

# Communicative styles, rapport and student engagement: An online peer mentoring scheme

\*JONATHAN CULPEPER

Department of Linguistics and English Language, Lancaster University, UK

\*E-mail: [j.culpeper@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:j.culpeper@lancaster.ac.uk)

KAN QIAN

School of Languages and Linguistics, The Open University, UK

This article investigates the communicative styles of three different peer mentors in the context of online language learning, and considers their effect on student engagement. A key objective is to show how an innovative corpus-based technique, keyword analysis, can be used as a first step towards identifying communicative styles. We view communicative style as a linguistic means by which rapport is managed amongst participants (Spencer-Oatey 2008). Our primary data includes 685 forum posts, of which 273 (over 26,000 words) were by the mentors at the heart of our study. We show that the three mentors have different communicative styles: different rapport management orientations are achieved in different ways. Furthermore, we bring together multiple data sources, including participants' posts and self-reported perception data. This allows us to find evidence on if and how communicative styles impact on student engagement and perception. We discovered that rapport enhancement aligns with increased active participation, especially if a self-effacement strategy is used, and positive student perception, but that the lack of such rapport does not automatically imply negative student perception.

**Keywords:** corpus-based text analysis, rapport management, communicative styles, student engagement, online peer mentoring, distance language learning

## INTRODUCTION

Online distance language learning has been increasingly accepted by the mainstream academic community, and this has opened educational doors to many learners who might not otherwise have had the opportunities to study another language due to time and location restrictions (Garrison *et al.* 2000). However, it also presents a range of challenges, including social isolation and anxiety (Hurd 2005, 2007). To an extent, this has been offset by increasingly advanced technology that has made it possible for language learners and tutors to communicate with each other asynchronously and synchronously, thereby mitigating feelings of isolation (Lamy 2013a; Kan and McCormick 2014; Delahunty *et al.* 2014). Nevertheless, the mere existence of tools is not enough: proactive human intervention is required. Good distance teaching institutions actively 'try to take account of the socialization needs of students, recognizing this as key to student achievement in non-campus-based learning' (Lamy 2013b: 226). A means of meeting such needs is peer support, also known as 'peer coaching' and 'peer mentoring', which has been in use for a long time in higher education institutions (Chilvers 2016; Giles and Ody 2015).

The Open University (OU), where one of the authors is based, is the leading distance learning institution in the UK. It provides a staff-moderated asynchronous online student forum for each module. In 2014, in an attempt to improve retention, a series of dedicated peer-mentoring threads were introduced into module-wide student fora to provide an

additional element of support to all level 1 language students on ten modules at critical points in their learning journey. For each module, one student, who had recently studied the same module, was given a mentoring role to provide moral and practical support online in the dedicated peer-mentoring threads. At the end of the academic year 2014-15, the scheme was evaluated with overwhelmingly positive feedback (Fayram *et al.* 2018). One noticeable result from the evaluation was the large difference in the number of posts by students: in one module only 28% of the total number of posts were from students, whereas there were 62% and 71% in the other modules. We hypothesized that the nature of the communicative styles of the mentors had an impact on student engagement in posting.

One of the aims of this article is to clarify the nature of a communicative style. An even more important aim is to show how keyword analysis, a technique used in corpus linguistics, can help operationalise the study of communicative style. Hitherto, as Spencer-Oatey (2008: 28) notes, there has been no agreement on how to identify the clusters that constitute a communicative style. We argue and demonstrate that keyword analysis can help to identify such a style, though it is only a first step. The communicative side of such a style relies on the identification of communicative functions in context. Statistically significant keywords do not automatically perform a communicative function, and, when they do, it is necessary to know what function they are performing. Thus, a second step was undertaken, namely a functional analysis, which was informed by Spencer-Oatey's 'rapport management framework' (e.g. 2008), a framework has been used to analyse online discussion fora (e.g. Gonzalez 2013; Hopkinson 2014). Finally, we investigate the way in which these rapport-oriented communicative styles align with student engagement, particularly in terms of the nature of participation (i.e. postings) and student perceptions of each mentor.

The following section reviews the literature on online learning and discussion fora, thereby providing a backdrop for our own forum data. In order to capture the linguistic characteristics on the mentor contributions, it also builds a definition of a 'communicative style', starting with the notion of style, then identifying communicative style, and finally describing, with reference to Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management framework, the communicative strategies from which communicative styles are constituted. Turning to methodology, our forum data sources and methods of analysis are described, focusing in particular on the innovative use of corpus-based text analysis tool to identify features of a mentor's style, but also noting subsequent steps that need to be taken to identify communicative function. The analyses and results are presented in two sections from both the mentor perspective and student perspective. The final section offers discussion and conclusions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Online learning and discussion fora**

In 1996, Moore and Kearsley highlighted the role played by technology in separating distance education from conventional education, and highlighted the importance of providing motivational support to distance learners to make them active participants in the learning process. Baumann *et al.* (2008) and Murphy *et al.* (2010) also argue that the success of learning languages at a distance depends on how well learners are supported because, in addition to challenges such as social isolation, most distance learners have work and family commitments that compete with their study time (Hurd 2005; Murphy *et al.* 2010). One form of such motivational support is to build a sense of belonging to an online learning community amongst learners via institutionalised staff-moderated online discussion fora.

A particular difficulty, however, is the ‘challenges of innovation’ (White 2014: 548) in distance language learning course environments, which is also noted by Hampel (2014: 17): ‘communication using digital media can be cognitively challenging, especially when it takes place in still relatively unfamiliar environments and involves additional mediation compared to face-to-face interaction’. It is therefore not surprising that forum participation and interaction is often low (Fayram *et al.* 2018). Much research has noted different kinds of participation, ranging from initiating a conversation, reading and commenting on others’ posts, to just reading others’ posts. In most public online discussion fora, it is observed that 90% of people simply ‘lurk’ rather than contributing content (Wilkerson 2016). Many researchers define forum ‘participation’ as the posting of an online message (Dennen 2008; Ng *et al.* 2012), whilst others regard just ‘reading’ as a form of ‘passive participation’ (Kan and McCormick 2014). In this study, we use the term forum ‘participation’ to refer to anybody who visits a forum thread, reading and/or contributing content through posting a message. In our view, the term ‘lurking’ may under-rate the forum participation; we consider ‘lurking’ as a form of participation. To distinguish forum ‘interaction’ or ‘active participation’ from ‘passive participation’, we follow Ingram and Hathorn (2004) and Weinberger and Fischer (2006) in stipulating that a comment or question is a prerequisite for the former terms to be used.

The most widely used method in previous studies to analyse forum discussion is content analysis, namely ‘a variety of textual analyses that involve comparing, contrasting, and categorizing a corpus of data in order to test hypotheses’ (Schwandt 2007: 41). For example, the study conducted by Ng *et al.* (2012) examines techniques used in two peer-facilitated discussion fora in blended-learning graduate courses (i.e. a mixture of online and face-to-face delivery), looking for evidence of the social construction of knowledge. However, Ng and her/his colleagues give no linguistic analysis of communicative styles to align with the ‘seven good techniques’ they examine (e.g. ‘Questioning’, ‘Fostering interaction’). This is not to say that usually there is a total absence of linguistic analysis of forum posts. Liaw and English (2013), for instance, attempt to identify specific linguistic characteristics of forum participants using Halliday’s social semiotic perspective (1978). Their analysis reveals how participants address each other, manage turn-taking as well as lexical choices. However, unlike our study, they do not align their textual findings with data on participant engagement.

### **Communicative styles**

It is clear from even a cursory glance at our data that the mentors had their own individualised ways or styles of mentoring the students. The notion of ‘style’ has been much discussed within a number of disciplines, including literary studies and sociolinguistics. Four aspects, in our view, are crucial to thinking about linguistic style.

- (1) *Style works as a whole.* It is not constituted by one feature or dimension. Social meanings of style are said to reside in ‘constellations of features which are interpreted together’ (Auer 2007: 12; see also Ervin-Tripp 1972). An atomistic approach to style which picks out some features but not others would not present a complete picture.
- (2) *Style is lent meaning by contrasts with other styles.* As Irvine (2001: 22) puts it, styles ‘are part of a *system of distinction*, in which a style contrasts with other possible styles, and the social meaning signified by the style contrast with other social meanings’. For example, a colleague of one of the authors sometimes adopts a specific north-west British accent in order to mark identity differences with academics speaking with southern British accents.
- (3) *Style is contextually relative.* Enkvist (1964: 29) suggests that ‘style is concerned

with frequencies of linguistic items in a given context, and thus with *contextual* probabilities'. In other words, styles are constellations of features that correlate with particular contexts. In fact, this is a necessary feature of a style, otherwise it would be impossible to delimit any particular one.

(4) *Style has a two-way relationship with context.* In other words, 'contexts can influence choice of style, but also choice of style can influence context' (Semino and Culpeper 2011: 301). Traditionally, style has been conceived of as being shaped by contextual constraints (e.g. a formal meeting produces a formal style). But more recently, scholars have recognised that the use of a style can engineer a change in context (e.g. an informal style can change a formal meeting into an informal one). Gumperz's (1982) work on 'contextualisation cues' has been pioneering in this regard.

In this article, we take a mentor's style to be his or her total set of distinctive linguistic choices relative to those of others in the same context.

We are interested in not only how the mentors' styles differ, but also how they differ in communicative terms, and thereby differ in promoting or otherwise student interaction, and how they are differentially perceived by students. What is *communicative* style? In a general sense, all style is communicative, but that is obviously not the intended sense when scholars use the expression. Instead, the function of the modifier *communicative* is to restrict the notion of style to a subset of styles that contribute to the constitution of particular communicative activities in which they perform particular communicative functions. Selting spells out the relevant aspects:

In relation to an activity type or genre that can be kept constant as a *tertium comparationis*, meaningful different ways of constituting this activity type or genre can be described as different communicative styles. Styles suggest additional social or interactional meanings which often have to do with self-presentation, definition of the situation, definition of the relationship between speaker and recipient, framing of activities and situations, etc. (2009: 21)

Online language teaching and learning is just one such 'activity type'. Our goal is to investigate the communicative styles of mentors, styles that contribute to the constitution of that activity type and perform particular communicative functions within it.

A starting point for describing the building blocks of communicative styles is the over 50 'politeness strategies' listed in Brown and Levinson (1987) and other works, and also works on impoliteness (e.g. Culpeper 2011), because these lie at the heart of social communication, especially relationships. The term 'strategy' here is used to denote routinized ways in which communicative functions are achieved (e.g. 'could you X' is a highly regular formula for achieving a moderately polite request in British cultures). Indeed, Spencer-Oatey (2008: 21-28) devotes space to lists of such strategies because they relate to rapport management, which we will introduce in the next sub-section. There is no uncontroversial finite set of strategies or of dimensions along which one might plot them. Nevertheless, there are a few dimensions along which strategies vary that are regularly mentioned in (im)politeness studies and cross-cultural/intercultural studies. Drawing on Spencer-Oatey (2008: 28-31), we summarise these briefly below, partly as a way of presenting the array of relevant communicative strategies, rather than tying our later analyses to a specific set of dimensions. We give the labels used in Spencer-Oatey (2008), with slight adjustment.

*Expressiveness–restraint:* This dimension is variously labelled by researchers; for example, it subsumes the 'positive politeness-negative politeness' of Brown and

Levinson (1987), and the ‘involvement-independence’ dimension of Scollon and Scollon ([1995] 2001). ‘Expressiveness’ typically includes, for example, attending to the hearer, expressing approval or sympathy, claiming in-group membership or common-ground, and using given names and nicknames. ‘Restraint’ typically includes, for example, giving the hearer options, minimising impositions, apologising, distancing the speaker and/or the hearer, and using family name and titles.

*Directness–indirectness*: A dimension that underpins classic work in politeness (e.g. Brown and Levinson 1987; Leech 1983), and cross-cultural pragmatics (e.g. Blum-Kulka *et al.* 1989). ‘Directness’ typically includes, for example, the use of mood (e.g. imperatives carry out requests) and performative verbs (e.g. ‘I order you to’); ‘indirectness’ typically includes hints. Conventional indirectness (e.g. ability questions to do requests, such as ‘Can you pass the water?’) lies somewhere in the middle of the dimension. There are also various devices for softening a message (e.g. hedges) or strengthening it (e.g. taboo words).

*Self-enhancement–self-effacement*: Spencer-Oatey (2008: 31) cites Ting-Toomey (1999: 107-8), who states that: ‘The self-enhancement verbal style emphasizes the importance of boasting about one’s accomplishments and abilities. The self-effacement verbal style, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of humbling oneself via verbal restrains, hesitations, modest talk, and the use of self-deprecation concerning one’s effort or performance.’

Needless to say, a description that a linguistic expression is expressive, direct, self-enhancing, and so on is not simply a description of linguistic form, but an interpretation that a certain linguistic form in a certain linguistic context (e.g. activity type) is performing a certain communicative function.

### **From facework to rapport management**

The notion of ‘face’ has been discussed in studies of interpersonal communication for decades. It is incorporated into Spencer-Oatey’s (2008) rapport management, which is why we introduce it and explain its relevance here (we will not comment on Spencer-Oatey’s notion of ‘sociality rights’, which form part of rapport management, because they are less relevant). Rapport management, in common with other relational frameworks, does not follow Brown and Levinson’s (1987) notion of face but shifts back to Goffman’s original definition:

the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he [*sic*] has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes. (1967: 5)

Note that Goffman’s notion is dependent on others: face is a person’s positive value claims as reflected in the assumptions made about them in interaction. Thus, thinking of oneself as intelligent is not a matter of face, but meeting one’s face claim to be intelligent by being treated as an intelligent person would be. This interdependence is what makes it different from Brown and Levinson’s (1987) notion, where it is much more the psychological property of the individual. Given its dependence on what others do in interactions, face is dynamic and emergent. All this is pertinent to learning situations. Not knowing something or getting something wrong are not at all likely to be a ‘positive social value’ - they are potentially face-damaging. Moreover, learning contexts, such as a course online discussion forum, are often public and thus have the potential for heavy loss of ‘face’. Indeed, a learner may conclude that saying nothing is better than risking face loss. Consequently, a tutor must constantly

demonstrate in their interactions a ‘line’ that supports the kind of face the learners might wish to claim. In other words, they must engage in ‘facework’, ‘the actions taken by a person to make whatever he [*sic*] is doing consistent with face’ (Goffman 1967:12).

There are four ways of orienting actions to face – or, put differently, four face-related communicative functions that linguistic material, including strategies, might perform – within Spencer-Oatey’s (2008: 32) rapport management framework:

1. rapport enhancement orientation: a desire to strengthen or enhance harmonious relations;
2. rapport maintenance orientation: a desire to maintain or protect harmonious relations;
3. rapport neglect orientation: a lack of concern or interest in the quality of relations;
4. rapport challenge orientation: a desire to challenge or impair harmonious relations.

*Rapport enhancement* is in tune with Leech’s (1983) model of politeness that accommodates acts that simply enhance politeness or face (e.g. compliments), perhaps to strengthen social relations. One might reasonably expect that tutors, or student mentors in our case, deploy ‘face enhancing actions’ (e.g. welcoming actions at the beginning of a session) as a means of creating a face-supportive atmosphere. *Rapport maintenance* could be simply a matter of performing routine politeness behaviour where it is expected, or, in tune with Brown and Levinson (1987), a matter of restoring relations in the light of face threatening behaviour (e.g. a request). Note that the difference between maintenance and enhancement is that without effort to maintain rapport, rapport will be threatened; enhancement, in contrast, is a relatively free gift. As tutors inevitably have some kind of directive role (e.g. requesting students to complete tasks), one might hypothesize that face maintenance will be important. Moreover, pointing out errors or suggesting corrections are likely to be highly face threatening acts which require significant face counter-work. *Rapport neglect*, as the term ‘neglect’ implies, has negative connotations: it is the neglect of face support or redress where face threat or loss has occurred. Spencer-Oatey’s suggestion that a ‘focus on self’ may lead to the neglect of another’s face is plausible in many situations, but perhaps less so in the tutor-student situation where the tutor’s role is very much focused on the other, i.e. the student. What is more likely is that the tutor is not aware of the face support or redress needed or miscalculates how much is needed. *Rapport challenge* accommodates impoliteness (see for example, Culpeper 1996). This, we assume, is not generally relevant to learning situations. However, highly critical feedback or an admonishment for lack of attendance can easily slip into rapport challenge. To these orientations, we add one other, *rapport neutrality*. In analyzing the data, it became apparent that we needed a category for items that had relatively little to do with Spencer-Oatey’s four kinds of rapport; in fact, rapport was not salient. Typically, these involve statements of information concerning aspects of the topic and the specific learning environment (e.g. telling students where they can upload their assignments).

These five general rapport orientations or functions help capture the interpersonal nature of the communicative strategies that comprise communicative styles. However, it should be remembered that they are general. As will be seen in our analysis, different strategies can achieve the same rapport functions but in different ways. An analysis will need to attend to the specifics of these strategies, and not least their linguistic realization. Moreover, a crucial point for this article is that rapport management is not simply achieved by individual communicative strategies but by clusters of communicative strategies constituting communicative styles (see Spencer-Oatey 2008: 28, for a list of scholars who make this claim). The problem, however, as Spencer-Oatey (2008: 28) notes, is that ‘there is no consensus as to how clusters of these features are best grouped and labelled’. Though this point was made in 2008, this lack of consensus continues. In the following sub-section, we

will argue that a method in corpus linguistics, ‘keyness analysis’, is a method that can provide the analyst with a robust foundation for describing those very clusters.

### **Combining corpus techniques, rapport and learning**

The central corpus linguistic notion we will be deploying in this article is the ‘keyword’. The term *keyword* is not to be confused with lexical items that are key because they are of particular social, cultural or political significance (e.g. Williams 1988). It is simply another term for statistically-based style markers (Enkvist 1973). Keyword analysis, a corpus technique, caters for the first and second points we made about style above, namely, that style is constituted by all its features and that it is lent meaning by contrasts with other styles, contrasts that make it distinctive. The power of this approach in the analysis of discourse has been repeatedly demonstrated (e.g. Bondi & Scott 2010; Mike Scott’s bibliography at <http://www.lexically.net/publications/publications.htm>). In **Keywords** sub-section below, we give details on both how keywords are extracted and analyzed.

The idea of combining corpus techniques with communicative or pragmatic phenomena is not new – witness the advent in 2017 of the new journal *Corpus Pragmatics*. The same can be said of corpus techniques and learning, as evidenced by the advent of many learner corpora. However, the idea of combining corpus techniques with rapport management in the exploration of online learning situations is very rare. To our knowledge, Ädel (2011) is the only study that can claim to have done this. We follow Ädel (2011), in examining online student discussion forum data (Ädel also examines some face-to-face study group discussions). However, she stresses that her study is primarily qualitative (2011: 2939). Her corpus technique is to generate word frequency lists, and then manually scrutinize the items above a certain cut-off frequency. This manual scrutiny was achieved by examining concordances (i.e. lists of the examples representing the high-frequency item in the corpus, along with the words that immediately surround them). Through this, she identifies those words that seem to be ‘rapport building’, and then supplies a label for the particular kind of rapport building, which then feeds into the development of a taxonomy. Ädel acknowledges some limitations: ‘only the most frequent and most salient expressions are captured’ (2011: 2939). A keyword analysis, in contrast, encompasses all the items in the data. Furthermore, there are important differences between Ädel’s study and ours in the understanding and operationalization of salience. Raw frequencies, even if restricted to the most frequent items in a dataset, do not necessarily display what is distinctive about a particular dataset. For example, unsurprisingly the word *the* is at the top of Ädel’s online data frequency list, it is after all the most frequent word in English and dominant in many genres. This word is not discussed by Ädel because it did not survive the second step of her approach, namely, the manual identification of items that are potentially rapport-building through qualitative analyses. It is here, presumably, that Ädel made a judgement about which of the high-frequency items were salient. In contrast with Ädel’s focus on high-frequency items, our corpus method, keyword analysis, computes *all* the items in a dataset and identifies what is statistically *distinctive* – i.e. statistically salient – in one relative to another (see **Keywords** below for a fuller explanation). Then we proceed qualitatively, not unlike Ädel, scrutinising the words both individually and as a whole.

The differences in approach between our study and Ädel’s partly reflect differences in research goal. Ädel focusses on the most frequent expressions as a way to cover ‘expressions that are central and not merely peripheral to the specific speech events under investigation’ (2011: 2939). Our focus, which flows from our definition of communicative style is specifically on what is distinctive in one individual mentor’s style compared with the other two. For example, in Ädel’s two datasets, one concerning online data and the other face-to-face, the first-person pronoun *I* is in second and first position in the frequency ranking of the

two datasets respectively. This particular fact is not discussed by Ädel, though it is clear from her discussion of rapport management functions that the first-person pronoun participates in a number of them. Had we been conducting a comparison of the same datasets it is unlikely that the first-person pronoun would have come into consideration in relation to our research focus. This is because our statistical method identifies only what is significantly *different* amongst the datasets (the mentors' contributions), not what is *similar*. There are in fact ways in which a keyword analysis could be developed to capture similarities, and we will mention these at the end of this article in the discussion of future research.

## DATA AND METHODS

### Data context

Language students at the university in this study come from diverse backgrounds, a wide age range and different levels education, and the majority of them are in employment (see Table 2). All level 1 language modules in Chinese, French, German, Italian, Spanish and English for Academic Purposes are distance learning courses supported by face-to-face and synchronous online tutorials, as well as asynchronous communication, over a period of 37-study weeks. Each module has a module-wide student forum where students communicate asynchronously in English with each other and the academic team via text messages organised into thematic 'threads'. At beginners' level, most posts are in English as the majority of the students are UK-based and their level of the target language is too elementary to conduct meaningful conversations. This forum contains no time-tabled learning activities and opens three weeks prior to the start of the module until the end of the module. Forum participation is voluntary. In the academic year 2014-2015 as part of the module, students were required to submit, via an online system, four tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) and one end-of-module writing assignment (EMA) by a cut-off date. Of those five assignments, two were speaking and involved using an audio tool to record the student's submission. Two weeks leading up to the submission date of each assignment, an appointed student mentor initiated a 'Student Buddy support' thread in the forum. These mentors were students who had recently completed the same module and were selected based on their forum activities in the previous year. They were given training regarding the mentor-role remit, namely providing moral support and practical advice (Fayram *et al.* 2018). Their work was unpaid.

### Data sets

Data sets were collected during the 2014-2015 academic year from three beginners' language modules. The three modules are labelled Module 1, Module 2 and Module 3. To protect the anonymity of the three mentors, the language names of the modules are withheld. Each of the three mentors (coded Mentor 1, Mentor 2 and Mentor 3) are responsible for the mentor-led threads of one module. The following five datasets were obtained:

(1) *Mentor posts*: 273 forum posts by the three mentors were exported as three text files and analysed for keywords by a corpus-based text analysis tool (see **Keywords** sub-section below). Summary information on the posts are shown in Table 1, which indicates that Mentor 2's posts had the most words because the majority of this person's posts had at least five steps or bullet points.

Mentor/Module	Number of posts	Number of words
Mentor 1 of Module 1	81	5054
Mentor 2 of Module 2	80	13,168
Mentor 3 of Module 3	112	8246

**Table 1: Number of mentor posts and total number of words per mentor**

The three mentors were all new to online mentoring, but experienced students at this university. They included: one native English speaker and two Europeans with ‘expert level’ of English; one male and two females; aged between 38 and 58. To protect their anonymity, detailed personal information is excluded.

(2) *Student posts*: 412 forum posts from the three modules by students were exported as three text files (one for each module), and manually categorised into common themes such as ‘asking for practical advice’, ‘asking for reassurances/moral support’, ‘sharing learning journey/resources’, etc. They provide contextual information and the nature of the interaction. Our analysis focused on understanding the student perspective: their anxiety and concerns, and needs and feelings. For demographic information of *registered students* of the three modules in our study, see the three emboldened columns in Table 2.

(3) *Survey data*: An online survey in English was conducted at the end of the academic year to evaluate the mentoring scheme involving all ten level 1 modules; 58 students from the three modules completed the survey (23 from Module 1, 16 from Module 2, and 19 from Module 3). The following relevant data from the survey were used for this study: i) why students visited mentor-led threads; ii) their perception of the mentor; and iii) the evaluation of the peer-mentoring scheme. It contained both responses to closed questions and open-ended comments (see the Appendix).

	<b>Module 1</b>		<b>Module 2</b>		<b>Module 3</b>	
	<b><i>Whole module*</i></b> <b>(N:640)</b>	<i>Survey respondents</i> (N:23)	<b><i>Whole module</i></b> <b>(N:173)</b>	<i>Survey respondents</i> (N: 16)	<b><i>Whole module</i></b> <b>(N:233)</b>	<i>Survey respondents</i> (N: 19)
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	<b>31%</b>	30%	<b>47%</b>	38%	<b>36%</b>	32%
Female	<b>69%</b>	70%	<b>53%</b>	62%	<b>64%</b>	68%
<b>Age</b>						
24 and under	<b>18%</b>	8.7%	<b>26%</b>	6.2%	<b>15%</b>	5.1%
25 – 29	<b>17%</b>	8.7%	<b>16%</b>	0%	<b>11%</b>	3.4%
30 – 39	<b>22%</b>	26.1%	<b>22%</b>	18.8%	<b>17%</b>	17.2%
40 – 49	<b>22%</b>	7.4%	<b>15%</b>	6.2%	<b>20%</b>	13.8%
50 - 59	<b>14%</b>	22%	<b>12%</b>	31.2%	<b>18%</b>	25.9%
60 – 64	<b>4%</b>	13%	<b>5%</b>	2.5%	<b>10%</b>	15.5%
65 and over:	<b>3%</b>	4%	<b>5%</b>	25%	<b>9%</b>	19%
<b>Education background</b>						
Less Than 2 A-Levels	<b>32%</b>	21.7%	<b>20%</b>	12.5%	<b>25%</b>	15.8%
2+ A-Levels or Equivalent	<b>40%</b>	34.8%	<b>37%</b>	18.8%	<b>31%</b>	26.3%
Undergraduate Qualifications	<b>20%</b>	34.8%	<b>25%</b>	50%	<b>28%</b>	31.6%
Postgraduate Qualifications	<b>8%</b>	8.7%	<b>18%</b>	18.8%	<b>15%</b>	26.3%
<b>Employment</b>						
Full-time	<b>41%</b>	[not obtained]	<b>40%</b>	[not obtained]	<b>39%</b>	[not obtained]
Part-time	<b>22%</b>		<b>14%</b>		<b>18%</b>	
Not in paid work	<b>17%</b>		<b>14%</b>		<b>15%</b>	
Retired	<b>4%</b>		<b>6%</b>		<b>11%</b>	
Unemployed	<b>9%</b>		<b>9%</b>		<b>9%</b>	
Rather not say	<b>7%</b>		<b>16%</b>		<b>8%</b>	

\* ‘*Whole module*’ refers to the number of registered students on the module.

**Table 2: 2014-2015 academic year students’ profile in comparison with survey respondent profile for Modules 1 – 3.**

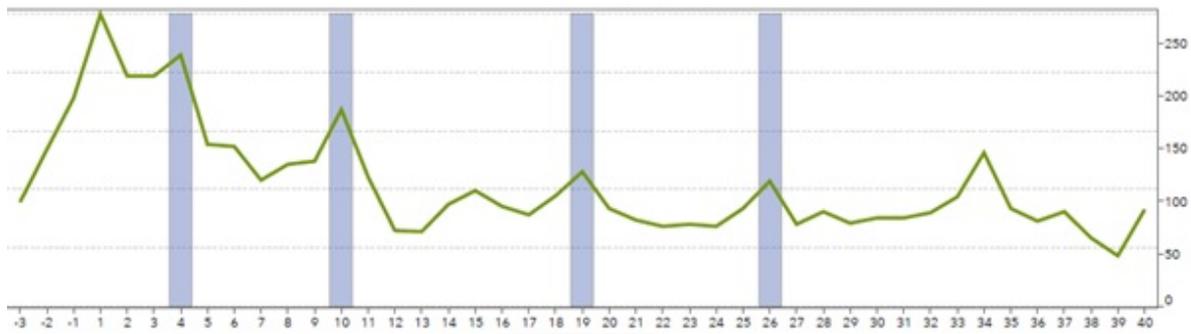
The demographic information of both the registered students and the *survey* respondents for each module is given in Table 2 for easy of comparison with the corresponding module

profile. Module 1 had most registered students. Module 2 had more male students in comparison with the other two modules. Module 3 had the highest number of respondents aged 60 or above (19%), and both Module 2 and Module 3 had 50% of students with undergraduate or/and post-graduate degrees. The *survey* respondents in the three modules had a similar gender spread, but in terms of age and level of education, they were, overall, older with a higher level of education than the registered students on the modules. This could be because of self-selection as the older students are mostly retired, and those with higher-level education struggled less with their study, possibly giving these two groups more time to complete surveys.

Of the survey respondents, Module 3 had the highest number of respondents aged 60 or above, and Module 2 had the highest level of education (50% undergraduate and 18% postgraduate). Later we consider how these demographics might influence forum participation and student perception of each mentor and the usefulness of the mentoring scheme. However, the respondents to the survey are a relatively small sample of the registered students, so any findings from these data should be interpreted with caution.

(4) *Interview data:* The three mentors were interviewed, to explore how their understanding of the mentor role influences their communicative styles. In addition, all students who took part in the online survey were also invited for an interview, but only two female students (aged over 40) from Module 2 volunteered. Both of them indicated in the survey that they only read the posts without contributing. Nevertheless, they were interviewed to find out why they did not contribute. All the five interviews, each lasting for about 30 minutes, were conducted on Skype, recorded and later transcribed.

(5) *Moodle data:* Descriptive statistics captured by Moodle regarding forum participation were obtained for all three modules (see Figure 1 for Module 1 as an example).



Note: The forum opened three weeks before the module start date (represented by the minus sign).

**Figure 1: Module 1 student participation in the Student forum week by week for 40 weeks.**

The bars in Figure 1 indicate the first four weeks when assignments were submitted. Week 34 was the submission week for the final assessment (EMA). The online Moodle system captures all student participants of a particular week of a module, no matter which thread is clicked by a student. On average 44% of students in module 1 visited the module-wide student forum, 47% in Module 2 and 40% in Module 3. Of those participants, about 85% on average visited the mentor-lead threads. For each thread, the system records all the posts with times, dates and their authors. It also captures the readers (as well as those who read and post) of each thread, but not of particular postings. From this information the raw figure of *all* participants (including ‘read-only’), and the percentage of *passive* participants and *active*

participants (i.e. who posted messages) in each mentor-led tread can be obtained (see Tables 6 and 7). As the system cannot distinguish between those who read and post, and those who read only, in order to obtain the read-only figures, we manually counted the students who posted and subtracted this number from the overall total number of participants. Note that the system does not capture forum subscribers who read the messages only via email.

## Keywords

In the context of corpus linguistics, the notion of keywords and the practice of keyword analysis has most notably been developed and popularised by Mike Scott, through the *KeyWords* facility of his program *WordSmith Tools* (Scott 2016a), which is designed for the computational analysis of corpora. It performs the kind of statistical analysis required to identify keywords, by conducting a statistical comparison between the words of a corpus (or wordlist) and a reference corpus (that is usually bigger), in order to identify words that are unusually frequent or unusually infrequent. The choice of the reference corpus will affect the nature of the keyword results. As Culpeper (2009:35) puts it: ‘the closer the relationship between the target corpus and the reference corpus, the more likely the resultant keywords will reflect something specific to the target corpus’. In our study, we compared, in turn, all the posts of each mentor against all the posts of the other two mentors combined.

According to the *WordSmith Tools Manual* (Scott 2016b), a word is ‘key’ if:

- a) it occurs in the text at least as many times as the user has specified as a minimum frequency;
- b) its frequency in the text when compared with its frequency in a reference corpus is such that the statistical probability as computed by an appropriate procedure is smaller than or equal to a *p-value* specified by the user (see below);
- c) in addition, the strength of keyness must be at least as great as the minimum log ratio set by the user (see below).

Keyness, then, is a matter of being statistically unusual relative to some norm. The statistical operations involved here – a cross tabulation, a significance test (typically log likelihood) – are amongst the most basic in statistics, and common in the world of corpus linguistics. The addition of log ratio is to accommodate effect size – the size of the keyness and not simply evidence of its unusualness (see <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/llwizard.html>, for more on relevant statistics, and especially ‘log ratio’, a statistic devised and labelled by Andrew Hardie). These days, many corpus analysis tools will carry out keyness analysis. For reasons largely of convenience, we used the program *WMatrix* (Rayson 2009). The minimum frequency was set at 5, and the minimum log-likelihood value at 6.63 (both typical values). The resulting unusually frequent words were ordered according to log ratio (i.e. the words higher on the list would account for greater differences between the data sets). Unusually frequent keywords are sometimes referred to as ‘positive’ keywords, and contrast with ‘negative’ keywords, unusually infrequent keywords. In this article, not unlike many keyword analysis articles, we concentrate solely on positive keywords. We will, however, make a few comments on negative keywords in the final discussion and conclusions section.

Keywords may be taken as symptoms of a style, but they are not in themselves a communicative style, which, as we remarked in **Communicative styles** above, can be taken to be a subset of the features that constitute a style. Less still can it be assumed that they are a communicative style constructing and reflecting rapport management. This is where the interpretative capability of the human analyst is essential. Pragmatic meanings, of which rapport management meanings are a part, are mediated in context. Some kind of more

qualitative analysis is called for. Thus, as is typical of studies that bring keyness analysis to bear in the pursuit of discourse analysis (see, for example, Baker 2006), we scrutinised concordances of every single keyword. We noted any repeated micro-pragmatic contexts these occurrences of the keyword participated in, especially the rapport-sensitive contexts displaying the strategies and features discussed in the literature. In many cases, those repeated contexts are the only micro-contexts the keyword instances participated in. Keywords that shared closely related contexts were grouped into specific communicative styles, and then we labelled these styles according to their rapport orientation. The results of these analyses are displayed in Tables 3, 4 and 5 in the section below.

### THREE MENTORS: KEYWORDS, COMMUNICATIVE STYLES AND RAPPORT ORIENTATIONS

This section presents the keywords for each of the mentors, and shows how groups of keywords create particular communicative styles with particular orientations to rapport management. All personal names are anonymised. Naming the precise language being learnt on the module (e.g. French, Chinese) is avoided, again to maintain anonymity (instead, we write: *[language name]*). Further, both pronouns ‘she/he’ and possessive pronouns ‘her/his’ or ‘her/himself’ are used to protect the three mentors’ identity.

#### Mentor 1

The following are the keywords for Mentor 1 (in rank order): *[language name]*, *Betty*, *hello*, *'m*, *hope*, *module*, *helps*, *good*, *am*, *studying*, *luck*, *all*, *that*, *are* and *I*. These are categorised in Table 3. Here, and in the other keyword tables below, strict rank order makes way for the fact that keywords which belong to the same communicative strategies, or even collocate with each other (as indicated by a plus sign ‘+’), are placed in the same cell. Bold indicates keywords in the examples.

Keyword(s)	Communicative strategies	Additional comments	Rapport orientation
<i>[language name]</i>	Giving information: <i>you might be able to download the [language name] keyboard</i>	Giving information on an aspect of the learning context.	Neutral
<i>Betty</i>	Attributing information: <i>I can only echo what <b>Betty</b> is saying.</i>	Driven by the frequency with which this particular student posted (40 posts), leading to many replies addressing her by her first name.	Neutral
<i>hello</i>	Initiating posts (followed by addressee’s given name): <b><i>Hello Andrew</i></b>	Informal, familiar formula.	Enhancement
<i>hope + helps</i>	Expressing a positive wish closing a post: <b><i>I hope this helps and good luck with your EMA!</i></b>		Enhancement
<i>module, studying</i>	Giving information: <i>...you need to contact your tutor or <b>module</b> team... Look at the TMA question as you are <b>studying</b>...</i>	Giving information on an aspect of the learning context.	Neutral
<i>good + luck</i>	Expressing a positive wish closing a post: <i>... <b>good luck</b> with your EMA!</i>	<i>Good</i> is also frequently used independently to express a positive evaluation of the student's question, idea, points, etc.	Enhancement

<i>all + are</i>	Addressing the whole group: <i>You are all amazing!</i> <i>I love the group! You all rock!</i>	<i>All</i> most often refers to the whole group in a complimentary fashion; <i>are</i> often follows <i>you</i> when talking to fellow students directly and adds involvement.	Enhancement
<i>that</i>	Giving advice: <i>Remember that ...</i> <i>I find that by doing it in this way</i>	Advice might be considered directive to a degree, but a strong pattern here includes the report of thoughts and feelings.	Enhancement/ maintenance
<i>I, I + am, 'm</i>	Self-disclosing: <i>When I feel overwhelmed...</i> <i>I know how stressful it can become...</i> Stating positive intentions: <i>I aim to 'pop' in at least once a day.</i> Expressing positive evaluations and good wishes: <i>I'm looking forward to hearing from you all.</i> Building common ground: <i>I am just a student like you.</i>	' <i>I</i> ' frequently collocates with <i>am</i> and ' <i>m</i> '; performs a number of functions geared towards rapport enhancement.	Enhancement

**Table 3: Mentor 1's keywords, communicative style strategies and rapport orientations**

Overall, the keywords show that Mentor 1 has a communicative style that is strongly oriented to rapport enhancement, with occasional orientation to rapport neutrality when she/he gives practical module related information. The communicative style largely consists of strategies to do with involvement, good wishes, positive evaluations, building common ground and self-disclosure. One communicative strategy, advice giving, is ambiguous between enhancement and maintenance.

Of the 81 posts by Mentor 1, 25 of them (30%) contain self-disclosure or personal information. She/He often uses emoticons, altogether 47 smileys used, to convey encouragement. Her/His overall rapport enhancement style is evidenced in the interview:

From personal experience I know that straight after Christmas there is a little bit of a dip, ... it is really hard to get back to studying after having two weeks off. So I started a thread just describing my feelings about getting back to studying after Christmas and how I struggled and the students they responded.

One effect of this style was to encourage students to reveal their own concerns and worries (e.g. 'if I'm honest I feel a bit stupid when it comes to learning a language, it's definitely out of my comfort zone' [StudentA, EMA thread]; 'I have always felt that my lack of [a] degree was held me back career wise...' [StudentB, TMA3 thread]). The analysis of student posts shows that the most common topic was 'asking for reassurances/moral support' (see **Participation and interaction in mentor-led threads** in the next section). Survey data provided further evidence, as 80% of respondents indicated that the reason they visited Mentor 1's threads was to 'seek the sense of not being alone'.

## **Mentor 2**

The following are the keywords for Mentor 2 (in rank-order): *please, new, tip, save, already, files, open, word, into, click, email, page, book, file, which, task, name, useful, read, point, online, then, sentences, audio, English, or, in, your, tutor* and *the*. These are categorised in Table 4.

Keyword(s)	Communicative strategies	Additional comments	Rapport orientation
<i>Please</i>	Requesting: <i>Please download the MP3 files ...</i> <i>Please ask your tutor by email...</i>	Highly conventional politeness marker in British culture. Directive discourse.	Maintenance
<i>tip, useful</i>	Advising and recommending: <i>My number one tip would be to study a little every day...</i> <i>you might find it useful to break it down ...</i>	Directive discourse.	Maintenance
<i>file/files, already, new, save, audio, open, into, email, tutor, read, click</i>	Giving instructions on: - the management of files, <i>save the file as ... You can trim an audio file</i> <i>The "Profile" tab should already be selected...</i> - the use of the browser, <i>Open in a new tab ...</i> - what students should do, <i>Email your tutor...</i> not to <b>read</b> from a pre-written script... - and where to do them, <i>click on the coloured icon... paste into...</i>	Directive discourse.	Maintenance
<i>then</i>	Giving step-by-step instructions: <i>select Header, then Blank...</i>	Directive discourse.	Maintenance
<i>the, task, name, online, sentences, English, word, tutor</i>	Giving information: <i>highlight that task in yellow...</i> <i>the correct file name is...</i> <i>find an online tutorial which you can attend...</i> <i>recording a few sentences...</i> <i>together with their English translations...</i> <i>Such English sentences in Chinese word order can be very helpful...</i> <i>email your tutor ...</i>	Typically relating to the learning context. The presence of the keyword <i>the</i> betrays the fact that this mentor has quite a ‘noun-y’ style.	Neutral
<i>in, page, book</i>	Giving information: <i>the corresponding noun in the task...</i> <i>instructions at the top and bottom of the page...</i> <i>grey grammar box at the top of Book 1 ...</i>	Typically, information about location.	Neutral
<i>which, or</i>	Giving information: <i>An MP3 player which pauses on phrases...</i> <i>checking it works on your PC or Mac...</i>	Used to pack in extra information.	Neutral
<i>point, your</i>	Giving information: <i>your understanding of that grammar point...</i> <i>The point I wanted to emphasize is to...</i>	<i>Point</i> is used to focus information; <i>your</i> is used to refer to aspects connected to the students.	Neutral

**Table 4: Mentor 2’s keywords, communicative style strategies and rapport orientations**

The keywords show that Mentor 2 has a communicative style that is strongly oriented to rapport maintenance and neutrality. In particular, it consists of strategies relating to directive discourse (suggestions, requests, commands, etc.) and information-giving discourse, the latter sometimes being mixed with the former. Apart from the first and last post in each thread to announce her/his presence and congratulate students on completing the assignment, almost all of Mentor 2’s posts are tips on assignments and technical advice on how to use tools. She/He often ended her/his post by saying ‘watch out for my tips on [...]’. She/He used in total only eight smileys, as opposed to 47 used by Mentor 1. As Mentor 2 did not disclose any personal information and did not ask students how they felt about things, there was not a

single post from students seeking emotional support. Amongst the 30 posts by students, 25 were about practical issues to do with assignments or technology. This was supported by the survey data where 100% respondents reported that they visited Mentor 2's threads for practical advice. Mentor 2's overall rapport style is further evidenced in the interview:

I focused on quite mechanical tips, very practical things for people to use rather than ... social chat or reassurance. [...] I focused on practical support. So maybe people just read what I posted and then applied it themselves. [...] I tend to do things with bullet points and factual, try to get to the point, business like.

### Mentor 3

The following are the keywords for Mentor 3 (in rank-order): *a bit, 'm, 'll, 's, may, until, 've, who, last, better, say, code, well, like, me, did, hope, everyone, there, they, hi, was, been, know, n't, do, just, be, that, it* and *I*. Most of these keywords are categorised in Table 5, except for *last, say, well, did, they, been, n't, be, that* and *it*, because they have particularly varied functions, and in some cases occur infrequently, and so are difficult to categorise. It should also be noted that some keywords are misleading when considered out of context, and this happens more than for the other two mentors' lists. For example (Table 5, final row), *just* seems to be a classic 'minimizer', a strategy by which rapport can be maintained especially when threatened in requests (e.g. 'Could I *just* borrow your pen a moment?'). However, in context it also performs rapport enhancement.

Keyword(s)	Communicative strategies	Additional comments	Rapport orientation
<i>a bit, was</i>	Expressing sympathy: <i>it can be <b>a bit</b> tricky getting your head around</i> Self-disclosing: <i>as it was my first time I was <b>a bit</b> nervous</i> Moderating claims: <i>we tend to hold our mouths <b>a bit</b> tight</i>	All relating to rapport enhancement. The moderation of claims seems to reflect a general self-effacing style.	Enhancement
<i>I, 'll, 'm, 've, me, hope, everyone, like</i>	Expressing positive wishes and feelings: <i>I hope <b>everyone</b> is well</i> <i>I'm very impressed</i> Building common ground: <i>As I studied ... last year, I know how stressful it can be cos I'm like that</i> Self-disclosing (often with humour): <i>Once I found that out, I found it much easier</i> <i>I sound like an old car engine</i> Stating positive intentions: <i>I'll be here everyday</i>	<i>I</i> frequently collocates with <i>'m, 'll</i> and <i>'ve</i> ; performs a number of functions geared towards rapport enhancement.	Enhancement
<i>'s, better</i>	Expressing positive evaluations: <i>it's a good idea</i> <i>You're <b>better</b> than me</i>	Also, some hints of self-effacement here.	Enhancement
<i>may</i>	Self-disclosing: <i>I <b>may</b> splash out on a first class ticket</i> Moderation of claims: <i>you <b>may</b> well find</i>	All relating to rapport enhancement. Also, part of a self-effacing style.	Enhancement
<i>until, there</i>	Giving information: <i>I shall lock this thread <b>until</b> then</i>	Typically, information about duration or course restrictions.	Neutral

	... <i>there</i> are no extensions		
<i>who</i>	Giving information: <i>those who are not yet finished are doing okay</i>	Used to pack in extra information.	Neutral
<i>code</i>	Giving information: <i>module code</i>	Typically relating to the learning context, especially course-related specifics.	Neutral
<i>Hi</i>	Initiating posts (followed by addressee's given name): <i>Hi Mark</i>	Informal, familiar formula.	Enhancement
<i>just</i>	Reminding: <i>I just want to remind everyone ...</i> Warning: <i>... just one week to go</i> Self-disclosing (often with humour): <i>sometimes I just rebel and watch Netflix</i>	Directive discourse. Both reminders and warnings can be construed as something that is of benefit to addressees but not directly the addressors (mentors do not set the deadlines; they are not responsible for them). <i>just</i> also seems to be part of a self-effacing style.	Enhancement/ maintenance

**Table 5: Mentor 3's keywords, communicative style strategies and rapport orientations.**

The keywords show that Mentor 3 has a communicative style that is mixed in terms of rapport management. As with Mentor 1, there is a rapport enhancement pattern involving strategies expressing positive wishes and feelings, building common ground, performing self-disclosure and so on. But there is also a rapport neutral pattern, involving strategies giving information about duration, course-related specifics, as well as the 'packing in of information'. However, unlike Mentor 1 and more like Mentor 2, there is a degree of rapport maintenance in the reminders and warnings. Moreover, unlike either Mentor 1 or 2, the distinctive feature of Mentor 3's communicative style lies in how rapport enhancement is achieved – it often involves a strategy of self-effacement. That self-effacement generally has a creative, humorous touch (e.g. 'sometimes I just rebel and watch Netflix', 'I sound like an old car engine...'). In response, there were posts by students with humour (e.g. '...Amy does her tutorials in her pyjamas' [StudentC, TMA2 thread]). In the 112 posts by Mentor 3, 61 emoticons were used, 47 smileys with a few grins and a few sad faces when she/he revealed her/his own difficulties. Mentor 3's overall rapport style is further evidenced in the interview:

It was nice to have that mutual support with each other so you could say 'well I am listening I promise you.' [...] I did tips for submission of audio files [...] you get a bit repetitive if you are just saying 'come along guys you can do it, you're doing all right.' I wanted to vary it a bit [...].

What this suggests is that Mentor 3 was taking a more indirect and creative line in supporting and encouraging learning, which encouraged students to share learning stories and resources (see the following section). The survey data supported our analysis in that the top reasons for visiting Mentor 3's threads were for practical advice (90%) and moral support/reassurances (72%).

## THE STUDENTS: PARTICIPATION, INTERACTION AND PERCEPTION

### Participation and interaction in mentor-led threads

As explained in point 5 of **Data sets** above, Moodle statistics report that of all the students who were registered in Week 1, on average 43% visited the module-wide student forum (M1: 44%; M2: 47% and M3: 40%). Although the participants gradually declined, it is clear from Figure 1 that numbers peaked in the subsequent five assignment submission weeks for Module 1. A similar pattern occurred for Modules 2 and 3. Of those students who visited the

module-wide fora, on average across the three modules, 85% participated in the mentor-led threads (including ‘readers’ and ‘posters’). As the Moodle system could not capture forum subscribers who read the posts via an email alert, the analysis misses this population.

Table 6 reports both the raw figures and the percentage of *active* participants who posted and *passive* participants who read only in each mentor-led thread by module, which reveals the often found fact that the majority of students were *passive* participants. Between 80-90% of participants across the three modules only read without posting, which is in agreement with Wilkerson’s (2016) claim that 90% forum participants read without contributing. We made the point earlier (in **From facework to rapport management**) that online learning environments are risky from a ‘face’ point of view; it might be deemed better to say nothing, risk no face exposure, and just ‘listen’. Another reason may be that learners ‘at a distance’ are time-poor, as on average 40% of the students in this study were in full-time employment and a further 18% in part-time employment (see Table 2).

Module/ Mentor (average % posters 5 threads combined)	Mentor-led TMA1 Thread		Mentor-led TMA2 Thread		Mentor-led TMA3 Thread		Mentor-led TMA4 Thread		Mentor-led EMA Thread	
	Posters	Readers	Posters	Readers	Posters	Readers	Posters	Readers	Posters	Readers
1 (15% posters)	23 (20%)	87 (80%)	11 (11%)	82 (89%)	7 (6%)	98 (94%)	13 (12%)	89 (88%)	27 (26%)	75 (74%)
	Total: 110		Total: 93		Total: 105		Total: 102		Total: 102	
2 (9% posters)	5 (7%)	64 (93%)	10 (22%)	34 (78%)	1 (2%)	38 (98%)	0 (0%)	33 (100%)	5 (14%)	30 (86%)
	Total: 69		Total: 44		Total: 39		Total: 33		Total: 35	
3 (22.6% posters)	9 (10%)	73 (90%)	14 (28%)	35 (72%)	5 (10%)	44 (90%)	13 (33%)	27 (67%)	12 (32%)	26 (68%)
	Total: 82		Total: 49		Total: 49		Total: 40		Total: 38	

Note: Some posters post in different threads. Each time he/she posts in one thread (one or more than one post), it counts as one poster in that thread.

**Table 6: Raw number and percentage of posters/readers against the total participants in each mentor-led assignment thread; and average percentage of posters per module (i.e. sum of five threads per module divided by 5).**

The results suggest that Mentor 3, who adopted a communicative style that combines rapport enhancement, especially involving self-effacement, with neutrality and a small degree of maintenance rapport, had the greatest impact on *active* participation – over 22%, on average, of participants contributing to content. Mentor 1 follows with around 15%; her/his rapport orientation was a mixture of enhancement and neutrality. Mentor 2, whose style was oriented towards maintenance and neutral rapport, ranks some distance behind the other two, with around 9%. Furthermore, the higher levels of student *active* participation in Modules 1 and 3 are strikingly reflected in the large number of posts contributed by students; more posts per poster, as well as the rich content of posts, as displayed in Table 7.

Mentor/ Module	Total No. of posts in mentor-led threads	Total No. of posts by the mentor	Total No. of posts by students/posters	Common topic areas of student posts
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<b>1</b>	279	81 (29%)	198 (71%): contributed by 36 students (5.5 posts per poster)	1) asking for reassurances/moral support 2) sharing learning journey/resources 3) asking for practical advice (technology and assignment format related) 4) socialising 5) expressing gratitude
<b>2</b>	110	80 (72%)	30 (28%): contributed by 17 students (1.7 posts per poster)	1) asking for practical advice (technology related) 2) asking for practical advice (assignment format related) 3) expressing gratitude
<b>3</b>	296	112 (38%)	184 (62%): contributed by 22 students (8.3 posts per poster)	1) sharing learning journey/resources 2) asking for reassurances/moral support 3) asking for practical advice (technology and assignment format related) 4) joking with each other 5) expressing gratitude

*Note:* when a student posted multiple times in different threads, it counted as one poster.

**Table 7: Raw number and percentage of mentor and student posts, total number of posters and average posts per poster, and common topics areas by module.**

Data from both mentor and student posts also indicate that enhancement rapport tends to create more opportunities for interaction (mentor to student, as well as student to student), which we suggest may facilitate the building of an online community where the moral support and reassurance comes from both the mentor and fellow students. This is illustrated in the following interaction (Mentor 1's TMA1 thread, 16-17 October 2014) (we have trimmed the extract due to lack of space):

**Mentor 1:** ...What is your top tip?

**StudentD:** ...try to do a little bit on most days rather than doing nothing for a few days and then doing a marathon session ...

**Mentor 1:** ...Great tip!

**StudentE:** ...break the assignment question down into all the points you have to cover and tick them off as you cover them...

**Mentor 1:** ...I might try your way next time...

**StudentF:** ...to be very organised with my computer files...

**StudentE:** ...I do exactly the same as you!

**Mentor 1:** That is great advice and I do something very similar...

**StudentG:** ...I find listening to a radio station called [name of the station] is a big help...

In contrast, Mentor 2's contributions, mixing maintenance and neutral rapport, produced dialogue between the mentor and students, rather than between students; there were no interactions between students and students on this forum. Below is a typical interaction between Mentor 2 and a student (Mentor 2's TMA 2 thread, 29 November 2014) (we have trimmed the extract due to lack of space):

**Mentor 2:**

The Problem:

- Do you find the speech too quick to follow on some of the audio tracks?
- Do you find the gaps too short, leaving you too little time to repeat what has just been said?
- Do you find some of the sentences too long to remember and repeat? [... 2 more bullet points]

The Solution:

- WorkAudioBook is a free Windows software application which can automatically breaks the audio into short phrases
- You can Open an MP3 file and [...4 more bullet points]

Any Questions?

- Please let me know how you get on with WorkAudioBook and feel free to ask any questions.

**StudentH:** ... Yes that's done it. Being of a certain age I've not had to deal with mp3 files before! And I've even managed to set the default to WorkAudioBook [...]

Mentor 2's long posts were commented on by two students:

Some of it [her/his posts] seemed very long winded and only seemed to add to the large amount of information that a student needs to absorb [...]. (StudentI, survey open comments)

I was very passive, I read the posts but I didn't engage I'm afraid and some of the posts were long so I just skim read [...]. Lack of time and not feeling I had anything relevant to add to [her/his] posts [...]  
(StudentJ, interview)

The mention of Mentor 2's lengthy posts might suggest a negative effect on student engagement. In addition, the posts in Mentor 2's threads covered less in topic areas than in the other two mentors' threads (see Table 7).

It is worth remembering that factors such as age and levels of education may impact on the forum participation. In Module 3 the higher level of *active* participation may be attributable to a higher number of: older students, who perhaps have more time (as indicated earlier); and students with higher levels of education who perhaps are more confident (see Table 2).

### **Students' perceptions of their mentors and the usefulness of the scheme**

The survey asked each respondent to give two words/expressions to describe their mentor. They were also asked to evaluate the mentoring scheme in terms of its helpfulness. Below the findings for each mentor are discussed.

#### *Mentor 1*

Of the words given, the top two used to describe Mentor 1 were *helpful* and *friendly*. The rest were *pleasant*, *professional*, *encouraging*, *clear*, *approachable*, *feel not alone* and *ideal*. There was one negative word *irrelevant*, to which the student added 'I just do not see the need for it'. These perceptions are in line with our keyword analyses of Mentor 1 in the previous section, showing that Mentor 1 engages in enhancement rapport and is friendly and approachable. In addition, 80% of respondents in Module 1 thought the mentoring scheme useful because it is good to 'bounce ideas' off someone 'who has been there before', and it makes one 'feel less alone with the studying' Spencer-Oatey (2008: 31).

#### *Mentor 2*

The top two words were *helpful* and *knowledgeable*. The rest were: *useful*, *dedicated*, *methodical*, *thorough*, *efficient*, *talkative*, *supportive*, *hardworking*, *praiseworthy*, and *descriptive*. The two negative words were *patronising* and *convinced of [her/himself]*. Despite Mentor 2's maintenance and neutrality rapport style, the majority of the words used to describe her/him were in fact positive, as students perceive her/him as knowledgeable, dedicated and supportive. Posts from students on the forum are consistent with this: 'Really appreciate all your tips and advice...'; 'You've saved me from several moments of loss of confidence!' [StudentH, StudentJ, TMA2 thread, Module 2]. This is also supported by the survey data where 90% of respondents of Module 2 thought the mentoring scheme useful, because '[she/he] offered us some great tips for learning and revising' and because some students may hesitate 'to contact the tutor because [she/he] thinks this is maybe a silly question'. However, Mentor 2's style, plus her/his lengthy posts, obviously had a negative

impact on a few students as they perceive her/him as ‘patronising’ and ‘convinced of [her/himself]’.

### *Mentor 3*

The top two words for Mentor 3 were the same as for Mentor 1: *helpful* and *friendly*. The rest were: *informative, useful, reassuring, supportive, organised, fun, knowledgeable, open, caring, and encouraging*. Mentor 3’s mixed rapport management style (enhancement, especially involving self-effacement, with neutrality and a small degree of maintenance) together with her/his humorous touches seems to have paid off. This is illustrated by the fact that all the words used to describe Mentor 3 were positive, and all the respondents in Module 3 (100%) thought that the mentoring scheme was useful, for example, because ‘it boosts moral when you know you are not alone’, and that Mentor 3 was ‘very supportive for those struggling and lots of extra ideas for those who are doing well’ [Survey open comments]. As 60% of survey respondents were over the age of 50 in Module 3, one might speculate that they might have been more generous with personal evaluation, and perhaps needed more help with technology and hence found the scheme useful.

The survey data seem to suggest that different communicative styles had an impact on students’ perception of the mentor as a person, but not as much as the impact on forum interaction (as discussed in 5.1). Although there were two negative terms used to describe Mentor 2, 90% respondents of Module 2 thought the mentoring scheme was useful because of the good tips offered. . However, as our survey data sample is small, it can only be used in conjunction with other four datasets (datasets 1, 2, 4 and 5, as described in **Data sets**) as additional information.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This article began by discussing the notion of style and more particularly communicative style, proposing an operationalizable definition. It explained how empirical evidence of styles could be derived through a corpus-based technique, namely keyword analysis. Hitherto, identifying the clusters of features that constitute styles had been an area of doubt. Instead, researchers, even Spencer-Oatey (e.g. 2008), had resorted to lists of possible communicative strategies, rather than addressing what in the lists might be pertinent to creating a particular style. The results of a keyword analysis, however, are only a first step: this may give evidence of a set of linguistic features constituting a style, but not necessarily a communicative one. Also, it will obviously enrich our findings further if the kind of communicative style can be identified. Hence our study examined the functions in context of the occurrences of every keyword, starting by scrutinizing concordances. Our functional analysis here was informed by the classic (im)politeness strategies, along with strategies that have been discussed in studies of facework, and indeed relational or rapport management. Having characterised the communicative styles of the mentors thus, the analysis enabled us to relate them to one of the four rapport orientations – enhancement, maintenance, neglect and challenge – suggested by Spencer-Oatey (2008), with the addition of our proposed orientation of rapport neutrality.

The article revealed not only the differences in the linguistic substance of the mentors’ communicative styles, but also how those styles: (1) were characterised by particular communicative functions; (2) pointed towards certain general rapport orientations; (3) impacted on student participation and interaction; and (4) were perceived by students. Mentors 1 and 3 had fairly similar communicative styles, both oriented to rapport enhancement and, to a slightly lesser degree, neutrality. This rapport enhancement involved

strategies expressing positive wishes, evaluations, intentions and sympathy; self-disclosure; building common ground. Their neutrality revolved around giving information. Additionally, both mentors performed a mixed rapport category of enhancement and maintenance in the performance of giving personalised advice, reminding and warning. What particularly distinguished Mentor 3 from Mentor 1 was the use of a strategy of self-effacement as part of a communicative style performing rapport enhancement, often coupled with a touch of humour. Mentor 2 stood apart from both of the other two mentors in having a style that oriented to maintenance and neutrality rapport in almost equal measure. Neutrality rapport again primarily involved a strategy of giving information, whilst maintenance rapport involved requesting, instructing and advising.

These communicative styles arise from words that occurred significantly more frequently in one mentor's contributions compared with that of the others. Such unusually frequent words are so-called positive keywords. To have also discussed negative keywords (significantly infrequent words), would have required much more space. Moreover, most of our conclusions are apparent from the positive keywords analysis alone, not least because, as might be expected, positive and negative keywords are related: a particular positive keyword in one mentor may mean a negative keyword in the others. Looking at the three sets of positive keywords alongside those for negative keywords provides further evidence of the contrasts we have observed. Nine (60%) of the words that constitute Mentor 1's 15 positive keywords (*hello, hope, module, helps, good, am, luck, all and I*) also appear in the list of Mentor 2's negative keywords. Only 12 (39%) of the words that constitute Mentor 3's 31 positive keywords (*ll, 's, who, well, like, me, hope, there, been, know, it and I*) appear in the list of Mentor 2's negative keywords. This suggests that Mentors 1 and 2 have more sharply contrasting styles than those between Mentors 3 and 2. No such sharp contrast appears between Mentors 1 and 3: none of the words that constitute Mentor 1's positive keywords appear in the list of Mentor 3's negative keywords or vice versa.

The communicative style of each mentor aligned with a different level of student participation. Enhancement rapport stimulated higher levels of active participation. Mentor 3's mixed rapport management communicative style – enhancement, especially involving self-effacement, combined with neutrality and a small degree of maintenance – achieved the highest level of active participation. The analysis and results of mentor-led threads indicated how enhancement rapport generated opportunities for multi-directional interactions involving mentors and students. Further, students had very positive perceptions of Mentors 1 and 3. This is consistent with earlier studies showing that: affective elements play a major role in online language learning (Hurd 2007); good support is key to the success of learning languages at a distance (Baumann *et al.* 2008; Murphy *et al.* 2010); online fora facilitate socialization and the building of the online learning community (Lamy 2013b). However, a surprising finding, at least at first glance, is the fact that the absence of rapport enhancement, and its affective and socialising role, did not create an overall negative impression of Mentor 2 for the students. Although students were not facilitated in expressing their concerns and worries, they appreciated the practical advice and good tips, finding them useful and reassuring. The majority of the queries from students were about practical aspects of study, in particular technical issues, as technology is one of the main challenges in online language learning (Hampel 2014; White 2014). Mentor 2 excelled in meeting this need.

As with any study, there are a number of areas that would benefit from further research. We stressed in the literature review that our focus in this study was on the distinctive styles of individual mentors. A further study could compare all three of our individual mentor datasets against other datasets (e.g. the British National Corpus, face-to-face teaching discourse, mentors from other online modules), in order to highlight distinctive features of the mentor style in general. Alternatively, some scholars have begun to suggest

ways of identifying what is statistically similar across datasets, thus, in a sense, doing a ‘reverse’ keywords analysis (see Taylor 2018, for an overview). This could have highlighted similarities across the three mentor datasets in this study. This might reveal whether there are particular styles for particular types of teaching; for example, those relating to in distance mode. Finally, perhaps the main area that would benefit from further study is the students’ contributions. These could, for example, be contrasted with the mentors’ contributions or different students’ contributions could be contrasted with each other using keyword analysis. That may reveal different preferences regarding communicative styles, both in general and connected to teachers’ or mentors’ more specifically. An additional relevant factor is that of gender, as face or politeness has sometimes been discussed in relation to ‘male’ versus ‘female’ communicative styles (e.g. Holmes 1995).

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## APPENDIX: SAMPLE SURVEY QUESTIONS

[Appendix about here]

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### **Appendix: sample survey questions**

q3 Overall, how useful did you find the discussions in the student buddy threads?

- Extremely useful
- Quite useful
- Useful
- Not useful
- No opinion

q4 How did the 'student buddy' threads help you personally? (Please select one for each row: Helped a lot, Helped a bit, Not much or Not at all)

- For moral support and reassurance from a fellow student who had similar experiences
- For practical information and tips
- For clarifying assignment requirements
- For ideas on how best to prepare for assignments
- For opportunity to express my feelings about the module
- For realising I am not alone
- For something to keep me going when I thought of giving up
- Others \_\_\_\_\_

q5 Please indicate your participation in each of the following student buddy threads: (Please select all that apply for each row: Before TMA1, TMA2, TMA3, TMA4, EMA)

- I just read other people's posts
- I asked a question/questions
- I posted a comment/comments
- I did not visit the student buddy discussion at this point in the module

Q5a If you only read other people's posts without posting any comments or asking questions, please briefly explain why.

q9 Please describe your student buddy in just two words \_\_\_\_\_ .

q10 Do you have any other comments about the Student Buddy scheme you would like to feedback to the module team? If yes, briefly describe.