

HOW LINGUISTIC STYLE AND TONE SHAPE INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE UNIVERSITY FORUMS

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Abstract

Encouraging meaningful engagement in virtual learning contexts presents notable challenges, as the absence of physical interaction often limits spontaneity and immediacy. This study examines the tone and linguistic features employed in asynchronous exchanges within the discussion forums of a course offered by an online university. To achieve this, it is essential to consider not only the quantity but, above all, the quality of the contributions made by both teachers and students, paying particular attention to tone and linguistic features. The sample refers to a subject taught during the 23/24 academic year, Didactics of the Specialty (English) in the Master's Degree in Teaching in Secondary Education, Baccalaureate, Vocational Training and Adult Education. The total number of students is 114. The methodology responds to a triangulated qualitative analysis: on the one hand, the interactions between the teacher and the students in the forums are analysed; on the other hand, the open responses to a voluntary and anonymous questionnaire that is given to the students at the end of the subject are analysed too; and, finally, a sentiment analysis is carried out, focusing on the tone of all the contributions. The findings indicate that adopting a friendly and conversational tone, combined with consistent, timely, and active participation on the part of the teacher, contributes to transforming the forum into a dynamic environment for interaction and learning. This communicative style encourages students to mirror the teacher's approach, promoting a sense of proximity and confidence that becomes evident in their own tone and discourse.

Keywords – Asynchronous strategies, Discourse analysis, Forum, Online education, Sentiment analysis, University.

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1. Introduction

The promotion of meaningful interaction between learners and teachers continues to represent one of the most persistent and demanding tasks within digital learning contexts (Arango-Vásquez & Manrique-Losada, 2023; Fernández-Castro, Sánchez-Cabrero & Husein-Eiadat, 2023; Forero-Arango, 2022; Mesa-Rave, Gómez-Marín & Arango-Vásquez, 2023; Wen, 2022). Online higher education typically integrates both synchronous components (such as live sessions) and asynchronous ones (such as discussion forums) within institutionally supported platforms that host diverse learning materials (Bernard, Abrami, Borokhovski,

Wade, Tamim, Surkes et al., 2009; Mosquera-Gende, 2025; Romero-Alonso, Valenzuela-Gárate & Anzola-Vera, 2023). Despite the pedagogical potential of these spaces, achieving active participation among students remains an ever present challenge (Garrison, 2016; Hernández-Sellés, Muñoz-Carril & González-Sanmamed, 2023; Mesa-Rave et al., 2023). Participation in synchronous sessions is often limited by scheduling conflicts or personal commitments, while engagement in asynchronous activities frequently decreases when such activities are optional or ungraded. Consequently, many students may complete a course without meaningfully engaging with its interactive elements, depending on the instructional design and pedagogical model implemented by teachers, departments, or institutions (Fernández-Castro et al., 2023; Velázquez-Gatica & López-Martínez, 2023). These difficulties can be overcome by means of diverse initiatives that leverage both synchronous and asynchronous communication, with particular attention to the pragmatic dimensions of teacher-student interaction (Bernard et al., 2009; Kamsinah, Natsir & Aliah, 2024; López-Navia, 2022; Romero-Alonso et al., 2023; Schalk & Marcelo, 2010; Sinkeviciute, 2024; Taguchi, 2023). The tone and linguistic style adopted in these exchanges can either encourage or discourage participation, ultimately influencing academic performance.

Taking all those aspects into account, it can be stated that promoting interaction and fostering collaboration are central responsibilities of online educators (Bernard et al., 2009; Fernández, Valderrey, Lázaro, Gil-Mediavilla & Gallardo-López, 2020; Forero-Arango, 2022; Guerra-Santana, Rodríguez-Pulido & Artiles-Rodríguez, 2019; Hernández-Sellés et al., 2023; Mesa-Rave et al., 2023; Mosquera-Gende, 2022, 2023; Wen, 2022). The teacher's mediation is decisive in determining whether forums evolve into dynamic environments or remain underused. The creation of spaces for dialogue contributes to bridging the social and psychological distance inherent in online education. As previously noted, both the quality and frequency of teachers' interventions, as well as the nature of the feedback provided, have a direct impact on students' engagement, self-regulation and motivation (Archer, Crispim & Cruz, 2016; Bernard et al., 2009; Gallego-Noche, Quesada-Serra, Gómez-Ruiz & Cubero-Ibáñez, 2017; González-Cabanach, Valle, Rodríguez, Piñeiro, García & Mosquera, 2008; Kamsinah et al., 2024; Lozano-Martínez & Tamez-Vargas, 2014; Mosquera-Gende, 2024; Romero-Alonso et al., 2023).

Among asynchronous modalities, discussion forums remain one of the most widely used spaces for interaction, now enhanced by multimodal affordances such as written, audio, and video contributions (Mosquera-Gende, 2024). As these forums become the central setting for teacher-student and peer communication, pragmatic competence governs how tone, politeness, and relational proximity are negotiated. Empirical studies have shown that pragmatic strategies (for example, lexical and syntactic modulation, tone adjustment, and the use of multimodal markers) function as interactional scaffolds that foster trust, reduce interpersonal distance, and sustain engagement over time (Kamsinah et al., 2024; Sinkeviciute, 2024; Taguchi, 2023). Through these exchanges, online forums transcend the mere transmission of content, becoming active spaces for community building and collaborative learning. As online communication lacks non-verbal markers such as gesture, tone of voice, and facial expression, interlocutors rely heavily on linguistic and paralinguistic signals to convey stance, affect, and understanding (Herring, 2013; Yus, 2011). Teachers' use of inclusive pronouns, mitigators, hedges, and positive politeness strategies (Hyland, 2005) helps to construct a supportive environment that reduces perceived distance and encourages learners to participate. Likewise, pragmatic choices such as humour, empathy, and self-disclosure contribute to satisfaction in online learning (Richardson, Maeda, Swarts & Swan, 2017).

Furthermore, discourse in online learning environments reveals how participants co-construct meaning and negotiate social identities through language (Derks, Fischer & Bos, 2008; Hyland, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Pragmatic competence becomes essential not only for maintaining coherence and politeness but also for managing the epistemic and affective dimensions of collaboration (Derks et al., 2008; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). The ability to interpret contextual cues, manage turn-taking asynchronously, and use linguistic resources to express gratitude, uncertainty, or enthusiasm contributes to an atmosphere of mutual respect and engagement (Herring, 2013; Yus, 2011; Richardson et al., 2017). Interaction in academic contexts is inherently social, and even in online forums, linguistic choices index attitudes and values that sustain a sense of community. In this sense, pragmatic awareness is not merely a

communicative skill but a pedagogical asset that fosters trust, motivation, and sustained participation in virtual learning settings (Fernández-Castro et al., 2023; Gallego-Noche et al., 2017; Hyland, 2005; Lozano-Martínez & Tamez-Vargas, 2014; Velázquez-Gatica & López-Martínez, 2023).

The present article reports on a teaching experience carried out in an online university during the 23/24 academic year, within the course “Didactics of the Specialty (English)” (as part of the Master’s Degree in Secondary, Baccalaureate, Vocational Training, and Adult Education Teaching) (Mosquera-Gende, 2023; Taguchi, 2023). This course was taught by a teacher, whose pedagogical approach emphasizes active and flexible learning, supported by the use of familiar and informal language (Mosquera-Gende, 2023; Peñalosa-Castro & Castañeda-Figueiras, 2021), with the aim of promoting collaboration and interaction (Fernández-Castro et al., 2023; Forero-Arango, 2022; Mesa-Rave et al., 2023; Mosquera-Gende, 2022). Taking all this into account, and due to the lack of specific studies on tone, language and voluntary participation in forums, the main objective of this study is to analyse the language and tone of discussion forums as a means to foster communication, strengthen social presence, and enhance the sense of belonging among students in online higher education. This analysis concentrates on the pragmatic and linguistic features of teacher-student exchanges in these environments.

2. Methodology

To achieve this objective, an explanatory sequential qualitative method design was employed, to explore the linguistic nuances of interaction in online forums. The methodology is based on a triangulated qualitative design. First, the posts and comments of the teacher and the students in the discussion forums are examined. Second, the open-ended responses to a voluntary and anonymous end-of-course questionnaire completed by students are analysed. Finally, considering all the previous contributions, a sentiment analysis (understood here as a valence-based assessment of tone) is conducted.

Regarding the questionnaire, a brief opinion survey was administered at the end of the course to collect students’ perceptions of forum use. Participation was voluntary, and the instrument had previously undergone expert validation for content relevance and clarity by two specialists in didactics and pedagogy. This study builds upon a previous investigation conducted during the 2022-2023 academic year (Mosquera-Gende, 2024), in which the same questionnaire had already been validated and tested. For the present research, the instrument was adapted to include only open-ended questions, allowing students to reflect freely on any aspect of their experience with the forums. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms.

As in the previous study mentioned above, a thematic and linguistic analysis was subsequently performed on the open-ended responses, as well as on the posts and comments of the teacher and the students in the forums. Using MAXQDA software, data were coded and categorised following an inductive-deductive process (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Flick, 2004; Maxwell, 2012; Stake, 2010). Codes were first developed from the data and then refined according to the study’s theoretical framework. Additionally, a sentiment (valence) analysis was conducted to capture the overall tone (Çeliktuğ, 2018; Li & Liu, 2014; Mosquera-Gende, Marcelo-Martínez, Postigo-Fuentes & Fernández-Navas, 2024). This analysis also examined lexical choices and syntactic structures that contributed to positive, neutral, or negative tones, aligning with principles of linguistic and discourse analysis (Çeliktuğ, 2018; Derks et al., 2008; Krippendorff, 2019; Li & Liu, 2014; Neuendorf, 2017; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). The quantitative dimension of forum use (for example, number of posts, distribution of messages per participant) was likewise examined to contextualise participation patterns. All data were anonymised, and informed consent was obtained from participants prior to analysis.

The sample, as already mentioned, refers to a subject taught during the 23/24 academic year, Didactics of the Specialty (English) in the Master’s Degree in Teaching in Secondary Education, Baccalaureate, Vocational Training and Adult Education. The total number of students is 114. The analysis will consider the participation in the forums which are described in Table 1.

Thus, although previous research has examined various dimensions of online learning environments, including interactional dynamics, pedagogical strategies, and students’ socio-affective engagement,

important methodological gaps remain. In particular, few studies have combined a detailed linguistic-pragmatic analysis with authentic, naturally occurring teacher-student exchanges in online forums. Consequently, one of the main contributions of this study lies in integrating qualitative discourse analysis with contextualised examples drawn directly from online asynchronous communication.

Discussion Forums	Descriptions
Ask the teacher	Space for asking the teacher questions about the subject. This space is divided by the teacher into various topics in which the students can write, without creating new topics, to facilitate the localization of different areas.
Innovation and research	Space in which the teacher proposes different voluntary challenges to work collaboratively using digital tools (Guerra-Santana et al., 2019; Mosquera-Gende, 2022, 2023). It is also a space in which more information, links and resources related to students' continuous learning is offered (Mosquera-Gende, 2025).
Post-exam	This space is opened at the end of the exam period, where the teacher posts, in the form of messages, the common mistakes she has found in the final exam, even indicating the marks that can be subtracted for committing those specific mistakes. This space is open to student questions and contributions (Archer et al., 2016; Lozano-Martínez & Tamez-Vargas, 2014). It is a space that students and teachers can also use to leave final comments about the subject.

Table 1. Description of the discussion forums (Mosquera-Gende, 2024)

3. Results

This section is developed following the triangulated methodology previously presented. Therefore, firstly, the contributions to the forums of the students and the teacher are analysed. Secondly, the open responses to a voluntary and anonymous questionnaire that is given to the students at the end of the subject are examined too. Finally, the sentiment analysis is explained. In each case, a thematic categorization will be carried out, followed by a linguistic and pragmatic analysis of the corresponding discourse units.

3.1. Contributions to the Forums

With reference to participation in the forums, of the total number of students enrolled ($N=114$), the number of students who participated in the forums was 53 (46.5 % of the total). Students sent a total of 62 messages, compared to 102 from the teacher. In total, 164 messages. The average number of messages per student was 1.16, with the same student posting a maximum of 4 messages.

Figure 1 shows that the *Ask the Teacher* forum registers the highest level of activity and interaction, both in terms of the number of participants ($N=40$) and the volume of messages posted by students (48) and by the teacher herself (71). These findings are consistent with expectations, as this forum serves as the main communication channel within the course. The other two forums can be considered secondary, either because of their shorter duration, as in the case of the *Post-exam* forum, or because of their specific focus, as with the *Innovation and Research* forum. The latter primarily contains the descriptions of voluntary tasks presented as challenges, which are carried out on external platforms using digital tools. Consequently, most of the related activity and interaction occur outside the forum itself (Mosquera-Gende, 2022, 2023).

Regarding the qualitative analysis of the comments in the forums, students' messages ($N=62$) and teacher's messages ($N=102$) were considered. Some examples of students' comments can be seen in Table 2.

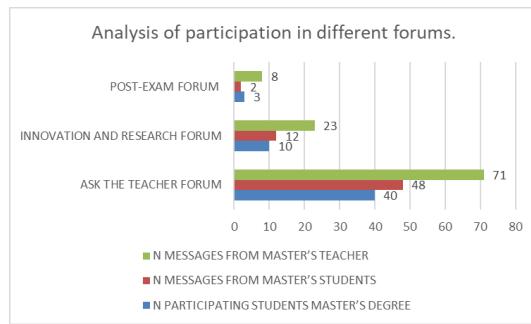


Figure 1. Analysis of participation in different forums

Categories	Examples
Posing questions	<p>“Hi Ingrid, I was reviewing the material from last week, and I just wanted to check if the rubric for Activity 2 is already available on Moodle. I might have missed it, but I couldn’t find it. Thanks in advance for your help!” (STC 12 – Student Contribution 12).</p> <p>“Hello Ingrid, Quick question! in the final project, do we need to include references in APA 7th format? I just want to make sure before I start writing.” (STC 1).</p> <p>“Hi Ingrid, Could you please confirm if we need to submit the task in PDF format? I wasn’t sure about it. Thank you!” (STC 22).</p> <p>“Hi Ingrid, I think there’s a small typo in the instructions for Activity 2. It says ‘see page 2,’ but there’s only one page in the document. Could you please check?” (STC 59).</p>
Expressions of gratitude	<p>“Good morning everyone! I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed today’s session. The examples made everything much clearer. I’ll rewatch the recording later to make sure I understood all the steps. Thanks, Ingrid!” (STC 61).</p> <p>“Hi Ingrid and classmates, I really liked the way you explained Bloom’s taxonomy today! I finally understood the difference between applying and analysing ☺. Thanks for making it so visual.” (STC 40).</p> <p>“Hi! Just passing by to thank you for your feedback on my last activity. It was super clear and motivating. I’ll make sure to apply your suggestions in the next one. Have a great weekend!” (STC 13).</p> <p>“Dear Ingrid, I wanted to say thank you for your patience. I’ve learned a lot, not only about the content but also about how to organise my own learning process.” (STC 3).</p> <p>“Good evening everyone! I’ve just finished the last activity, what a journey! 😊 It’s been challenging but also very rewarding. Thank you, Ingrid, for guiding us so well throughout the course.” (STC 30).</p> <p>“Good afternoon! Thank you for making everything so clear throughout the semester. I’ve really enjoyed this subject.” (STC 32).</p> <p>“Hi Ingrid, Just wanted to say I loved the activity with the concept maps! I’d never used them before, but they really helped me organise my thoughts. Thanks for introducing this strategy!” (STC 48).</p> <p>“Oh nooo, last post of the course! 😭 Just wanted to thank you, Ingrid, for all your dedication and positive energy. You made learning fun and meaningful. Take care and hope to see you in future courses!” (STC 62).</p>

Categories	Examples
Encouragement to classmates	<p>“Hi everyone! Just wanted to say that the teamwork activity was so much fun! I enjoyed reading your ideas and learning from your perspectives. Hope we can collaborate again soon!” (STC 53).</p> <p>“Hi! It’s been such a great experience sharing this space with all of you. I’ve learned so much from your comments and examples. Wishing you all a great break!” (STC 55).</p>

Table 2. Main categories of the students’ comments in the forums

Their comments reveal a variety of focal points, including questions related to course content, assigned activities, the final exam, and other aspects of the subject. In addition, numerous posts express gratitude toward the teacher and encouragement toward classmates, particularly in relation to overcoming the collaborative challenges presented in the *Innovation and Research* forum. Within the messages addressed to the teacher, several emphasise her prompt feedback and timely corrections, while others highlight her overall dedication, engaging personality, sense of humour, and the valuable learning experience gained throughout the course.

The students’ interventions are characterised by a register that combines academic discourse with features of informal digital communication. Linguistically, most messages employ direct address forms (“*Hi Ingrid*”; “*Hello everyone*”) and first-person pronouns to establish a personal stance and ownership of the message. The use of modal verbs (“*could*”; “*should*”; “*might*”) and polite requests (“*Could you please confirm...?*”; “*I just wanted to check...?*”) reflects a cooperative and deferential tone appropriate for teacher-student interaction. Many posts and comments also display discourse markers such as “*just*”, “*well*” or “*so*” and mitigation strategies (“*I might have missed it*”; “*I just wanted to say*”), which soften requests and help maintain a positive relational balance. The presence of emojis and expressive punctuation (for example, exclamation marks or ellipses) contributes to emotional immediacy and mirrors oral communication practices within an online learning environment (Mosquera-Gende et al., 2024).

Pragmatically, the students’ posts and comments perform a variety of interactional and social functions: asking for clarification, expressing gratitude, sharing enthusiasm, and fostering group cohesion. Queries such as “*Could you please confirm if we need to submit the task in PDF format? I wasn’t sure about it. Thank you!*” (STC 22) or “*Quick question! in the final project, do we need to include references in APA 7th format? I just want to make sure before I start writing*” (STC 1) demonstrate informational and procedural goals, while posts like “*Thank you for your feedback, it was super clear and motivating*” (STC 13) fulfil phatic and affiliative functions that sustain rapport with the teacher. Expressions of collective identity (“*Hi everyone!*”; “*Hope we can collaborate again soon?*”) and closing rituals (“*Have a great weekend*”; “*Take care*”) signal solidarity and community-building. Overall, the discourse reflects a balance between academic politeness and social warmth, showing how students in online environments strategically blend professionalism with interpersonal engagement to construct both cognitive and affective presence (Derks et al., 2008; Richardson et al., 2017).

On the other hand, in parallel, the teacher’s messages mainly consist of responses to students’ questions and, in a smaller proportion, the teacher’s responses to their expressions of gratitude as well as messages of encouragement to her students (see Table 3).

The teacher’s messages exhibit a highly interpersonal and supportive discourse style, characterised by warmth, immediacy, and empathy. Linguistically, the teacher’s interventions rely on a conversational register that blends professional clarity with affective language. She frequently uses direct address (“*Hello, [name of student]*”) inclusive pronouns (“*we*”; “*you all*”), and personalised closings (“*Hugs*”; “*Big hug*”; “*Take care*”) to strengthen social proximity. The presence of laughter markers (“*haha*”; “*hahaha*”), emojis, and light humour (“*to infinity and beyond, hehe*” – TEC 2) projects approachability and reduces hierarchical distance. At the same time, her responses are grammatically precise and lexically simple, balancing academic authority with social accessibility. This hybrid tone allows her to maintain professional credibility

while fostering an informal and emotionally safe learning environment (Derks et al., 2008; Richardson et al., 2017).

From a pragmatic perspective, the teacher's replies fulfil multiple communicative functions simultaneously (informative, supportive, and affective). When clarifying content ("Yes, that's correct, just make sure you include the main criteria in your reflection" TEC 96) or correcting errors ("Thanks for spotting that little mistake! I've already fixed it" TEC 74), the teacher adopts a positive politeness strategy that validates the student's contribution while providing feedback. Expressions of encouragement ("You're doing excellent work! Keep it up!" TEC 62) and empathy ("Don't stress too much, that's what really matters" TEC 100) perform important face-saving acts, reinforcing students' confidence and motivation. Her consistent use of humour, gratitude, and emotional reassurance not only humanises the teacher-student relationship but also models a communicative style aligned with the principles of social presence and affective immediacy in online education (Derks et al., 2008; Richardson et al., 2017; Sinkeviciute, 2024; Taguchi, 2023). Overall, her discourse exemplifies how pedagogical authority can coexist with warmth, resulting in a linguistically informal yet pragmatically rich form of professional interaction.

Categories	Examples
Responses to questions	<p>"Hello, (name of student)! Yes, that's correct, just make sure you include the main criteria in your reflection. It doesn't have to be long, just meaningful. Hope that helps! Sending hugs, Ingrid" (TEC 96 – Teacher Contribution 96).</p> <p>"Hi, (name of student), haha you made me laugh! Thanks for spotting that little mistake! I've already fixed it. You've got eagle eyes! 🦅 Hugs, Ingrid" (TEC 74).</p> <p>"Hello, (name of student), don't worry at all. You've understood it perfectly. It's normal to have doubts at this point. That's a good sign you're reflecting on your learning! Big hug, Ingrid" (TEC 7)</p> <p>"Good morning, (name of student)! Great question. Yes, you can upload it in PDF format, that way the layout won't change. Thanks for checking before submitting. Hugs, Ingrid" (TEC 37)</p> <p>"Hello, (name of student)! Yes, the examples you mentioned are perfect. You can use them exactly like that. Thanks for double-checking before submitting. Hugs, Ingrid" (TEC 16).</p> <p>"haha, (name of student), you're always so attentive! Don't worry, I've updated the link. Technology sometimes plays tricks on us! 😂 Sending hugs, Ingrid" (TEC 26).</p>
Responses to expressions of gratitude and messages of support and encouragement	<p>"Hello, (name of student), thank you so much for your kind words. I'm really happy you're enjoying the course. You're doing excellent work! Keep it up! 🌟 Hugs, Ingrid" (TEC 62).</p> <p>"Hi, (name of student), I completely understand how you feel. Don't stress too much, just try to summarise the main points in your own words. That's what really matters. Take care, Ingrid" (TEC 100).</p> <p>"Dear (name of student), what a lovely message, thank you! It's been a pleasure to accompany you all in this process. I'm proud of the progress you've made. Big hug, Ingrid" (TEC 97).</p> <p>"To infinity and beyond, hehe 💪" (TEC 2).</p>

Table 3. Main categories of the teacher's comments in the forums

3.2. Contributions to the Questionnaire

In relation to the questionnaire, of the total number of students (N=114), 34 students responded, 29.8% of the total. This brief, anonymous and voluntary questionnaire provided to students at the end of the course included two open questions, in case they wished, optionally, to leave an opinion or comment on the use of the forums during the course, both about the positive and the negative aspects of it.

As can be seen in Table 4, these contributions can be classified into five basic dimensions. They capture the diversity of perceptions and experiences related to the use of online forums in the course. These dimensions reflect both cognitive and emotional aspects of participation, as well as students' views on organisation, interaction, and teacher involvement.

Dimensions	Students' Contributions
<p>Organisation and structure of the forums This dimension includes comments that evaluate the clarity, categorisation, accessibility and usability of the forum space.</p>	<p>“I love that the forums are so well organised, it's very easy to find the information 😊” (S 15 – Subject 15). “I found the forums really helpful to keep track of everything” (S 14). “Thank you for the organised and focused organization of the forum” (S 34). “I loved it... the categorisation helps a lot” (S 1). “The forum was the most useful tool in the course. It kept everything clear and accessible” (S 7).</p>
<p>Teacher presence and responsiveness This dimension includes comments on the teacher's active involvement, quick replies, and emotional presence, which students perceive as key to engagement and trust.</p>	<p>“The super speed with which she replies is incredible” (S 8). “Ingrid was there whenever we had any questions, always replying super quickly 😊” (S 26). “There was always an almost immediate response to any question, hehe” (S 13). “It felt like Ingrid was always there for us in the forum and that gave me a lot of confidence” (S 33).</p>
<p>Sense of belonging and community This dimension includes comments on how the forum fostered social connectedness and a sense of participation despite physical distance.</p>	<p>“It made us all feel part of something even though we're in our own homes ❤️” (S 16). “Even though it's online, the forum made it feel like a real class community” (S 32). “Reading the forum made me feel part of the group” (S 31).</p>
<p>Interaction and learning among students This dimension includes comments on peer-to-peer interaction, learning, participation, and diversity of opinions.</p>	<p>“Sometimes it felt like there were too many threads, but I liked reading other students' opinions” (S 22). “Reading others' discussions helped me understand the topics better” (S 30). “It was great to see different points of view I wouldn't have thought of on my own” (S 12). “It was nice that everyone respected each other's opinions, even when we disagreed” (S 10).</p>
<p>Quantity and cognitive load This dimension includes comments on the quantity of messages and the difficulty of keeping up.</p>	<p>“It was hard to follow all of them” (S 2). “Sometimes I got a bit lost with the amount of information” (S 19). “Sometimes I didn't have time to read everything” (S 29). “For me, the forums were excessive. I felt overwhelmed” (S 4).</p>

Table 4. Main thematical dimensions in the questionnaire

These five dimensions capture the pragmatic diversity of the students' discourse. Linguistically, the comments combine personal stance markers, evaluative adjectives, and mitigation devices, reflecting a communicative style that balances appreciation and emotional expression within an academic yet informal online context. From a linguistic and pragmatic point of view, the questionnaire responses reveal a discourse that is both personal and interactionally oriented, characterised by informal yet cooperative linguistic choices. Lexical items such as “*I love*”, “*really helpful*” or “*super quickly*” convey positive affect and immediacy, reflecting an evaluative stance common in online learning environments where emotional engagement replaces physical presence. Many utterances employ first-person singular pronouns (“*I liked*”;

“*I found*”; “*For me*”) to foreground subjectivity and ownership of experience. The frequent use of hedges (“*sometimes*”; “*a bit*”; “*I think*”) mitigates potential criticism and promotes politeness, as in “*Sometimes it felt like there were too many threads, but I liked reading other students’ opinions*” (S 22). This mixture of positive appraisal and cautious self-expression signals a balance between enthusiasm and critical reflection typical of learner-centered online discourse (Derks et al., 2008; Herring, 2013; Kamsinah et al., 2024; Richardson et al., 2017; Schalk & Marcelo, 2010; Taguchi, 2023).

Pragmatically, these interactions perform several key functions: expressing gratitude, evaluating pedagogical practices, and building social presence. Expressions such as “*Thank you for the organised and focused organisation of the forum*” (S 34) or “*It felt like Ingrid was always there for us in the forum and that gave me a lot of confidence*” (S 33) demonstrate positive politeness strategies that reinforce solidarity and closeness between the students and the teacher. In contrast, mild complaints like “*For me, the forums were excessive. I felt overwhelmed*” (S 4) or “*Sometimes I got a bit lost with the amount of information*” (S 19) are framed in mitigated, self-reflective language that avoids confrontation. This suggests an awareness of the academic context and a preference for maintaining a respectful, cooperative tone even when expressing dissatisfaction.

At the interactional level, the discourse shows how affective engagement and social connectedness are constructed linguistically in a virtual learning space (Derks et al., 2008). The repeated references to immediacy and responsiveness — “*The super speed with which she replies is incredible*” (S 8) or “*there was always an almost immediate response*” (S 13) — highlight the pragmatic value of teacher presence as a marker of care and accessibility. Students frequently conceptualise the forum as a community of practice, using language that evokes belonging: “*It made us all feel part of something even though we’re in our own homes*” (S 16) and “*Even though it’s online, the forum made it feel like a real class community*” (S 32). Overall, as already mentioned before, the linguistic patterns reveal a hybrid register (polite, affective, and community-oriented), situated between academic discourse and informal online communication, including pragmatic strategies that negotiate both learning and belonging.

The examples included in the three tables show the students’ answers exactly as they wrote them. This can provide some clues as to the tone and language used by students towards the teacher (use of emoticons, abbreviations, colloquial words, etc.). These expression contribute to creating a positive and constructive learning environment in both the classes and the forums (Mosquera-Gende, 2024). We will return to this in the following section, when discussing sentiment analysis. In the same way, it should be noted that these tables contain direct examples, that is, with the same wording, including any errors that may be present in the original.

3.3. Sentiment Analysis

For analytical consistency, sentiment was examined through a qualitative content-based approach supported by lexico-semantic and pragmatic indicators rather than automated polarity scoring. The final analytical corpus comprised 164 forum interactions, plus 34 responses to the open-ended questionnaire item, amounting to a total of 198 contributions. Given that a single post may contain more than one analytically relevant segment, coding was applied at the level of meaning units, rather than at the turn level. In total, this process resulted in 302 coded units. This dataset was collected over a five-month period and encompassed all student and teacher contributions produced within the specified timeframe.

Each intervention was coded along two primary dimensions: polarity (positive, neutral or negative) and affective intensity (low, moderate or high) (Çeliktug, 2018; Li & Liu, 2014; Mosquera-Gende et al., 2024). Lexical items conveying evaluation (“*love*”; “*useful*”; “*motivating*”; “*overwhelming*”), emotional stance (“*thank you*”; “*I’m sad*”; “*I felt supported*”), and modality (“*might*”; “*should*”; “*could*”) were used as indicators of underlying sentiment orientation. Punctuation (exclamation marks, ellipses), typographic emphasis (capitalisation, emojis), and discourse markers (“*haha*”; “*just*”; “*well*”; “*honestly*”) were also considered as pragmatic amplifiers of emotion.

To enhance validity, sentiment coding was cross-checked with the communicative intention of each message, distinguishing between emotional expression (for example, gratitude or frustration) and cognitive evaluation (e.g., clarity, organisation or usefulness). Regarding the coding protocol, all 164 contributions were manually annotated by the primary researcher. To ensure robust intra-rater reliability and consistency in the application of the coding criteria (polarity and affective intensity), a random subset of 20% of the corpus was re-coded two weeks after the initial annotation. This verification process resulted in a high level of agreement, confirming the stability of the coding decisions (Krippendorff, 2019; Neuendorf, 2017). Neutral messages, such as procedural queries, were classified as informational unless affective or evaluative markers were present. Negative sentiment, though infrequent, was typically softened by self-attribution or mitigation strategies, reflecting the learners' awareness of politeness norms in an academic context. The teacher's replies consistently registered as highly positive in polarity and high in affective intensity, functioning not merely as content feedback but as emotional regulation mechanisms within the online learning environment (Mosquera-Gende et al., 2024; Richardson et al., 2017).

From a quantitative perspective, considering participation from the point of view of polarity or valence analysis (Mosquera-Gende et al., 2024), 75% of the total comments analysed have been positive in tone, while 20% can be considered to have a neutral tone and only 5% contain some type of negative elements.

As already stated above, across the full corpus of student and teacher interventions, the overall sentiment is predominantly positive, with frequent expressions of gratitude, enthusiasm, and emotional engagement. In the questionnaire data, lexical markers such as “*I love*”, “*useful*”, “*motivating*”, “*incredible*”, and “*positive*” convey satisfaction with the course's organisation and the teacher's responsiveness. Even when students articulate difficulties — for example, “*For me, the forums were excessive. I felt overwhelmed*” (S 4) — their comments are mitigated by self-reflection and contextual justification, resulting in a softly negative or neutral sentiment rather than overt criticism. The polarity distribution shows that positive affect dominates (for example, appreciation, belonging or confidence), while negative affect is rare and typically associated with cognitive load or information overload. This suggests a strong emotional balance between the students' attitudes and the supportive learning environment perceived through the forums (Mosquera-Gende, 2024; Richardson et al., 2017).

In the students' forum contributions, the sentiment becomes even more affective, revealing warmth, politeness, and trust toward the teacher. Messages such as “*Thank you for your feedback, it was super clear and motivating*” (STC 13) and “*I really liked the way you explained Bloom's taxonomy today*” (STC 40) combine positive evaluation with interpersonal appreciation. The use of exclamation marks, emojis, and informal discourse markers (for example, “*haha*”, “*just wanted to say*” or “*so much*”) reflects genuine enthusiasm and a desire for proximity (Derks et al., 2008; Mosquera-Gende et al., 2024; Richardson et al., 2017). Importantly, even procedural or query-based posts maintain a polite and friendly tone, with mitigators (“*I might have missed it*”; “*just checking*”) that prevent potential face threats. The affective balance in these messages reinforces the sense of psychological safety within the digital classroom, where emotional expression and academic inquiry coexist harmoniously.

The teacher's interventions mirror and amplify this affective tone, producing a reciprocal cycle of positive sentiment. The teacher's consistent use of humour (“*to infinity and beyond, hehe*” TEC 2), emotional reassurance (“*Don't stress too much*”), and affectionate closings (“*Sending hugs*”; “*Big hug*”) project empathy and immediacy, consolidating a climate of trust. Her responses neutralise tension and reframe potential confusion or error in constructive, emotionally supportive ways. From a sentiment-analysis perspective, her discourse exhibits high emotional valence (positive polarity) and low arousal negativity, functioning as a stabilising emotional anchor in the online space. The combination of teacher warmth and student appreciation creates an emotionally cohesive learning community, where positive sentiment serves not only as an indicator of satisfaction but also as a pedagogical resource that fosters engagement, motivation, and collective wellbeing (Richardson et al., 2017).

4. Discussion

The results of this study reinforce the central premise of the theoretical framework: online learning forums operate as multimodal spaces of cognitive and affective interaction (Mosquera-Gende, 2024), where linguistic and pragmatic strategies serve both pedagogical and relational purposes (Arbaugh, 2001; Baker, 2010; Herring, 2013; Kamsinah et al., 2024; López-Navia, 2022; Richardson et al., 2017; Sinkeviciute, 2024; Taguchi, 2023). As research on online communication and social presence has shown (Mosquera-Gende, 2024; Richardson et al., 2017), written discourse functions simultaneously as a medium for knowledge exchange and as a means of identity construction and emotional connection (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Meyer, 2014; Picciano, 2017). The students' posts and comments illustrate this duality, revealing that affective expression and linguistic politeness sustain engagement. Lexical markers of positivity such as "*I love*", "*amazing*", "*motivating*", or "*useful*" demonstrate how emotional investment intertwines with cognitive appraisal, aligning with the concept of stance and engagement in academic discourse (Hyland, 2005).

The sentiment results indicate that approximately 75% of all discourse units displayed positive polarity, characterised by gratitude, enthusiasm, and community-building language. The use of exclamation marks, emojis, and laughter markers (for example, "*hahahaha*" or "*awesome!!*") reflects a high degree of affective immediacy, a trait associated with greater satisfaction and participation in online settings (Baker, 2010; Meyer, 2014; Richardson et al., 2017). Even when negative affect appears, such as "*For me, the forums were excessive. I felt overwhelmed*" (S 4), it is mitigated through self-attribution and hedging. Learners therefore adapt their linguistic choices not only to express emotion but also to maintain face management and social harmony, key factors in sustaining a constructive online climate (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012).

The teacher's discourse complements these findings through consistent use of positive politeness and empathic communication. Humour ("*to infinity and beyond, hehe*" TEC 2), reassurance ("*Don't stress too much*"), and affectionate closings ("*Hugs*"; "*Big hug*") construct an emotionally safe environment that strengthens belonging and self-efficacy (Perochena-González, Cárdenas-Lizarazo, Mosquera-Gende & Guerrero-Barona, 2021). These results corroborate research on teacher immediacy behaviours and affective scaffolding (Arbaugh, 2001; Baker, 2010; Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012). Pragmatically, informal markers ("*haha*"; "*you made me laugh*") and phrases of support and encouragement ("*You're doing excellent work*") entail solidarity and empathy, reducing hierarchical distance and encouraging participation.

From a linguistic-pragmatic perspective, teacher and student discourse demonstrate interpersonal understanding through the consistent reinforcement of tone, lexical selection, and communicative practices (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Direct address, personal pronouns, and mitigation devices foster dialogic symmetry despite the institutional asymmetry of roles. Students' appreciation messages ("*Thank you for the feedforward*"; "*Thank you for your dedication*") correspond to teacher replies that reciprocate affect ("*Thank you for your kind words*"), producing a feedback loop of positive sentiment. This reciprocity humanises interaction and shows how emotional and social dimensions support effective online pedagogy (Derkx et al., 2008; Yus, 2011).

The forum ecosystem (comprising questionnaire responses, as well as the posts and replies of the students and the teacher) integrates cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of learning (Arbaugh, 2001; Carpenter, Mosquera-Gende & Marcelo-Martínez, 2025; Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Meyer, 2014; Richardson et al., 2017). Positive sentiment and pragmatic balance act as pedagogical catalysts, sustaining motivation and reducing transactional distance. The blend of academic register and conversational tone creates a discourse that is at once informative, supportive, and affective, exemplifying the concept of "*the emotional architecture of online learning*" (Picciano, 2017). Thus, sentiment emerges not merely as a reflection of satisfaction but as a constitutive component of the learning process, shaping engagement patterns and perceived educational quality (Arbaugh, 2001; Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Meyer, 2014; Richardson et al., 2017).

5. Conclusion

The results confirm that affective and linguistic awareness are core elements of effective online pedagogy (Arbaugh, 2001; Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Meyer, 2014; Mosquera-Gende, 2024; Richardson et al., 2017). Teachers who deliberately apply positive politeness, humour, and empathic immediacy, as in the

instructor's interventions, enhance students' presence and emotional security. The similarity of tone across teacher and student discourse shows that sentiment operates as a pedagogical resource, enabling trust, openness, and sustained participation. Consequently, forum communication should be designed not only for cognitive exchange but also for emotional resonance and community-building. Encouraging authentic expression, validating student contributions, and modelling warmth through written interaction can foster motivation and engagement in virtual contexts. In doing so, affectively responsive discourse becomes part of the learning design itself, supporting both academic achievement and social well-being within a cohesive digital learning culture.

By foregrounding those interpersonal, affective, and communicative processes that shape digital learning spaces, the research offers a perspective that both complements and extends existing work, thereby providing a more in-depth understanding of how participants construct meaning and foster supportive interaction in virtual educational settings.

However, this study presents several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the analysis is based on the discourse produced within a single course of an online university, which restricts the generalisation of the results. Although the triangulated qualitative approach, combining forums contributions, teacher interventions, and open-ended questionnaire responses, provides a robust picture of interactional dynamics, the sample remains context-dependent and shaped by the teaching style, course content, and specific cohort involved. Likewise, the linguistic-pragmatic and sentiment analyses were conducted on naturally occurring data, which reflects real patterns of communication but also entails uneven participation across students and forums.

Another limitation concerns the nature of the sentiment analysis itself. The study focused on valence as an indicator of emotional tone, but did not incorporate a more detailed examination of discrete emotions (for example, enthusiasm, anxiety, empathy) or multimodal features such as emojis, punctuation patterns, or typographic emphasis beyond descriptive observation. Additionally, although the data reveal clear trends of interpersonal alignment between teacher and students, the study does not control for external factors, such as workload, academic calendar pressure, or students' prior experience with online learning, that may also influence the tone and participation levels observed.

Future research could expand the scope of analysis by incorporating multiple courses, teachers, and disciplinary fields to identify whether the tendencies detected here hold across different contexts. Comparative studies between teachers with distinct communicative styles would be particularly valuable to determine which linguistic and pragmatic strategies most effectively foster engagement, emotional connection, and collaborative learning. Finally, longitudinal studies following students across several academic years, if that was possible, could shed light on how tone, interaction patterns, and perceptions of teacher presence evolve over time, contributing to a deeper understanding of the communicative mechanisms that sustain effective online education.

In sum, as previously noted, the observations presented in this study contributes to a more enriched understanding of the emotional, pragmatic, and relational dimensions that underpin students' engagement in online learning environments. By synthesising the qualitative regularities emerging from the analysis, the study highlights the complex interplay between interactional practices and learners' affective orientations. Although further investigation is needed to deepen, consolidate and extent these findings, the present work offers a solid and robust conceptual and empirical foundation for continued exploration of digitally mediated communication. At the same time, it provides meaningful implications for the design of more responsive, supportive, and pedagogically effective online learning contexts.

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