The final two roles assumed by the instructor in the asynchronous group discussions are establishing a focus of the discussions (52 comments) and summarizing the main points of the discussions (51 comments), which both obtained a similar percentage of almost 6%.

RQ 3: HOW DO THE EFL LEARNERS VIEW THEIR INTERACTIONS IN THE ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSIONS OF FREE WRITING?

In analyzing the interviews, several themes emerging from the analysis characterize the asynchronous group discussions of free writing. One interesting theme generated from the thematic analysis of the students' interviews is the perceived active interaction in the asynchronous group discussions. Regarding this, some EFL learners stated that one interesting feature of the asynchronous group discussions is the peer interaction, while others also pointed at learner-instructor interaction:

"Well. We definitely have learner-learner interaction as we discuss free or English-related topics and we find it very useful at all aspects" (S10).

"Actually, in this group, we interact with each other, and we also interact with the teacher who responds to our questions when we do not agree with peers." (S11).

The second interesting theme which emerged from the analysis of the interviews is the perceived value of the interactions in mediating the learners' language learning in general. Most of the partici-

pating learners pointed at the role of peer interactions in assisting them to better understand and better learn English and negotiate meanings and express their ideas clearly:

> "Our interaction through group discussion with each other helps us to acquire better language abilities in English and to discover new cultures" (S1).

> "I can mention the fact of discussing meaning. We negotiate meaning either with each other or with the teacher" (S3).

> "Sure, interaction in this group has a very important role as it helped me to express my ideas and thoughts in a clear way" (S5).

Many learners also realized the value of peer interactions in the asynchronous group discussions in getting their errors or mistakes in writing corrected, enhancing their writing through peer feedback and revisions of texts, improving their reading skills as they need to read all peers' comments, and even communication skills since they have to communicate with each other in the group:

> "Sometimes you don't realize the spelling and grammar mistakes you commit, but through these activities, other members see that and correct them, and u will always remember not to commit the same mistakes" (S13).

> "Posting and commenting in this group give us such a great chance to exchange information about grammar" (S19).

> "Because even we don't know things, so we can add to our personal grammar through reading the other comment or posts" (S15).

> "It is a good chance to enhance our writing skills, esp. when there is an interaction between people and friends" (S4).

It was also interesting that the EFL learners' voices in the interviews are indicative of the perceived importance of the online learning environment in promoting their peer interactions. Concerning this, some learners perceived the Facebook group as an interactive learning environment that is conducive to dynamic interactions among them, while others pointed at the role of instructor in facilitating their peer interactions and encouragement from both peers and the instructor in the asynchronous group discussions:

> "The interactive environment is the most interesting feature I like about our group, as we all try to better our writing and help each other in terms of writing and even the way of thinking and analyzing the topic to write about it later" (S9).

> "Actually in this group, we interact with each other and the teacher acts as a facilitator not like in the classroom" (S6).

> "The second thing is the encouraging from other members and the teachers" (S12).

Although the above voices of the students are indicative of the value of peer interactions in language learning in general and in writing and grammar in particular, some learners also found it challenging to engage in asynchronous group discussions. Specifically, those learners seemed to be struggling to follow up the huge amount of comments in each weekly discussion as well as the weak connection of the net. However, a few others identified other challenges, including the lacking tolerance of peers' some comments on writing among some peers, which makes it sensitive for them to identify every issue in their writing:

> "The challenge is to follow up the comments made by the group to see what they have said about the subjects. As the participants maybe many, it is sometimes difficult to follow up their comments" (S18).

> "Almost nothing but sometimes, the weak net connection" (S20).

"Sometimes, it became little sensitive to attack one paragraph by all other members as to inspect every word, every comma or punctuation mark, or apostrophe" (S16).

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study on the EFL learners' patterns of peer interactions support the role of such interactions in asynchronous group discussions within the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and previous studies on learning in general (Nandi et al., 2012; Rovai, 2007; Schrire, 2006; Zhu, 2006) and in particular in ESL/EFL writing (Ho, 2015; Liou & Peng, 2009; Liu & Sadler, 2003; Saeed & Ghazali, 2016, 2017; Saeed et al., 2018). Interpreting the findings of the study from this theory of Vygotsky (1978), peer learning online does not occur in isolation but in collaboration among learners through peer interactions. Specifically, the present study provided empirical evidence showing that EFL learners can be active learners as shown in the overall number of comments exchanged by them in the asynchronous group discussions over the study period. Interestingly, in terms of the patterns of peer feedback, our analysis of the language functions revealed several patterns of interactions, including suggestion, evaluation, alterations, and clarifications, which is consistent with the results of several previous studies on peer interaction in asynchronous group writing (Bradley, 2014; Chang, 2012; Ho, 2015; Liou & Peng, 2009; Liu & Sadler, 2003). Yet, the present study identified further patterns of peer interactions, which support some other studies in peer learning (Hara et al., 2000; Nandi et al., 2012; Zhu, 2006) and peer writing (Razak & Saeed, 2014; Saeed & Ghazali, 2016, 2017). These patterns are problem identification, justification exchanges, comprehension checks, acknowledging errors, expressing agreements and disagreements about various issues of their free writing, procedural comments, and others.

The findings of the present study also highlight the importance of peer interactions as evidenced by the foci of interactions exchanged by the EFL learners. Concerning this, the EFL learners focused on the task of reviewing and revising their free writing through their peer interactions oriented towards the content, organization, purpose, grammar, meaning/vocabulary, and spelling and punctuations with different numbers and percentages. These patterns of interaction from the foci perspective are almost similar to what was called as revision-oriented interactions in several previous studies on asynchronous peer writing (Ho, 2015; Liou & Peng, 2009; Liu & Sadler, 2003; Saeed & Ghazali, 2017; Saeed et al., 2018) since they enable learners to remain focused on the task itself, identify various issues in writing and assist each other to revise their texts. In other words, such peer interactions show how learners mediate their learning or understanding of what they do and construct their knowledge of writing in asynchronous group discussions. This study also adds to these previous studies in terms of how learners, through peer interactions, attempt to organize or manage the task through procedural comments and also deviate from the task through comments oriented towards socialization and friendships. This goes in line with the two studies by Saeed and Ghazali (2017) and Saeed et al. (2018) which emphasized the roles of such patterns of peer interactions in asynchronous group discussions in contributing to their learning indirectly by creating a friendly atmosphere where they feel attached and committed to the group.

Regarding the numbers and percentages of the above-identified patterns of peer interactions in terms of the functions and foci of interactions, a comparison of this to previous related research shows a different tendency. While in our study, the highest patterns of peer interactions are evaluations, followed by problem identification and alterations, and the lowest patterns are acknowledging errors and procedural comments, in other studies, other different patterns of interactions scored the highest (e.g., chatting for Liou & Peng, 2009, suggestion for Bradley, 2014 and Ho, 2015) and the lowest (e.g., clarifications for Liou & Peng, 2009 and Bradley, 2014, alteration for Chang, 2012 and response for Ho, 2015) occurrence in asynchronous group writing. Such differences of the frequency or occurrences of patterns of peer interactions can be also true between this study and other studies in relation to the foci of peer interactions. While most of these previous studies reported that ESL/EFL learners exchanged more comments that focused on global issues of writing (e.g., content,

organization, and purpose) than comments focusing local issues (e.g., grammar, meaning, and spelling and punctuations), in this study, the learners' comments focused more on local issues as seen from the highest patterns of peer interactions which are grammar, meaning, and spelling and punctuations than global issues as evidenced by the lowest patterns which are purpose and content. Regardless of this, our findings still support how asynchronous technologies engage learners in more task-related interactions through the feature of delayed time between posting a question and responding to it, as reported by Saeed and Ghazali (2017) and Saeed et al. (2018).

Like several previous studies (Anderson et al., 2001; Nandi et al., 2012; Paulsen, 1995; Zhu, 2006), the findings of the present study add to the literature review on the importance of instructor's facilitation in promoting and maintain EFL learners' peer interactions in asynchronous group discussions. Specifically, the current study identified several ways by which the instructor could facilitate the EFL learners' peer interactions in asynchronous online discussion. In this regard, peer interaction may not occur by itself just because learners are available online, but it needs to be facilitated maintained and fostered by instructors. In this study, the instructor played the role of an active facilitator who was present online during each weekly group discussion and kept commenting on the group by inviting them to participate, questioning them, responding to some learners' questions, encouraging them to participate, acknowledging their contributions, and even checking the social presence of these who were seen to be silent for some time.

Researching on peer interactions also needs to emphasize learners' reflection on their experiences and practices when engaging in asynchronous group discussions. Therefore, the present study also attempted to explore the EFL learners' views on their peer interactions. The findings obtained from the thematic analysis of the learners' voices in the interviews indicate that peer interaction is necessary for their language learning in general. Like several studies on learners' perception of their asynchronous group discussions in writing (Razak & Saeed, 2014; Razak, Saeed, & Ahmad, 2013; Saeed & Ghazali, 2017; Saeed et al., 2018), this highly emphasized finding suggests that the learners may have found such interactions as a way to engage in an active learning environment where they act as active learners rather than passive learners as in the case of most traditional EFL classes and where they could get ample opportunities to learn EFL through peer interactions and practices, especially since the medium of interactions and communication in the asynchronous group discussions was observed to be mainly English. In spite of this, the voices of the EFL learners also articulated the role of the instructor in promoting their interactions. Moreover, although the learners seemed to be aware of the value of peer interactions in writing, grammar and even reading in English and how the asynchronous technology played a role in facilitating their interactions, they appeared to be challenged by the large amount of interactions that may have made it sometimes difficult for some of them to follow the online discussions. They were also challenged by the disruption or weakness of the net connection and the lacking tolerance of peer feedback among some of them, which made it sensitive for providers of comments to point at each issue in their writing.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

The findings of the present study have theoretical, pedagogical, and technological implications for research on EFL learning and, in particular, writing. Theoretically, peer interactions as indicated by the findings of the study represent a social mediating process of learning in which learners reciprocally support each other, scaffold each other, and negotiate meanings through English as the medium of communication. Peer interactions also establish a learning context for learners where they enhance their understanding of the issues in their writing and construct their knowledge about the accurate use of grammar and vocabulary when writing their texts.

Pedagogically, the findings of the study are encouraging and valuable for instructors and learners, particularly in the EFL context which is mostly characterized by dominance of the traditional approach to teaching and learning, central role of the teacher in the classroom interactions, passivity and lack of confidence of learners, as well as an inadequate exposure to English. With these chal-

lenges in mind that restrict the opportunities for learning in the EFL context, the study informs us of the role of online peer interactions in providing learners with the space for collaborating, interacting using English, acting as active providers of feedback, and contributing to the group's overall learning. Therefore, EFL teachers and instructors can use asynchronous tools as a supplementary vehicle for extending learners' learning and providing them with more opportunities for collaboration through peer interactions.

Another pedagogical implication of the findings is that such findings have practical implications for EFL teachers and instructors who are interested in acting as facilitators of learners' asynchronous group discussions. In other words, teachers and instructors should be cognizant of what and how to facilitate students' online discussions and keep dynamics in their roles and responses to students' peer interactions over time. Their facilitating roles should be projected through their interactions with their students that varied in the context of the current study from inviting and attracting students to participate in the online discussions as well as organizing the flow of interactions for learners to questions students as a way to engage them deeply in the discussions. By so doing, teachers and instructors will avoid turning the online group discussions into teacher-dominated ones and will more likely to maintain and foster learners' peer interactions in such discussions.

Technologically, the findings of the current study suggest that asynchronous technological tools are active learning platforms for online group discussions of EFL learning in general and EFL writing, in particular. Engaging learners in such online asynchronous discussions of writing implies that EFL learners will increase their awareness of the educational value of technologies for further EFL learning outside the classroom contexts. Nowadays, due to advances in technologies, including the expanding revolution of Social Networks (SNs) and their highly recognized role in forming online learning communities, EFL learners can join such online communities to enhance their EFL learning through voluntary participation. This will also indicate the extent to which EFL learners are willing and motivated to make a good use of technologies in EFL learning and writing through peer interactions.

It should be noted that despite the interesting findings obtained in the present study, there are some restrictions and limitations that should be addressed for future research. The first limitation is that the present study focused on two important aspects of asynchronous group discussions: peer interactions and instructor's facilitation. More specifically, the focus of the study was on the patterns of peer interactions and the roles of the instructor as indicated through his comments. Therefore, future research should look at how the instructor's facilitation affects students' peer interactions over time. Secondly, the present study investigated asynchronous group discussions in a particular writing course in one Saudi university where the students had also face-to-face discussions. Such discussions may have affected their peer interactions online. So we recommend future research to look at online asynchronous group discussions among EFL learners beyond the classroom courses or without any face-to-face group discussions. The results of the present study might have been affected by the roles of the instructor in facilitating learners' online discussions. In other words, as the instructor acted as a facilitator, his comments on the activities might have encouraged the learners to be more active due to his online presence. Therefore, such findings should be interpreted carefully by future researchers. Furthermore, the present study reported the findings based on the overall patterns of peer interactions without looking at it at the individual learner level. This may have affected the findings of the study, especially since there were some learners who were observed to be more active in interacting than other peers. Therefore, one interesting aspect of investigation for future studies is measuring each individual learner's online participation in asynchronous group discussions through his/her overall number of comments, patterns of comments, and contributions to the entire group's dynamics of interactions and learning. A final limitation of the present study is that the investigation focused on the foci of peer interactions, which suggest that the EFL learners were able to detect various issues in their free writing. However, no analysis of the efficacy of peer interactions was made in order to ensure whether the students enhanced their writing through peer interactions. In other

words, the students' writing itself was not involved in the analysis of the data of the present study. In this regard, future studies should look at the students' text revisions by comparing the first draft before group discussions and the last draft after the discussions to identify the areas enhanced through peer interactions.

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APPENDIX

1. What do you think of your online peer interactions in the group discussions?

2. What aspects of language learning, particularly writing do you thank your online interaction has enhanced?

3. Do you feel that your interaction with the instructor was useful? How?

4. What other things about online interactions that have made you feel you are an active learner?

5. Any particular challenges did you face when interacting with peers and the instructor in the group discussions?

BIOGRAPHY
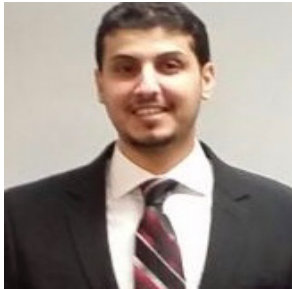
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