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Ma. Guadalupe Santos Espino

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Editorial Policy

The MEXTESOL Journal is dedicated to the classroom teacher in Mexico. Previously unpublished articles and book reviews relevant to EFL teaching and research in Mexico are accepted for publication. Articles may be of a practical or theoretical nature and be written in English or Spanish. The Journal reserves the right to edit an accepted manuscript in order to enhance clarity or style. The author will be consulted only if the editing has been substantial.

Research-Based Articles: A research-based article should report original research or discuss research-related issues. These articles are usually submitted as refereed (judged as acceptable, conditional, or not acceptable) by two members of the Editorial Board who are experts in an area related to that of the article. The refereeing process is blind but, if an author wishes, a referee may be assigned as a mentor to guide the author through the revision process. A footnote will state that the article was refereed.

Professional Practice Issue Articles: In order to open the publication process to more authors, refereed or non-refereed articles are accepted in this section. These normally describe professional teaching experiences or library research related to teaching which the author wants to share with the readers. These articles will be read, judged and styled by members of the Editorial Staff for originality, quality and clarity of ideas.

Reviews: The Journal welcomes review articles summarizing published research or professional practice, position papers which promote or defend positions on a current, controversial topic, and book reviews of classroom texts, recorded material, computer software or other instructional resources. Reviews are non-refereed but are subject to editing.

Submission Guidelines: in order to facilitate the publication process, if possible, submissions should first be sent by e-mail to the address of the Journal. The article and any graphics must be written using Microsoft Word or Word Perfect and sent as an "attachment". Please specify if you are submitting for a **Refereed** or **Non-refereed** article.

Any correspondence to the Journal concerning manuscripts should be faxed or e-mailed to the Editors at the address below. Information concerning advertising in the Journal or MEXTESOL membership should be sent to the National MEXTESOL Office at the addresses also listed below.

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Política Editorial

La revista MEXTESOL está dirigida al maestro de inglés. Se aceptan manuscritos y reseñas relevantes a la enseñanza del inglés como idioma extranjero e investigación que no hayan sido previamente publicados. Los artículos pueden ser de naturaleza teórica o práctica y pueden ser escritos en inglés o en español. La revista se reserva el derecho de editar un manuscrito aceptado para brindarle mayor claridad o mejorar su estilo. El autor será consultado únicamente para sugerir cambios.

Artículos basados en la investigación: un artículo basado en investigación debe reportar investigación original o discutir asuntos relacionados con la investigación. Estos artículos generalmente se someten a arbitraje (juzgados como aceptable, condicional o no aceptable) realizado por dos miembros del consejo editorial expertos en un área relacionada con el artículo. El proceso de arbitraje es anónimo, pero si el autor lo desea se le puede asignar a un árbitro como mentor para guiarlo en el proceso de revisión. El artículo se publica con una nota al pie de página para indicar que es arbitrado.

Artículos relacionados con la práctica docente: con el propósito de abrir las posibilidades de publicación a más autores, se aceptan artículos arbitrados y no arbitrados. Generalmente describen experiencias docentes o investigación bibliográfica relacionada con la enseñanza. Estos artículos son leídos y juzgados por miembros del personal editorial para asegurar su originalidad, calidad y claridad de ideas.

Reseñas: la revista acepta reseñas de investigación publicada o de práctica docente, ponencias que argumentan a favor o en contra de temas actuales o controvertidos y reseñas de libros de texto, materiales audiovisuales, programas de computadoras, y otros recursos didácticos. Las reseñas no son sometidas a arbitraje pero son sujetas a edición.

Indicaciones para enviar una propuesta: para facilitar el proceso de publicación se recomienda enviar el manuscrito por correo electrónico a la dirección de la revista. Se debe utilizar un procesador Microsoft Word o Word Perfect para el artículo y gráficas que lo acompañen y ser enviado como un attachment. Además se debe enviar una copia del manuscrito a la Dirección postal de la revista ya que las gráficas, tablas o diagramas que contenga el artículo pueden sufrir alteraciones al ser enviado por correo electrónico. Si no se tiene acceso al correo electrónico, se debe enviar el manuscrito acompañado de una copia en diskette de 3.5". Favor de indicar si se desea que el **artículo sea o no arbitrado**.

Cualquier correspondencia a la revista que tenga que ver con artículos para publicación debe ser enviada vía fax o correo electrónico a las direcciones que aparecen abajo. La información concerniente a propaganda en la revista o a membresías debe ser enviada a la Oficina Nacional de MEXTESOL cuya dirección también aparece abajo.

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Manuscript Guidelines

Articles must be typed, double-spaced and preferably no more than twenty pages long. The format should conform to the Publication Manual for the American Psychological Association (A.P.A.) guideline format.

In-Text Citations:

References within the text should be cited in parentheses using the author's last name, year of publication and page numbers (shown below):

*Rodgers (1994) compared performance on two test instruments.
or In a recent study of EFL writing (Rodgers, 1994)*

Or for Direct Quotes:

Rodgers (1994) argued that, "most existing standardized tests do not accurately assess EFL writing performance" (p. 245).

Reference Page:

The list of references found in an article must appear at the end of the text on a separate page entitled "References". The data must be complete and accurate. Authors are fully responsible for the accuracy of their references. The APA format for reference page entries is shown below.

Books:

Brown, J. (1991). *Nelson-Denny Reading Test*. Chicago: Riverside Press

Journal Articles:

Ganschow, L. (1992). A screening instrument for the identification of foreign language learning problems. *Foreign Language Annals*. 24, 383-398.

From the Editor

When I first agreed to edit this Special Issue on CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), I imagined the contributing authors would be mostly from Mexico and the United States. However, I was pleasantly surprised to realize that the contributors to this issue reflect the international character of technology in the modern world. We do have two contributing authors from Mexico and two from the United States, but we also have articles from Brazil, Japan, South Africa, and Spain.

The first article by M^a Victoria Fernández Carballo-Calero from the Universidad de Vigo in Spain is a good introduction to the use of computer technology for language teaching. She explains some general terms, describes some uses of computers and clearly discusses some of the advantages and disadvantages of using computers. She also examines the use of computers for assessment purposes.

The second article by Vera Lúcia Menezes de Oliveira e Paiva from Brazil presents the idea of community. More and more the Internet is being used for language learning and throughout the years, it has become less mechanical and more based on language for communication. This emphasis on the communicative aspects of the Internet (email, chat, etc.) has led to studies on the development of virtual communities of users. Prof. Menezes examines how collaborative learning communities can be created that facilitate language learning possibilities.

Three dedicated professors from the Universidad de Colima here in Mexico (Arthur Edwards Block, José Miguel Rodríguez Reyes, and Raúl Aquino Santos) have given us our third article that describes a web-based question-answering system that is in use on their campuses. This self-editing template can be used for both traditional and distance learning situations. While the article is a bit more technical, it is clearly presented and can give us another option for computer use for language learning.

Leila Kajee from South Africa gives us an example of using technology in a less-technologically developed environment. Many of her students had never used a computer before their first experiences at the university level. Her insights as she describes the implementation of an email project at her institute can be very enlightening for all who want to adopt technology in less developed settings.

Armand Affricano, who is working in Japan, examines the philosophy of using computer technology in the classroom as well as offering us some very precise suggestions for using email, e-lists and video-conferences with our students.

No special issue about CALL would be complete without a history of its use in Mexico. Mercedes Rossetti was kind enough to prepare a very informative article relating how computer use began and has developed in recent years.

Nancy McKeand from Louisiana gives a clear description of an on-line classroom management tool, *Nicenet*, that can be used as a tool to help teachers organize their classes.

Finally, Elizabeth Hanson-Smith, Coordinator of the TESOL Electronic Village On-Line sessions describes how you can take advantage of this wonderful free experience in on-line education. Even if you are unable to attend TESOL's annual convention (in Tampa, Florida from March 15-19, 2006), you can take advantage

of this pre-convention, on-line educational program which is free to both members and non-members of TESOL.

By the way, as a member of the Board of Directors of TESOL and a (very) long-time member of MEXTESOL, I would like to encourage you to, besides keeping your MEXTESOL membership up-to-date, consider joining TESOL. TESOL is the international professional organization to which MEXTESOL is affiliated. Mexican residents (as well as those of all other Latin American nations) can become special global or electronic members of TESOL for a very reduced rate. Check out the TESOL website (www.tesol.org) for details. You won't regret it. TESOL is developing more and more on-line benefits for its international members every day.

Finally, I would like to thank all our readers for the time they dedicated to making this issue a success. I also would like to acknowledge a great mentoring effort by Martha Lengeling. Special thanks to Anne V. Martin, my friend and our Style Editor for this issue, who volunteered her valuable time to help this issue become a reality.

El papel del ordenador en la ELAO ¹

M^a VICTORIA FERNÁNDEZ CARBALLO-CALERO, UNIVERSIDAD DE VIGO, SPAIN

Introducción

De acuerdo con Scandura (1983), los ordenadores pueden utilizarse dentro y fuera del aula, y de formas diferentes, dependiendo de la función que se pretende que éstos desempeñen:

1. Como objeto de estudio, en cursos de lenguajes de programación.
2. Para enseñar al alumno sobre sus efectos y usos en sociedad, en cursos de alfabetización sobre su utilización o sobre sus aplicaciones.
3. Para promover el aprendizaje de otras asignaturas con su ayuda (caso que nos ocupa en este trabajo).

Nos gustaría dejar claro desde un primer momento que de ninguna manera consideramos que el ordenador sea o vaya a convertirse en la solución a *todos* nuestros problemas en las clases de lenguas extranjeras.

Acrónimos y papeles otorgados al ordenador

Acrónimos

Un buen punto de partida para abordar el tema del papel desempeñado por el ordenador en el aprendizaje / enseñanza de un idioma lo constituyen los acrónimos utilizados para referirse a este tipo de enseñanza.

Dependiendo del acrónimo elegido se puede deducir la función que le adscribe la persona que ha decidido utilizar uno u otro, aunque no está de más señalar que esta regla no siempre se cumple, puesto que a veces se utiliza el mismo acrónimo para diferentes conceptos o diferentes acrónimos para el mismo concepto:

...what is CAL to one teacher may be CBI to another. The inverse is true also.

Not only may one technique be represented by many acronyms, but also one acronym may encompass widely differing techniques, especially as one traverses time and place (Levy 1997:83).

De acuerdo con la clasificación establecida por Levy (1997:77-83), los acrónimos más utilizados en relación con la enseñanza de lenguas asistida por ordenador son los siguientes:

- CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning)
 - CAI (Computer-Assisted Instruction)
 - ICALL (Intelligent Computer-Assisted Language Learning)
 - CELL (Computer-Enhanced Language Learning)
 - TELL (Technology-Enhanced Language Learning)
- Aunque entre los más comunes destaca:

¹ This is a refereed article.

CAI (el más utilizado en EE.UU., haciendo énfasis en la enseñanza / instrucción)

CALL (representa un punto de vista más europeo, haciendo énfasis en el aprendizaje)

Nosotros hemos optado por el acrónimo español ELAO ², traducción del acrónimo CALL, y siguiendo a Levy (1997), con el objeto de que no quede fuera ninguno de los posibles papeles que podría desempeñar el ordenador.

Papeles

Podríamos hablar de un número determinado de conceptos generales a los que los diferentes autores les han venido dando nombres distintos ³.

Si tomamos como base la clasificación de Taylor (1980), que se refiere a los diferentes papeles como *tutor*, *tool* y *tutee*⁴, podemos distinguir tres conceptos claramente identificados:

Un primer concepto estaría representado por el ordenador que presenta el material al alumno, evalúa la respuesta por parte de éste y dependiendo de dicha respuesta determina qué es lo que va a presentar a continuación.

El segundo concepto estaría representado por el ordenador utilizado por el alumno como ayuda para llevar a cabo otras tareas.

El tercer concepto estaría representado por el ordenador "tutorizado" por el alumno o por el profesor.

En este trabajo no se va a defender un papel u otro, pues se considera que los tres, (ciñéndonos a la clasificación propuesta por Taylor (1980)) son de gran importancia. Aunque la ELAO y nosotros en este trabajo nos centramos fundamentalmente en el papel del ordenador como "tutor", el papel de "herramienta" es también muy importante para aumentar el rendimiento del alumno, así como para el aprendizaje indirecto (por ejemplo, a través de un *chat* o del correo electrónico).

Es importante tener en cuenta que, en general, cuando se considera al ordenador como tutor, pensamiento cuyas raíces se encuentran en el behaviorismo / conductismo y en la enseñanza programada, se sigue pensando en el profesor como algo que está dentro de la máquina y no en el profesor trabajando con el alumno junto a la máquina (Levy 1997). Nosotros no vamos a descartar la situa-

² ELAO (Enseñanza de Lenguas Asistida por Ordenador) es el acrónimo más extendido en el ámbito hispanohablante para referirse a CALL (*Computer Assisted Language Learning*), y fue utilizado por primera vez por G. Ruipérez en 1988, como título de un Curso de Matrícula Abierta de la UNED (v. Ruipérez 1990).

³ Kemmis et al. (1977), por ejemplo, hablan de *instructional CALL*, *revelatory learning*, *conjectural learning* y *emancipatory learning*. Higgins (1983), por su parte, menciona los papeles de *magister* y *pedagogue*. Wyatt (1984), a su vez, distingue entre *instructor*, *facilitator* y *collaborator*. De Quincey (1986) propone para el ordenador los papeles de *opponent*, *task setter*, *manipulator*, *enabler*, *simulator* y *environment provider*. Evelyn & Olivier (1987) los de *tutor*, *editor*, *adviser*, *partner* y *tutee*. Y, de acuerdo con los modelos establecidos por Phillips (1987), la distinción estaría entre *the expert systems model*, *the prosthetic model* y *the games model*.

⁴ "Tutor", "herramienta" y "tutoría".

ción en la que el profesor esté trabajando con el alumno junto a la máquina o cerca de la máquina, pues consideramos que la presencia del profesor es cuando menos muy aconsejable en la ELAO (Kathleen 1997), sobre todo cuando el ordenador se utiliza en su papel de herramienta (no directivo) sin ofrecer ningún tipo de guía al alumno.

Ventajas e inconvenientes del ordenador

Ventajas

No cabe duda que una de las grandes ventajas del ordenador-tutor está relacionada con la disponibilidad o la "no disponibilidad" de un profesor.

Sin olvidar que "neither textbooks nor technology can replace the live, unprogrammed feedback and interaction of the language teacher" (Willets 1992:4), habrá momentos en los que sea imposible tener a ese profesor disponible. Si éste es el caso, el ordenador-tutor sería "lo más parecido" a un profesor.

Por otro lado, gracias al ordenador el alumno tiene movilidad espacial y libertad de horarios. El usuario puede trabajar en el ordenador en un laboratorio, en su casa o en el lugar que él elija y a la hora que desee. A su vez, el ordenador respeta las diferencias individuales, con una realimentación de tipo personal, permitiendo al alumno trabajar a su propio ritmo (Kataoka 2000) y favoreciendo que éste intente el trabajo más difícil que quizás le diese vergüenza intentar en público (Kamhi-Stein 2000 a y b), sobre el contenido que prefiera, y con un programa adecuado a su estilo de aprendizaje, ya que cada vez existe más variedad de software para la ELAO.

Además, es importante recalcar la posibilidad para el alumno de practicar las destrezas oral y auditiva. Asimismo, el carácter interactivo del ordenador y el hecho de que el trabajo con él favorezca que los alumnos desarrollen un cierto nivel informático son otras ventajas que merece la pena mencionar.

Pero nos interesa en este punto hacer énfasis en la posibilidad de que el ordenador se introduzca en el aula con el profesor presente. Sela (1995), para quien el ordenador es una "herramienta para la enseñanza", afirma que es nuestro trabajo, el de los profesores, descubrir los métodos de enseñanza, las técnicas e ideas que nos capaciten para enseñar de una manera efectiva en las clases en las que los niveles son diferentes y ayudar a nuestros alumnos a explotar todo su potencial. Este autor sugiere como herramienta el ordenador y esgrime las siguientes razones: aprendizaje y enseñanza individual, falta de presión en el alumno, trabajo en grupo, orientación al éxito, motivación, variedad, contenido interesante, materiales interesantes visualmente, elección por parte del alumno, realimentación personal y preparación mínima por parte del profesor.

El punto en el que básicamente discrepamos con Sela es el que se refiere a la "preparación mínima por parte del profesor", ya que consideramos que el trabajo que requiere la preparación de una clase con ordenador es incluso más laborioso que el requerido por una clase que va a estar basada en una "lección magistral", sin mencionar la complejidad de los problemas que puedan surgir en la puesta en práctica. Pensemos solamente en los de tipo técnico.

Inconvenientes

En primer lugar, no se pueden obviar ni el tema económico, que abarcaría los costos del principio y de desarrollo, ni tampoco el tema de los problemas técnicos que pueden surgir a la hora de poner en práctica la enseñanza de lenguas a través del ordenador.

Otro de los inconvenientes que se señalan normalmente sobre el uso del ordenador-tutor es la imposibilidad de participar en situaciones reales donde se trabaje la destreza oral.

La realimentación inadecuada que proporcionan algunos programas es otro de los grandes problemas. Es de vital importancia que el alumno reciba una realimentación adecuada. Para ello, es nuestro deber estudiar muy bien los programas antes de que nuestros alumnos empiecen a trabajar con ellos. Por otra parte, tenemos que ser conscientes de que los profesores no sabemos muy bien lo que los alumnos están haciendo con los ordenadores, por ello debemos buscar programas que reduzcan al máximo la posibilidad de que el alumno abandone por el motivo que sea.

La evaluación del alumno es otro tema muy comprometido, y el ordenador no siempre va a ser preciso a la hora de calificar. Existe un número indefinido de respuestas que el alumno puede dar en un momento dado, y todas acertadas con un mayor o menor grado de precisión pero, al mismo tiempo, existe un número definido de posibilidades en cuanto a las respuestas que va a admitir el ordenador como correctas. Y si vamos más allá de la palabra, a las frases y oraciones, el tema se vuelve todavía más complejo. Y es que, como dice Levy (1997), puede que se necesite *real world knowledge* (1997:213), para evaluar correctamente.

Otro argumento en contra, también señalado por Levy (1997), y muy importante en ciertos casos personales, sería el aislamiento del mundo real que se produce en determinados alumnos que se crean su propia realidad virtual. Sin embargo, esta idea no es compartida por todos (v. Castells 2001).

Por último, no deberíamos dejar de mencionar en este apartado la falta de formación tecnológica tanto del alumnado como del profesorado de lenguas, de gran importancia para que la ELAO se implante con éxito.

Integración del ordenador en el contexto del aula

No cabe duda de que es más fácil la integración del ordenador en el aula si éste desempeña el papel de tutor. El alumno, "en teoría", no va a necesitar que el profesor esté presente a su lado en todo momento, ya que los materiales están diseñados para que el primero trabaje de una manera independiente y autónoma⁵.

Desde el momento en que se decide introducir la ELAO en el aula habrá que contar primero con el equipo adecuado, que será uno—como mínimo—o varios ordenadores. Después, el elemento más importante será la predisposición del do-

⁵ No ocurre lo mismo en el caso de la integración del ordenador-herramienta, pues la presencia del profesor es necesaria, ya que el ordenador-herramienta no ofrece ningún tipo de guía a los utilitarios.

cente a integrar la nueva tecnología, ya que como bien dice Murphy-Judy (1997): "integration of a new technology is impossible without disposition." (1997:1).

Es importante que quede bien clara la idea de que, a pesar de que el ordenador-tutor tenga la capacidad de guiar al alumno, también se puede introducir en el aula en este mismo papel independientemente de la presencia del profesor, sin tener que convertirse en un sustituto del último (Lam & Lawrence 2002) y ofreciendo también múltiples ventajas, incluyendo práctica multimodal con realimentación, individualización en una clase grande, proyectos en parejas o en trabajo de grupo, colaborando o compitiendo, el factor diversión, variedad en los recursos disponibles y en los estilos de aprendizaje utilizados, aprendizaje exploratorio con gran cantidad de datos lingüísticos, formación en destrezas de uso de ordenador (Warschauer & Healey 1998).

Asimismo, es de vital importancia que el ordenador se integre perfectamente en la estructura y en los objetivos específicos del curso, porque de otra forma el alumno lo verá como algo "extra" y no le prestará la atención que se merece (Morrison & Fitzgerald 1996), entre otras cosas, porque no va a ser examinado de tal componente.

Por otro lado, también es importante que, antes de empezar a trabajar con un programa específico, el alumno conozca de antemano algo del vocabulario y determinadas estructuras que puedan aparecer, ya que en caso contrario lo más probable es que se encuentre con elementos que desconoce y existirá la posibilidad de que se sienta abrumado. Muchas veces el fracaso se debe a la falta de relación directa entre el libro de texto, el contenido de las clases, la evaluación del curso y el componente multimedia (Gunn 1997). La situación ideal, de acuerdo con esta autora, parece ser aquella en la que las visitas al laboratorio multimedia estén dentro del horario de clases, con acceso libre en otros momentos (sujeto a disponibilidad) -particularmente más utilizada esta última opción antes de los exámenes⁶, aunque también depende de si esta opción ha sido presentada como totalmente opcional frente a "altamente recomendada".

Finalizaremos este punto sobre integración con una cita de Felix (1997), que, creemos, engloba el significado de lo dicho hasta ahora:

[...] technology is not a panacea and does not provide self-contained teaching but should be seen as supplementary to already excellent teaching, be this in the classroom or at a distance. What is needed is to integrate useful technology in all its various forms into the full teaching program. This will not only reshape our thinking about the way we teach, but also provide a learning climate and environment richer in authentic interaction than even before (1997:10).

Examinar y examinarse a través de un ordenador

Frente a la opción alternativa de la evaluación del alumno por el profesor, con o sin ayuda de lápiz y papel adquiere gran importancia también el tema de la evaluación a través del mismo ordenador.

Convendría hacer hincapié en que no es lo mismo examinar a un alumno en vocabulario que examinarlo en la destreza oral, en primer lugar porque hoy en

⁶ Véase Brett (2000).

día los programas no están lo suficientemente desarrollados para ser exactos, en este último tema.

Otro punto a tener en cuenta son las características individuales de cada alumno. Un alumno al que el ordenador le provoque cualquier tipo de ansiedad es más fácil que se equivoque si es examinado a través del mismo. De igual modo, un alumno que no sepa escribir a máquina o que sea muy nervioso tendrá más errores tipográficos que un experto mecanógrafo o que alguien a quien los nervios nunca le traicionan, independientemente del dominio de la materia de la que está siendo examinado.

De acuerdo con Garret (1991):

anecdotal evidence from CALL-experienced teachers suggests that giving computerized tests for "real" grades is undesirable, because typographical errors and unintended keypresses may result in lowered scores for less skilled or nervous students (1991:88).

Existe un tipo específico de tests en ordenadores (*CALT: Computer Adaptive Language Test*) que creemos merece la pena mencionar llegados a este punto. Para explicar lo que se entiende por *CALT* basta con dar las tres características básicas que propone Brown (1997):

1. Los ítems son seleccionados y adecuados a los estudiantes que hacen el test.
2. El test termina cuando se localiza el nivel del alumno.
3. Son más cortos en tiempo y en número de ítems.

Además, de acuerdo con Brown (1997), los *CALTs* poseen unas ventajas determinadas:

1. Pueden administrarse de una forma individual.
2. Los límites de tiempo tradicionales no son necesarios.
3. Son mucho más objetivos que el ser humano a la hora de corregir.
4. Son mucho más exactos al informar de resultados.
5. La realimentación inmediata es en forma de resultados.
6. Existen tests diferentes para alumnos de distintos niveles, reduciéndose al mínimo, por ejemplo, las posibilidades de estudiar para un examen o de copiar.
7. Si se quiere, se puede proporcionar realimentación inmediata para los ítems mal respondidos.
8. Permite proporcionar una estimación más precisa de capacidad del alumno.
9. Los alumnos trabajan a su propio ritmo.
10. Los *CALTs* normalmente llevan menos tiempo.
11. Provocan menos frustración en los alumnos, porque éstos trabajan sobre ítems adecuados a su nivel.
12. Los alumnos se sienten menos intimidados, porque las cuestiones se presentan una a una.
13. A muchos alumnos les gustan los ordenadores y lo pasan bien.

Sin embargo, este autor también señala una serie de inconvenientes, que se hacen extensivos al resto de los exámenes a través de ordenadores, puesto que:

1. Los ordenadores no siempre están disponibles, o no siempre funcionan, o se va la electricidad.

2. La capacidad de la pantalla es limitada, lo que dificulta la presentación de mucho material al mismo tiempo.
3. Las capacidades gráficas de los ordenadores son limitadas y los hacen más lentos.
4. Pueden dar distintos resultados si los tests se hacen a lápiz, o si se hacen en el ordenador.
5. Existen grandes diferencias que dependen del grado en el que los alumnos están familiarizados con los ordenadores o teclados.
6. Existe la posibilidad de ansiedad provocada por los ordenadores.

Resumiendo, consideramos que sólo en los casos en los que un centro dependa exclusivamente del auto-aprendizaje se debería examinar a través de ordenadores. En general, los que escriben más rápido tienen ventaja y a algunos alumnos les resulta más fácil que a otros acostumbrarse a ser examinados en ordenadores. Hay que tener en cuenta también que el hecho de examinar a los alumnos a través de ordenadores puede cambiar sus actitudes de positivas a negativas, pasando a ser de algo que les ayuda a algo que les castiga (Marty 1981). De cualquier modo, y como ya se ha mencionado al principio, hay algunas destrezas que soportarían mejor un examen a través del ordenador (por ejemplo, la evaluación sobre conocimiento de vocabulario, que no implica operaciones muy complicadas que favorezcan a unos y perjudiquen a otros).

Investigación sobre *media*

De acuerdo con Clark (1983), las fuentes más comunes de confusión en la investigación sobre *media* parecen ser los efectos incontrolados de las diferencias en el método de enseñanza o en los contenidos entre los tratamientos que se comparan y un efecto de novedad relativo a los medios más modernos, que tiende a desaparecer con el tiempo.

En general, y siguiendo a Lidell & Bradin (1999), los problemas en la investigación sobre la ELAO tienen que ver con los cambios tan rápidos que se suceden en la tecnología y con las diferencias en el diseño del *software*, destrezas objeto, alumnos, modos de uso, diseño de investigación, métodos de recogida de datos, cosas que se asumen sobre la teoría de adquisición de segundas lenguas (SLA), y finalmente también, con las diferencias en lo que la gente entiende por la ELAO.

Conclusiones

Uno de los principales usos del ordenador está directamente relacionado con la enseñanza, y en particular con la enseñanza de lenguas. A pesar de que existen diferentes acrónimos para referirse a dicho uso, podemos comprobar que básicamente los distintos acrónimos hacen referencia al mismo concepto.

De igual manera, los diferentes papeles que puede desempeñar el ordenador, también han recibido nombres diferentes, cuando realmente se hablaba de los mismos conceptos.

Nosotros nos hemos centrado en este trabajo en las ventajas e inconvenientes del uso del ordenador en su papel de tutor, por ser el caso del ordenador-tutor el objeto de la mayoría de los estudios de la ELAO, aunque también haya estudios sobre el ordenador en su papel de herramienta (Beauvois 1995, Brierley & Kemble 1991, Warschauer 1996).

Hemos tratado la importancia de la "integración", así como el tema de la evaluación a través del ordenador y su idoneidad o no, dependiendo de las destrezas que se traten de evaluar.

Está claro que los ordenadores son cada vez más fáciles de usar, bien como herramientas o como tutores, y llegará un día en que la teoría del reconocimiento de voz hará el teclado innecesario (Eastment 1998:5).

Sin embargo, no podemos caer en el error de afirmar de una manera tajante que el uso de la tecnología es la panacea para nuestras clases de lengua.

Tal uso nos ayudará en algunos casos, y no nos servirá de ayuda, o incluso nos perjudicará, en otros. Es muy importante saber cuándo, cómo y dónde deberemos utilizarla (Schwier 1994) y no dejarnos llevar por la novedad y hacer únicamente un mal uso de ella.

Desde luego que la tecnología está ahí y, aunque los profesores sigamos teniendo un papel muy importante en las aulas, no deberíamos prescindir de algo que, utilizado correctamente, puede tener un efecto tan positivo.

Computers will not replace teachers because they cannot do most of the significant things teachers can: lesson planning, individual counseling, preparation and selection of materials, evaluation of process and product, and so on. Teachers of the future will perform the very same functions they do now, but will make use of technology to give students a richer, more stimulating learning environment. But as computers become our new tools, or slaves, we will find that the technology demands new kinds of student-teacher relations: students must become more autonomous, active learners, and teachers must relinquish some of their power and authority -not to the computer, but to the students themselves. The effect of the digital revolution on teaching and learning will be enormous, and the teaching profession must prepare now for the changes ahead of it. (Hanson-Smith 1997:8)

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Tearing down walls and building up a collaborative learning community

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No one educates anyone else, no one educates themselves, men educate one another, mediated by the world.—Paulo Freire

This paper presents a reflection upon the learning of EFL in an electronic environment. The data come from a group of Brazilian students learning English in a community network, which tears down the walls of the traditional school and challenges the students to surf the net to acquire communicative competence and to make connections with people outside the classroom. Freire's idea that people, mediated by the world, educate themselves, and Vygotsky's concept of learning as a social process make up the theoretical framework for that experience. A discussion list is the meeting point where the students interact, express opinions, exchange information, collaborate and ask for help. Students are also supposed to interact with partners outside the virtual classroom using either e-mail or chat rooms. The teacher is no longer the only source of knowledge, but the one who provides opportunities for learners to solve problems and take responsibility for their own learning.

The context and the participants

Since 1997, when a computer laboratory with Internet access was installed in the Language Arts College of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG, in Brazil), I have been utilizing Internet resources—e-mail, chat, the World Wide Web—to help with the teaching of an English language course designed to develop reading and writing skills.

It is a sixty-hour course, divided into four hours a week, 15 weeks per semester. The objective of the course is to offer authentic input and non-artificial opportunities for students to practice the English language. Our students are prospective English teachers and it is difficult for them to find opportunities to use the language outside the classroom, so the Internet has been a useful tool to bridge that gap.

The university offers English language courses for future language teachers in the morning and in the evening. Those attending the evening classes usually come from an impoverished environment and only a few have opportunities to travel abroad. In addition, they usually do not have the opportunity to be in contact with their peers in the morning, as most of them work all day.

The course was developed for undergraduate students, but was part of a major project of our university which aimed at giving graduate students the op-

¹ This is a refereed article.

portunity to work as teaching assistants (TAs) supervised by experienced teachers.

Until the second semester of 1998, the course was face-to-face, i.e., the teacher, TA and students were all required to be present in the laboratory for the biweekly meetings representing the four weekly class-hours which were offered in the morning. As of the first semester of 1999, the classes have been entirely on-line, allowing for the demolition of the walls of the traditional day and evening classrooms, creating a learning community that integrates the day time and evening groups of students, who can now interact with their peers regardless of their different timetables.

As our classroom has neither walls nor fixed time for meetings, there is a demand from non-enrolled students to join our group when they get to know about the course. In order to cope with the needs of our community, the content is open to anyone who wishes to receive the assignments and messages of the group. However, only those students actually enrolled in the course have permission to interact. This restriction is necessary to limit the number of messages to a quantity the students can deal with within the time limit they have set aside to participate in the course. Depending on the size of the enrolled group, people from the community can also join our classes ².

Sometimes the students themselves invite friends, who will be regarded as listeners, into the virtual community or send friends the information sent through the discussion list. In the following excerpt, a student explains that his friend would like to participate in the course.

The exercises of the ninth task were very, very interesting. Maybe they were the most amazing of all. I use to print the tasks that are suggested and this one I have not only printed but also recommended to many of my friends that study English too. One of them even asked me if he could take part on our Internet classes. But unfortunately, he is not an UFMG student. Anyway, I will keep on making good suggestions to him.

It is my contention that the students share the tasks with their friends because the activities involve the real use of the English language in meaningful situations.

The syllabus

To promote on-line interaction among students, our syllabus is designed to integrate technological and communicative functions to the maximum extent possible. Here are some examples of the activities:

- Write introductions which will also be used when interacting by e-mail with pen pals,
- Learn how transition between ideas is operated as awareness of this process is very important or both readers and writers,

² It is worth mentioning that one group had a participant from Caruaru, which is hundreds of miles away from our university. That would never have been possible before as our university does not offer distance education programs.

- Use search engines to find out interesting information about favorite singer/actor and share the best with the group,
- Find a pen pal through sites offering "key pal" services,
- Interact in chat rooms,
- Visit greeting card sites and send a card to a classmate,
- Choose a site where people put messages in real or virtual bottles and throw them into the real or virtual sea, and from there send a message to humanity,
- Learn to make a simple homepage with personal information and list of favorite sites with your own critiques of them,
- Choose a magazine or newspaper of any country in the world and read about the most prominent news item in the media at that moment and share impressions with classmates about the way the same news is spread in various countries,
- Find and choose sites that show resources for learning and teaching English and make a critique to send to the group.

The course is organized around a discussion list where all the interaction among the virtual community—students, TA and teacher—takes place. The discussion list is hosted on the Yahoo!Groups site (<http://groups.yahoo.com>) at no cost, but with the proviso that advertisements come together with the message. All the messages exchanged during the course are filed away on a page created by the software. Figure 1 shows the appearance of the course homepage and Figure 2 the discussion list homepage as generated by Yahoo!Groups.

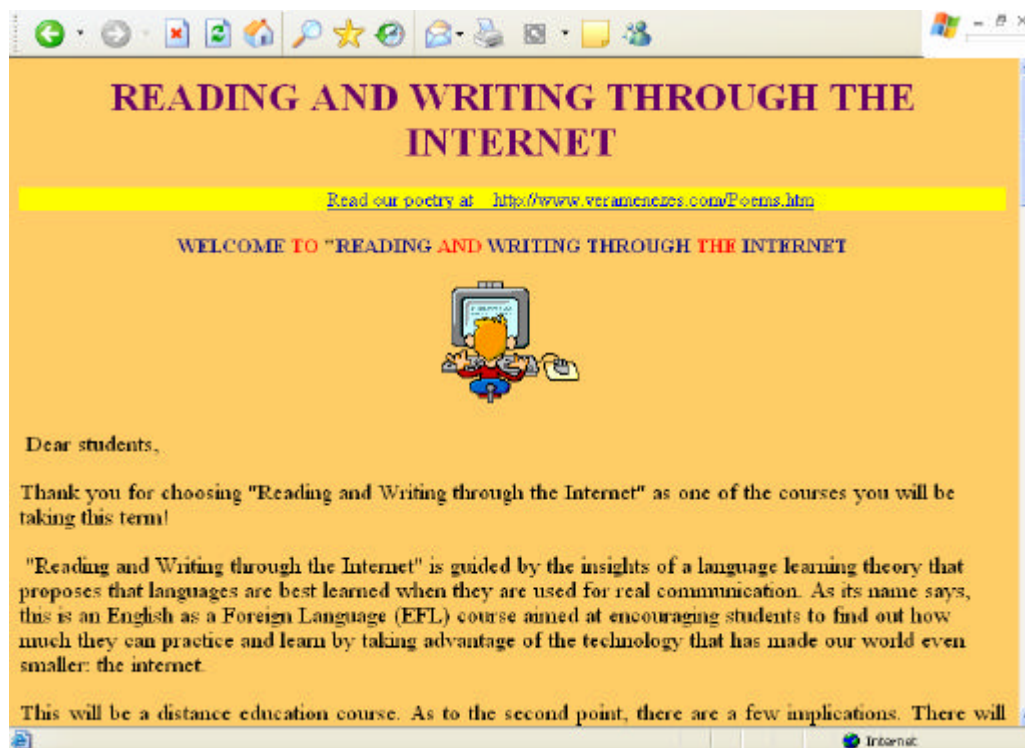


Figure 1. Reading and writing course homepage

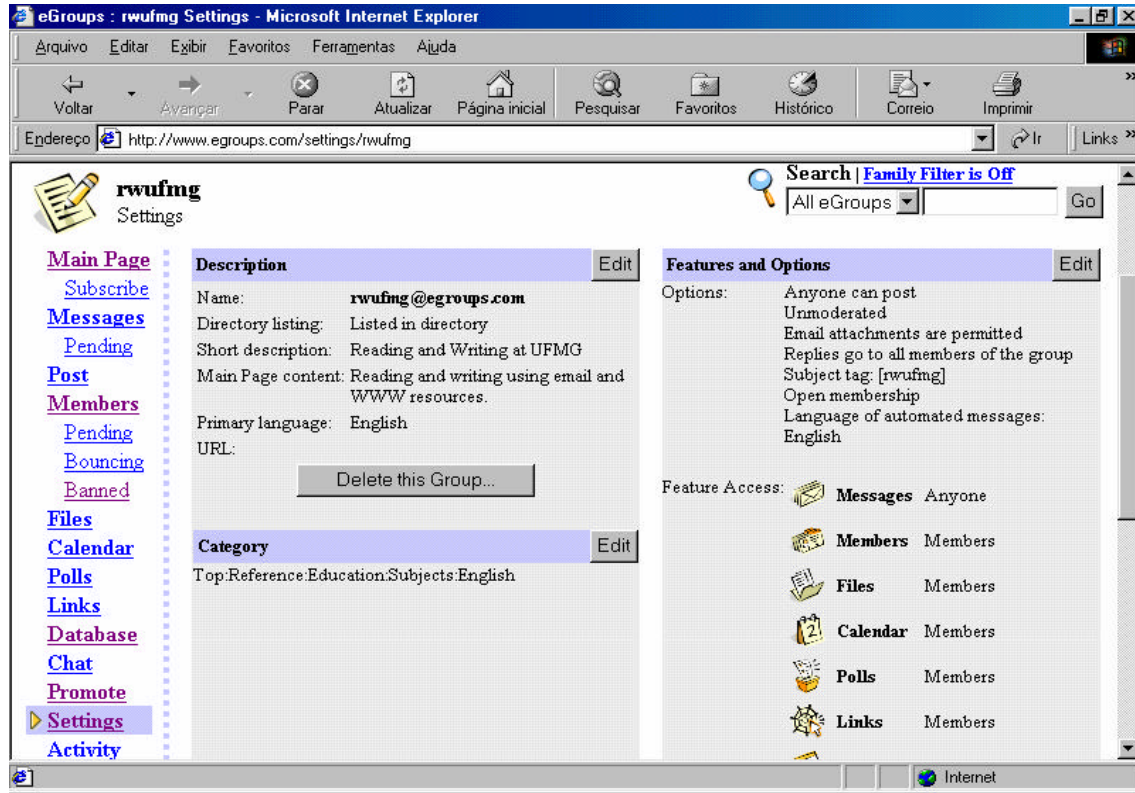


Fig. 2. Reading and writing discussion list homepage

Besides taking part in interactions, students also communicate through e-mail or chat with native speakers of English or English language learners in other parts of the world.

Evaluation

Students are assigned two tasks each week and they must post them by Wednesday. Course attendance is only registered if tasks have been posted on time. As the objective is to produce meaning, feedback focuses on the content and not on the form of the task output.³ Students are expected to keep a copy of each task and choose, at the end of the semester, ten of their best tasks to be graded by the teacher (5 points each). They are told to keep in mind that it is the process rather than the product which will be analyzed for assessment and that there is no reason to be afraid of making mistakes.

Another ten points is assigned to the "Making Contact" activity. The students are asked to hand in copies of selected e-mail messages exchanged with their foreign key pals or samples of their Internet chat sessions, as they can choose between e-mail and chat. The final task is a homepage (thirty points), where they

³ By focusing on the content, I do not mean that the form is not important. The program offers the students different kinds of courses and they have the opportunity to study the form as well.

can talk about themselves and post some of their tasks. In addition, students evaluate themselves (ten points), as well as the teacher and the course.

The theoretical support

The theoretical basis for our course is anchored in the assumptions of the communicative approach; of the socio-cultural theory—which assumes human learning to be necessarily socially constructed; and in studies on computer assisted learning and collaborative learning.

Regarding the communicative approach, the course follows the strong version of the approach as described by Howatt (1985):

The 'strong' version of communicative teaching (...) advances the claim that language is acquired through communication, so that it is not merely a question of activating an existing but inert knowledge of the language, but of stimulating the development of the language system itself. (p. 279)

For Howatt, the weak version could be described as "learn to use English" versus the strong version's "using English to learn it." In choosing the strong version, that is, using the language to acquire it, one must emphasize the following aspects: student-centered teaching, with the teacher as mediator; focus on the content with an emphasis on interaction; the concept of language as an instrument of communication and not as a formal system; use of authentic material; and total tolerance of errors.

Interaction through discussion groups encourages participants to work in a cooperative way and at the same time allows the students to preserve their individuality. As Littlewood (1981) says:

The development of communicative skills can only take place if learners have motivation and opportunity to express their own identity and to relate with the people around them. It therefore requires a learning atmosphere which gives them a sense of security and value as individuals. (p.93)

The sociocultural theory is of paramount importance in the design of the course. First, it sees learning as a cultural phenomenon and second, it includes the notion of a zone of proximal development which Vygotsky (1978) defines as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through the problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Although the concept was developed to describe how children learn, it has been applied to adult learning as well (see Lantolf, 2000). I would like to add to Vygotsky's ideas, Freire's notion of collaboration, with dialogue as the basis for his pedagogical proposal. Although Freire does not ignore the role of leadership, he sees dialogue as the means by which educational actors meet to transform the world collaboratively (Freire, 1970).

Another important concept is scaffolding as developed by Wood, Bruner & Ross (1976). Scaffolding is the process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would otherwise be beyond his unassisted efforts. In our course, teachers are aware of their functions as tutors getting the students interested in the tasks, giving feedback, controlling students' frustration, making instructions clear, etc.

Finally, studies on computer assisted learning, such as those by Azevedo (2000), Kelm (1996), and Debski (1997), have enlightened us in the design and tutoring of the course.

The corpus

Samples of chats and electronic messages exchanged among students, teachers and people outside the course form a rich corpus which is stored for research. Those data have been analyzed in several MA and PhD studies. Souza (2000) used samples of chats provided by students to describe oral discourse markers in the texts produced synchronously in computer-mediated interactions; Sabariz (2004) identified learning strategies employed by the students to solve their reading and writing tasks, and Parreiras (2005) analyzed the virtual classroom as a complex system. Articles have also been written by the TAs; an example is Silva (1999), who reports the first experience in our lab.

In this paper, I will present some excerpts from messages in a course which was taught together with the TA, Ricardo Souza, in the first semester of 1999. This is representative of a period when students were not as comfortable with the technology as they are now.

The data analysis

The stimulating atmosphere is in great part reached by total tolerance of errors and by the appreciation of individual contributions through constant positive feedback. As one example:

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>By the way I continue changing e-mail with my penpal.  
  
Good job Paula!4 I hope so does everybody else!  
Cheers,  
Ricardo.
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We can observe that the TA does not correct 'changing.' Instead, he compliments the student for interacting with a pen pal as requested.

Although some students demand, at the beginning of the course, to have all their errors corrected, little by little even the most insistent ones end up adapting to the new model of a course built around the exchange of ideas and spontaneous interaction. Many times the students are encouraged by their own colleagues to adapt to the new learning framework, as the following excerpt of one of the messages demonstrates:

⁴ Pseudonyms are used in place of the real names.

I am so happy with this course. I think we'll have a great time. I hope we always keep in touch with everybody.

Don't worry with the mistakes. When we are doing something wrong, it's good because we can learn with the mistakes. And I am sure that we'll never forget what we did wrong again.

I hope we enjoy this course.
Bye,
Euarda

Similar experiences, which prioritize communication and have a high degree of tolerance for linguistic deviations, are being carried out in other countries. For example, Kelm (1996), in describing an experiment in computer-mediated communication among learners of Portuguese as a foreign language, emphasizes the importance of focus on meaning and not on form. He says that "[t]he conversations that students have during CMCs⁵ become the source of the language environment. CMCs create a natural language environment in that the conversations focus almost entirely on content" (p.21). He adds that "[t]he fact that the student has gained enough confidence to express these thoughts to other peers in Portuguese is far more important, as related to the language acquisition, than the mere accuracy to the grammar" (p.24).

Following the Vygotskyian presupposition that views learning as a profoundly social process, virtual interaction breaks down the walls of the classroom and allows new agents to play a part in the educational environment, benefiting each member, including the teacher, with an experience that is both collective and individual. As Debski (1997) reminds us, "using language no longer means pure transfer of information from person A to person B, but involves a social relationship between people" (p. 44). In this type of interaction, students increase their linguistic repertoire while they reflect upon their roles as future teachers. Teachers and students become partners in the exchange of information about the use of the Internet in teaching/learning English, as in the example below:

> At CNN, I had a great idea. I'll get some copies of the >news and I'll give to my students at CENEX. They will
> practice reading and they'll learn lots of new words.

Hi Elaine,
I'm so glad you're enjoying the course! Your idea is great. I also use a lot of stuff I find on the net as classroom material, and usually my students enjoy them a lot. Thanks for sharing this idea. I'm sure other people will like it too. You're perfectly right in what you said about the mistakes, I mean, you shouldn't worry about them. Later on we'll give you chances to revise them, and we'll also suggest sites where you can work directly on language improvement.
Cheers,
Ricardo

The actions of each of the actors in this process contribute to the construction of a learning environment that is both flexible and democratic, enabling the

⁵ Computer mediated communications

teacher to generate opportunities to solve real problems that arise in real situations. In this new universe of virtual communities of collaborative learning, teachers and students exchange experiences and scaffolding. The students are expected to have a certain degree of autonomy and the ability to manage their time to dedicate to the course and to share information and interact with the group. On the part of the teachers, besides the course content, they should have a capacity to lead a discussion without monopolizing it, and a working knowledge of the technology involved. This kind of course generates a lot of messages during the whole week and in order to assist the students the teacher and the TA share the responsibility of reading and giving feedback whenever needed.

Administration and management of this course are highly demanding, not just to fulfill the students' needs, but also to take care of outsiders' interest in the course. At first, there are always some students who are not used to interacting with classmates. They still believe that the teacher is the only source of knowledge and the only one able to help them. That kind of student tries to establish a personal dialogue with the teacher, parallel to that going on within the group, but they are always urged to share their ideas and doubts with the whole group. We always insist that one student's doubt might be the same as other students' doubts and that we also collaborate when we share our problems.

Other students with weaker computer skills need more help. More experienced students usually offer to meet those classmates in the lab in order to help them. The teachers also have appointment periods in their offices to offer personal assistance. However, little by little the group consolidates into a virtual learning community where knowledge is gathered and built up collectively and many doubts are solved in the discussion list.

The participants in this process, including the teachers, experience a process of learning that is simultaneously individual and collective and that occurs through their interaction, scaffolding and negotiation of meaning both with each other and with the curriculum content. The following is an example of negotiation of meaning between two students. At first, Fabio, sends a message to the list and one student, Silvia, does not understand one word (*dunno*). Then, there is negotiation between the two students while the others remain as observers. This excerpt presents only the second part of the interaction:

Hi Fabio,

My name is Maria Celia and I read one message that you wrote the word "dunno" what does it mean?

Thanks

Silvia.

Subject: [rwatufmg] Re: Fabio
Date: Thu, 15 Apr 1999 00:00:15 -0300
From: Fabio
To: Silvia <rwatufmg@egroups.com>

Dear Silvia,
First of all, WELCOME ABOARD!!!

That is to answer your question about the expression "dunno". That's a famous reduction of *****don't know*****. As you wish, it's regarded as a nonstandard word, that is to say, a word regarded as incorrect by most educated speakers. Here come other examples: gotta, gonna, coulda, wanna, etc.

That's all for now. I HAFTA GO NOW.

Happiness,
Fábio

That example, besides showing negotiation of meaning between two participants, is also proof of the collaborative learning environment. The colleague, in addition to providing the meaning of "dunno", gives his classmate other examples of the phenomenon. Dialogue among participants, collaboration, orientation and support characterize an environment with countless opportunities for learning. Learning outstrips the plans laid by the teacher and allows each student to establish his/her own priorities. Beyond the role of the teacher, students can act as coaches for their classmates, giving feedback, scaffolding, and inspiring curiosity in their partners. The course dynamics leads each student to venture out independently into virtual places which offer learning opportunities. Any message sent to the group can trigger a learning experience.

In the next excerpt, one of the students confesses to having learned something from another's message and the TA takes advantage of the opportunity to refer to the theory, applying the example to the concept of collaborative learning:

By reading Elias's e-mail I concluded that I just had to write something about what I've seen and done in Module 2. So, let me say a little about it.

Jerusalem seems to be an interesting place but, despite being a christian, I wouldn't like to visit it. Utah seems to be a beautiful state although it can be very dry in summer and cold in winter. On the other hand, those mountains must be one of the most beautiful things on this planet. I say this because I just love mountains!

Is that all I should do?

Bye, because I'm tired of staying in front of this computer for about 2 hours.

Subject: [rwatufmg] Re: On second thought
 Date: Sat, 10 Apr 1999 21:45:18 -0300
 From: Ricardo Augusto de Souza <ricardod@unix.horizontes.com.br>
 To: Raimundo

That's it Raimundo!

You see? This is the collaborative work component we talked about. Now after resting a bit (long hours in front of a computer can be really tiring), don't forget to visit DAVE'S ESL CAFE, VIRTUAL LANGUAGE CENTER and CNN from module 2. Specifications of what exactly you should send us about them will be found in module 2, Ok?

Congratulations on the hard work!

Cheers,
 Ricardo.

Debski (1997) in describing the main aspects of what we could call the strong version of the communicative approach, says that "language learners abandon the role of diligent acquirers of knowledge, and become responsible, reflective and creative agents, taking over some responsibility for the outcome of the course" (p.48). The following messages provide concrete examples of the concept Debski outlines above. Several features of the social construction of knowledge in a virtual learning community can be pointed out in the messages below. First, the student Kátia asks for help (addresses of sites) from somebody and not from the teachers, showing the lack of association of the teacher as the only source of knowledge. Second, the participant judges the work of a classmate, Fábio, to be really good, and suggests that he share his expertise with the rest of the group. Kátia wants to learn how to insert images into her messages, a skill that the teachers had not foreseen.

I was wondering if somebody could send me the links to visit "Dave's ESL center", "Virtual language center" and "CNN". I deleted the messages with these addresses and I didn't visit those sites yet.

Fábio is really good working with INTERNET isn't he? I Would like to learn how to attach fotos in my answers as he did. So Fábio, what about a free lesson to those students that are starting their experiences at virtual space?

That's it for now, I'll be back after lunch and CENEX class, and will try to visit these sites.

Cheers,

Kátia.

The TA, Ricardo, is the first to respond to the message. He teaches a method for finding out addresses of sites, instead of simply providing the URLs to the student, by giving an umbrella address that lists many sites. In addition, he encourages Fábio to help his classmates.

At 07:09 14/04/99 PDT, Kátia wrote:
>Hi classmates and teachers!
>
>I was wondering if somebody could send me the links to >visit "Dave's
ESL center", "Virtual language center" and >"CNN".

Hi Kátia,

Just go to this site: <http://mofetsrv.mofet.macam98.ac.il/~elaine//eti/>

Once there, enter Module 2.

> So Fábio, what about a free lesson to those students that > are start-
ing their experiences at virtual space?

Great idea! How about that Fábio?

Cheers,
Ricardo.

Upon receiving this, Fábio sends a reply, not to Kátia, but to the TA, in which he offers to meet other students with technical difficulties in the computer lab at the language arts college.

Dear Ricardo,
How's everything?
That's about your proposal. I think I can cope with those students that are starting their experiences at virtual space. I'd say it's OK for me. I think we could fix up a time for the free lesson. Perhaps, One Monday at night (FALE's computer facilities).

With a taste for adventure and the outdoors, we all would plunge into the web sea. Okey-dokey!

I'll talk to you later. I'm in a hurry cause it's getting late and it's time to go to bed now. Drop me a line anytime you want.

Regards,
Fabio

Within this new modality of teaching/learning, students and teachers take on new roles. According to Azevedo (2000):

Being an on-line student is much more than learning to surf the Internet or use electronic mail. It is being capable of seeing oneself as part of a virtual community of collaborative learning and performing in the new role specifically reserved for such a student in that community.

Azevedo (2000) further states:

[T]he on-line teacher needs more than anything else to be a convert of the new pedagogical precepts. It's not simply a new medium in which he must learn to act, but a new pedagogical proposal that he must help to create with his educational practices. Assuming the role of comrade, leader, cultivator of community spirit is something very different from what had been his main activities in conventional education. His great talent should not be focused exclusively on the content or didactic techniques, but also on the ability to mobilize a community of apprentices around his own training; to incite the debate; to maintain a climate of

mutual help, and to motivate each person to become responsible for the motivation of all.

Drawbacks

So far I have focused only on the positive side of the experience. However, the problems must also be discussed. When the course changed to completely on-line, the number of registered students doubled, but the drop-out rate also increased quite a lot. In the first semester of 2000, for example, 45 students enrolled, but 12 never appeared, and of the 33 left, only 22 reached the end of the course. There was around a 50% drop-out rate ⁶. The reason alleged is always the same—the insurmountable obstacle of having to stay hours and hours in front of a computer. The students who use free e-mail services like hotmail™ have to read each message on its own webpage, which can involve a large amount of connection time. A slow Internet connection makes such students frustrated and tired. The same is true of the delay in opening pages on some of the sites the students have to visit. Some of the participants also complained about reading texts on websites. The following is a student complaint about the problem of slowness and of reading texts on the web:

Hi there, people,

(...) reading lots of text on the net, in my opinion is quite tiring and boring; so, I only read what is really necessary and interesting. On the other hand, the activities which make me think and work give me a lot of fun (I fortunately found them in Module 2). When I say I don't like reading text on the screen it is especially true as far as waiting for the new page to load is concerned. Even when I am at a very fast computer I don't have the nerve to wait for the pages to load. That's why I give up sometimes.

I don't want you to think I'm a grouch, I'm just telling the truth about what I think of the net. However, I know I'll get used to it and enjoy surfing on the net a little bit more. I think the activities are interesting and we do learn from them. I also find this activity of exchanging e-mail in English very interesting.

I'm sorry if I sounded so rude but I'm really pissed off today (sorry for the cursing). To be quite frank, I've been enjoying the activities suggested; the only problem is the time some pages take to be loaded and the downloading of some pictures and programs just take forever.

See you on the web,

Raimundo

Another problem that can occur is that a site can be recommended and then later be temporarily inaccessible. Students immediately run to their teachers for help, as in the following example:

⁶ Of course, it should be mentioned that some of the students re-registered the following semester. It is a rare case that someone gives up on the course due to inability to adapt to the new style.

```
> if it's my computer problem or the "servidor" problem or > because it's  
too full of people at this time..I'm trying > to do the xercise later.  
> Mércia
```

Mércia,
There might have been a problem with the server. Try it again.
Cheers,
Vera

Students opinions

Despite the obstacles, student evaluations of the project have been very positive, as illustrated by some commentaries:

I visited the site suggested by Vera and I thought it was great. These exercises are improving my English and helping me to improve my vocabulary more and more. I didn't think that the tests weren't so easy but my score wasn't so bad. They really needed us to pay attention to do them.

I'm really enjoying this subject (English through Internet).

I guess all kind of exercises are great, and this 9th task wasn't different. it's a little hard work but it's great.

By the way, I am suggesting these wonderful English sites to my friends and students. Everyone around me is in love with them.

Dear Vera & Ricardo,

Thanks for everything. The course was great. It was a fantastic experience. I never had made a whole course through Internet. You, teachers, had great ideas and the tasks were very important exercises for everybody.

One more time, THANKS A LOT.

Health, Peace, Freedom and Work.

I hope you continue with it, it's important.

Hugs,
Afonso

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to return to the title of this paper, tearing down walls and building up learning communities, to discuss a new concept of "class". In defining what a class is, Ur (1996) says:

Lessons in different places may vary in topic, time, place, atmosphere, methodology and materials, but they all, essentially, are concerned with learning as their main objective, involve the participation of learner(s) and teacher(s), and are limited and pre-scheduled as regards time, place and membership (p. 213)

In the virtual model we have adopted, time, space, and even the participants stop being predetermined. The walls and the barriers of time are metaphorically broken down, as neither an hour nor a place is predefined. In some

ways we have also left open the possibility of a certain indirect participation in the "class." As we placed no restrictions on accessing the homepage where our messages are filed, anyone could benefit from the information exchange among the visible participants in the process—students, TA, and teacher.

Countless invisible participants—key pals or partners in chat interactions—also indirectly participated in the individual learning community, enabling the social construction of knowledge. As van Lier (2000) reminds us, "the learner can learn best from negotiating with a native speaker or a more competent interlocutor, presumably because knowledge has to come from one who knows or can do more" (p. 248).

Finally, as an epigraph to this paper, I bring back the voice of Paulo Freire (1970), who warns us that "no one educates anyone else, no one educates themselves, men educate each other, mediated by the world" (p. 68). I would say that, in on-line courses, we can create an environment in which no one educates anyone else, no one educates themselves, we educate each other, mediated by the computer.

What we are doing in our on-line courses is facilitating mediation among our students and the whole community made up of diverse participants—English speakers and learners. We enable our students to have more contact among themselves (students of day time and evening classes) and with the world, tearing down the walls of the traditional classroom in order to build up an environment in which everyone is mutually educated, including the teacher.

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An Online System for Managing Student Review and Self-Evaluation¹

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This paper describes a web-based question-answering system called E-teacher that can be used in both traditional and distance learning courses to review academic contents. E-teacher is a self-editing template-based system consisting of a set of PHP scripts that generate the HTML code dynamically, or "on the fly." E-teacher was developed to help students review course content and reinforce the knowledge gained during traditional or distance learning courses.

E-teacher permits individual teachers to employ nine different self-editing templates that record questions, answers, additional instructions and help in resolving problems, as well as hyperlinks into the system database or Internet. This information is stored according to question type in the database where students can then review for tests. The teacher can select individual questions from the different question types and create a series of online tests for the students to self evaluate as they review course material. E-teacher also allows individual students to practice the different question types and receive feedback through an overall "grade" that is constantly actualised as the student progresses through the system exercises.

Introduction

Teaching and learning are increasingly becoming intertwined with technology in many higher education institutions. Indeed, technology has become an all-encompassing fabric that facilitates the educational process and helps make our daily lives more fruitful. Teachers are changing how they teach and institutions are presently evolving to incorporate technology to an even greater degree as they recognize the benefits it affords and attempt to avoid the "technological divide" and the competitive disadvantage this represents.

It is important to bear in mind that technology is but a tool in the learning process, not an end in itself. Consequently, before employing technology in the classroom, it is important for the teaching materials to be well grounded from both the pedagogical and technological points of view.

Educational technology is a fascinating field which has yet to be fully explored and widely used in English Language Teaching (ELT). There are, however, extensive Computer Applied Language Learning (CALL) tools for the field of ELT. Many of these tools are sound from a technological point of view, but empty from a pedagogical perspective, or vice versa. Others, fortunately, are both pedagogically and technologically sound, yet they do not possess the characteristics that meet the more specific needs of particular groups of language learners.

¹ This is a refereed article.

The University of Colima is in the process of creating CALL educational materials, mainly in the field of medicine, to better meet student interests and needs. In ELT, a small team of enthusiastic teachers has shown interest in using educational software or designing their own so that a substantial number of English students benefit as much from the University's technological infrastructure as possible. This is what led us to create E-teacher, an online resource designed to meet our students' specific needs.

The overall purpose of this resource is to promote learner autonomy; its aims are:

- a. to promote the use of information technology for learning purposes including, but not limited to, English Language Teaching among students and teachers, and
- b. to provide students with systematic, free, voluntary practice.

Target Audience and Setting

The University of Colima (UdC) has a student population of approximately 24,000, all of whom take required English courses via the University's English Program (PUI). English is a compulsory subject at secondary and high school levels in Mexico. This means that first year undergraduate students at UdC have already received 5 to 6 years of English teaching, and they will receive a further 4 or 5 years instruction for the duration of their undergraduate studies.

Despite the number of years of instruction, many students do not become proficient in English. One reason is the lack of student intrinsic motivation, a result of the fact that English is a compulsory subject and that they do not see an immediate need to learn it.

Another factor, one that also has an effect on teacher motivation, is teaching conditions, a problem that is widespread in the world of ELT. A single teacher may have up to 10 35-student groups and see them 3 times a week for a teaching load of 30 hours, but each student receives only 3 hours per week of instruction. The lack of instructional time, the excessive workload and the number of students per group make instruction much more difficult. The lack of outside resources that afford practice represents an additional important factor contributing to the lack of motivation among some students.

Background for Developing E-teacher

Self-Access Centres and online materials

One approach to increasing motivation and learning is a self-access language centre (SAC). Around the world, educational facilities have started to create their own sites. The University of Colima has a SAC at each of its five campuses. The next goal is to develop further resources. Technologically speaking, the challenge of our work is to produce an online resource that can, at least in part, replicate the usefulness of the SAC itself. Copyright issues also represent a major motivation for this project as the majority of materials in a SAC—video, audio and textbooks—are copyrighted. An SAC can only refer to materials which it physically owns; it cannot provide access to them online unless it possesses the copyright, which is not usually the case. E-teacher, the system we propose, was

not conceived as a replacement for the SAC, but rather as a complement. SACs are performing their function well; E-teacher will work as an additional tool for both teachers and students.

Promoting learner autonomy—several theories

Learner autonomy refers to the ability individuals have to govern themselves. Autonomous individuals can decide for themselves what is right or wrong, what is true or false (Kamii & Clark, 1993). Learner heteronomy is the opposite term. Heteronymous persons cannot judge for themselves and therefore depend on the judgement of others. Unfortunately, the school system in many countries, especially in compulsory education, is still producing heteronymous students.

An autonomous learner is often a more responsible learner. Dickinson (1995) suggests that students who see the reasons for their success or failure as depending on external factors are more likely to fail than those who take responsibility for their own learning. Gremmo and Riley (1995) point out that developments in technology have made "an undeniable contribution to the spread of autonomy and self-access" (qtd. in Motteram & Slaouti, 2000), but they also warn against calling behaviouristic programmes "self-directed." What this implies for the design of materials is that technology may contribute to promoting learner autonomy, but that a constructivist pedagogy is not easily embedded.

Regarding software development in general, Motteram & Slaouti (2000) discuss two issues: "its failure to promote any level of reflective pedagogy and the absence of choice," which means that many materials that have been created do not promote learner autonomy, regardless of how effective they may be at transmitting knowledge. They suggest that what we need to aim for is critical choice in the feedback. Selfe (1995) states one key feature of teachers who work within virtual environments is that students "labor constantly to develop and maintain the habit of continuing to learn. They must make themselves attend to and explore student perceptions and behaviors, especially those that are not congruent with patterns typically displayed in traditional learning environments" (p. 29).

The Behaviourist View

Learner autonomy cannot be achieved in a class where everyone has to go at the same pace. You are normally asked to learn a lesson in a 50-minute session, no more, no less. Even in small classes, teachers are aware of the differences in students and end up punishing the slower ones and boring the faster ones. Skinner (1968) saw "machine instruction as the solution for this problem" (p. 30). He believed that by allowing each student to go "at his own rate," learner autonomy would be promoted.

The Constructivist View

Another theoretical model is constructivism. Beatty (2003) describes it as follows: "Constructivism is a humanistic model that differs radically from behaviourism, suggesting that learning is a process by which learners construct new ideas or concepts by making use of their own knowledge and experiences. The learner has greater control and responsibility over what he or she learns and re-

lies on schema... to select and transform information, create hypotheses and make decisions" (p. 91). Schema are mental models that condition the learner's acquisition of new knowledge. Schema theory is important to CALL because many aspects of schema mirror the organization of hypertext, hypermedia and multimedia (p. 92). In the constructivist model, the learner should be able to decide much more than his or her pace of learning. The schema theory suggests that the learner could end up learning everything but what the teacher expects them to learn.

The E-teacher proposal does not pretend to be constructivist or behaviourist. It is just a modest attempt at helping students achieve learner autonomy. As Beatty (2003) puts it: "As with behaviourism, not all aspects of constructivism are likely to be found in all learning materials labelled constructivist, nor is constructivism likely to be pervasive in any teacher's daily classroom practice" (p. 97)

Educational Technology-- Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has existed for nearly four decades. In the 1960's and 1970's, it existed almost exclusively for an intellectual elite. The reason for this was simple: as computers were very expensive, only a limited number of institutions, universities and government programs could afford them. CALL was transformed with the advent of the personal computer. It is then that individual teachers, and eventually companies and institutions, started creating CALL software *en masse*.

The communicative approach that emerged in the 1970's, and has since prevailed in language education, has permeated into CALL design, although most CALL software is still predominantly behaviourist. It was hoped that the so-called communicative CALL, with the technology available in the 80's, would make content more meaningful, but it was not "communicative" in its purest sense. In this mode, computers acted as "the teacher," and all feedback they were able to provide was "right" or "wrong." This is not to say that this type of approach to design was erroneous. Students who learned using behaviourist software at the time can testify to its effectiveness.

Also, design has long been constrained by available technology. We are at a stage in which technology has become more flexible and there is room for more creative design, and what is more, it is possible to adapt technology to our needs, provided we have the necessary resources.

Some Benefits of the Internet in Education

The Internet has extended the possibilities of a class. It is possible to store everything one does for web access. With a little editing, a course can be re-cycled. There is also the possibility of virtually limitless delivery possibilities, as hundreds—or even thousands—of students can use the same material. Owston (1997, p. 30) suggests that the web can be "*capitalised*" by the instructor, providing for flexible learning. Once teachers put their materials online, they can be accessed numerous times. A word of warning is the copyright issue. Unless proper permission is granted, one should not make copyrighted materials available. This gives educators both the opportunity and challenge to create their own materials. Linking to existing pages is permitted and advisable as a time-effective

way of gathering useful information. However, as Internet addresses often change, linking to pages can often become frustrating as students sometimes cannot find the information they seek. Being the author of information, although time-consuming in the first stages, gives us the advantage of being in control of the materials. When providing links to external sites, we need to periodically check them for functionality.

E-teacher: Description

E-teacher is a template-based system which is managed through Microsoft's Access database, where data are captured and retrieved upon request. The system will be integrated into distance education courses offered by the Facultad de Telemática of the University of Colima (FT), (<http://telematicanet.ucol.mx>). E-teacher is composed of nine activities that can be used as independent modules or in combination and can be easily integrated within online courses.

E-teacher is being piloted by English as a Second Language (ESL) professors at the FT as a complementary tool in their face-to-face courses. The implementation of this Web-based question-answering system will make student self-evaluations and the interactivity with the course materials easier and more efficient. This is in contrast to other simple strategies for handling student questions, such as bulletin boards, newsgroups, listservs, and e-mail, which are more open-ended and promote learner autonomy more overtly and adapt more obviously to the constructivist model. This system has a set of modules to increase the interactivity of students with course materials. For instance, E-teacher has a module that rates the performance of each individual student, based on random exercises and exams for their personal use without recording any data about the results. The activities for students within this system and their full descriptions are listed in Table 1.

Activity	Description
WordScramble	The system randomly misarranges the letters within a response, which students must appropriately order to reproduce the correct answer.
SentenceScramble	The system randomly misarranges the syntax of a sentence or phrase, which students must appropriately order to reproduce the correct answer.
MatchCols	The system produces two columns which students must correctly correlate.
Fill	The system produces sentences or paragraphs with spaces which students must complete with the correct response.
SingleChoice	The system produces multiple choice questions with between two and ten options with a single correct choice.
MultiChoice	The system produces multiple choice questions with between two and ten options with an equal number of possible correct choices.
Dialog	The system misarranges elements (dialogs, processes, etc.) within two columns which students must correctly order.
Random	The system accesses the database of the type of exercise the student chooses (Fill, MatchCols, etc.) to randomly produce exercises from all the categories contained within that specific database.
Exams	The teacher selects a maximum of 20 questions from the 7 different question-type databases (Fill, MatchCols, etc.). Students then select any number of practice tests the teacher has previously captured.

Table 1. Different types of activities on E-teacher

Question-answering system

The E-teacher system consists of a set of PHP (Hypertext Protocol) files that generate all the HTML code dynamically. This PHP code handles all the operational tasks. The files reside in an Apache Web Server operating in a Windows 2000 server with a PHP module version 4.0. In addition, the system is also installed on a PC running the Linux operating system. The database that handles all the files can be accessed transparently through ODBC (Open DataBase Connectivity) in any platform that supports this open database connectivity. The system consists of student, teacher and administrator modules.

The E-teacher is an open system for students. Any student can access the system to review course materials independently of the topic or teacher. Teachers, however, must be registered by the system to add, modify or delete review materials. Figure 1. shows the main screen for the E-teacher system.

It is important to mention that students can not modify the contents, graphic interface or functionality of the system. This can only be done by the teacher(s), previously authorized by the administrator of the system, who possess the access code.



Fig. 1. E-teacher main screen

In the main screen, students can select the teacher with whom they wish to study. Once they select the teacher, they can choose the type of exercise and the specific topic they wish to review.



Fig. 2. E-teacher personalized activity screen

Once the student accesses the activities page, he can select among the options the instructor has previously developed. In Figure 2, the student has chosen to study in Mr. Arthur Edwards' personalized study area. The student has also chosen the topic and exercise type, which in the above example is "Sentence Scramble."



Fig. 3. Sentence Scramble exercise for an English class topic: Unit 1: The Doctor

The entire section where the instructions are actually written is completely open-ended, providing the teacher with the freedom to write what he wishes. This openness allows for a great variety of exercise types, although they share the same programming and general structure. For instance, in the above example, the teacher offers a communicative exercise in which the student must complete the sentence. However, by writing different instructions in the same space, the teacher can create other communicative exercises such as answering questions, etc., or simply use the exercise for general or specific practice and review of syntax.

The visualization of each exercise type is important and should be predictable, according to usability standards. (<http://www.usability.gov>) Therefore, E-teacher uses the same shape, colour and size buttons to represent the different options available to students who use the system. Table 2 presents the standard selections located on the upper left hand corner of the different exercise options as illustrated in Figure 3.

Option	Description
Menu	Returns students to the activities main screen.
Instructions	Provides specific instructions on how to resolve the item
Review	Provides feedback about the degree of accuracy of the response
Next Item	Provides student with a new item

Table 2. List of standard selections for students

One important characteristic is that teachers can provide students with several levels of difficulty depending on whether or not they wish to incorporate the optional selections. As Beatty (2003) states: "The challenge of mastery learning in CALL is the necessity of providing new material or new approaches when a learner fails to accomplish the initial goals. It is important that, in a restricted time frame, learners do not abrogate the task of thinking and take advantage of a software program's willingness to supply default answers. Like a good teacher, a computer should prod and stimulate learners to consider an answer rather than just giving in to the first 'I don't know' and supplying the answer" (p. 89).

Figure 3 shows how options to "prod" students along are provided. It should be noted that the options are placed side-to-side on the upper right hand corner of the screen, and the options are listed from left to right, according to the level of cognition required to resolve the problem. Table 3 shows the different options available to students:

Option	Description
Lesson	Provides a hyperlink to relevant pages related to the contents of the review material so that students can research the problem and find their own solution
Hint	Presents additional specific information to assist students resolve the item, so that students can find the "missing piece of the puzzle"
Tip	Gives the next correct part of the answer so that the student can "infer" the rest
Resolve	Provides the correct response

Table 3. List of selections useful for resolving items

Finally, the lower left hand corner of the screen (cf. Fig. 3) has the options of "Refresh," "Return," "Exit," and "Credits." These are options that provide system-wide navigation. Again, the principles of usability are very important. Levy (1997) states that good design and ease of use should be paramount and that technology should be adapted to user needs, not the reverse, and that the focus should be on cognitive principles that lead to more intuitive computer systems. (p.69) Table 4 provides a brief list of the options and their description.

Option	Description
Refresh	Permits the student to begin the same exercise anew
Return	Allows the student to navigate back to the E-teacher personalized activity screen (see Fig. 2)
Quit	Permits the student to leave the E-teacher system
Credits	Provides credits and system information

Table 4: List of standard navigation options

The teacher work screens should also be intuitive from the teacher's point of view. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, authoring software forced teachers to adapt to the demands of the computer. These programs were often difficult to understand or use by teachers with limited experience. Program design did not take into account the user's computer experience and ability. Consequently, missing a full stop or semicolon sometimes resulted in the program not functioning. (Levy, 1997, p.69) Figure 4 shows the teacher main screen and the primary options afforded teachers using the E-teacher system.

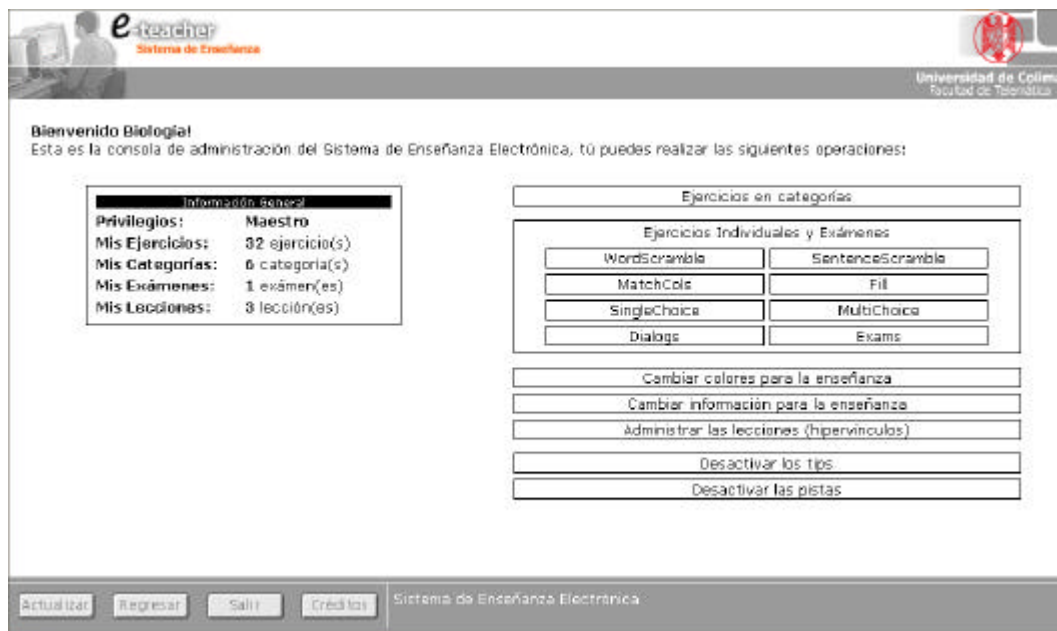


Figure 4. The teacher main work screen

It is important to note that teachers can deactivate the “tips” and “hints,” making the exercises increasingly more cognitively demanding. The “lesson administrator” (hyperlinks) permits teachers to provide hyperlinks for related investigation, bibliography, etc. by the students, thus providing for learning under the constructivist model.

Beatty (2003) observes: “A strength—and a weakness—of some computer-based materials is their lack of a clearly determined scope and sequence. Instead, they allow individual learners to pursue links which they perceive as being both useful and interesting. This ability to choose a path of learning means that different learners are not all constrained to learn the same materials in the same

way, but may instead find new answers and solutions to questions and problems” (p.148).

Table 5 provides a list of the options for teachers using the E-teacher system.

Option	Description
General Information	Displays the general information and the summary of lesson exercises incorporated by the teacher and his privileges
Exercise categories	Creates the databases needed to present the review activities as a coherent set.
Individual Examinations and Exams	Creates individual activities that can be included in the Random and Exams databases for either review or inclusion in practice tests.
Change Colors for Instruction	Suggests a variety of color combinations teachers can use as backgrounds for their activities.
Change Interface Information	Individualizes information within the system, according to teacher requirements
Administer Lessons (hypertexts)	Creates a hyperlink database where the teacher can select hyperlinks to provide additional information (i.e. readings, diagrams, etc) to help students solve items, provide additional information or otherwise promote leaning.
Activate/Deactivate Tips	Allows the teacher to activate or deactivate the tips captured in the database, allowing for different degrees of difficulty.
Activate/Deactivate Hints	Allows the teacher to activate or deactivate the hints captured in the database, allowing for different degrees of difficulty.

Table 5. Different options that appear on the teacher main menu

General Goals of E-teacher

Our students’ needs are similar to those of many students in other contexts, which is why we are piloting this system hoping that its use may be extended to a larger public. The primary goals of E-teacher are:

- a. to promote the use of information technology for learning purposes in the area of ELT
- b. to provide students with systematic voluntary grammar and vocabulary practice

Online resources are often problematic because of their sometimes questionable quality or limited access. The kind of support these resources offer varies, although content, in the form of lessons, is a constant. Some sites offer grammar or vocabulary lessons, readings, fun activities (games), and many offer links to other sites, which represent an economical way of making the most of a site in its early stages. Links should be constantly updated, as Internet sites tend to vanish without a word of warning. Also, new, interesting sites may emerge that one may want to add to the links.

Specific Benefits of E-teacher

At present E-teacher will help learners by:

- offering nine different exercise types which can be edited by teachers, providing them a choice to produce dozens of exercise permutations
- permitting students to review and practice content, not only for weekly exams, but for semester or yearly evaluations.

- giving students immediate feedback as they work on individual exercises and at the end of the activity.
- providing users with an online examination upon finishing the 9 types of exercise to provide students more global feedback about their progress.
- offering useful links that will help them do their assignments (dictionaries, literature, grammar, etc.) and spend time on the net while learning (games).

However, in the future, E-teacher can be modified to also:

- provide scaffolding for student interaction both synchronously and asynchronously.
- permit students direct contacting with their teacher through several Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) tools.

All of these objectives are aimed at contributing to the development of student autonomy. It is difficult to become an autonomous learner in a world where materials are not at hand. With resources available, with this and other tools we expect to promote learner autonomy.

Design Features of E-teacher

Clarke (1997) reviews many multimedia and Internet environments which were tested with users. Some of those suggestions for screen and navigation features were considered in the design of E-teacher.

Each contributor to this online resource can select a single colour combination that is used throughout the student interphase, and all hyperlinks are a standard colour. Furthermore, all control buttons are standardized (i.e. size and shape) throughout the system. The background colours are lightly shaded, which is intended to avoid eye strain.

The site, at present, can be accessed exclusively from within the College of Telematics, where it has been piloted. However, the intention is to install the system in one of the University of Colima's SACs to carry out a larger pilot program, before putting the system into use in the other four Centres.

Development and Requirements

E-teacher was developed, initially, using PHP/4.2.3 to manage the online database and it runs on Apache Server v.1.3.26. The advantages of using these two tools are: they are "freeware," meaning that developers who choose to use these tools do not have to pay any royalties and there are no copyright issues.

PHP is "open source," which means that developers can program and personalise what they do with this tool because the source code is provided gratis. The product of any Internet tool developed with these two resources is compatible and will function equally well with the two major browsers: Netscape or Microsoft Internet Explorer.

Conclusion

The fast and increasing development of distance education courses via the World Wide Web has made the development of computer systems that increase the interactivity of student-contents and student-interface necessary. With this goal in mind, we have developed E-teacher, a system based on a set of PHP

scripts and templates to help students review materials and to self-evaluate with a high level of interactivity with the course content.

Students are still heavily dependent on teacher guidance in our context. Intrinsic motivation and learner autonomy is what drives students who perform better. The purpose of E-teacher can be summarised in one sentence: E-teacher helps students achieve learner autonomy through interaction with course content and the Internet, a vast source of learning materials and authentic language, as they improve their language skills on the material they review. Whether our goals have been achieved or not is a difficult question to answer if we consider students as a whole. For that reason, our next plan is assess the performance of our system with students.

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“So where do I start in cyber space?” Enhancing language learning in an online community of practice: points of entry for teachers and teacher trainers in developing countries^{1 2}

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The reported benefits of the use of technology in the English language classroom are too varied to ignore. However, while South African higher education institutions are in the process of developing technology plans, the use of technology in English language classrooms is not well documented. Teachers and teacher trainers are often left wondering where to start and what procedures to follow. This paper reports on the implementation and findings of the Techpal project, which was instituted in a higher education English classroom in South Africa. The aim of the project was to establish whether the selection of students could work effectively with online technology in the English classroom; whether a community of practice is possible in an online environment; and what the benefits and challenges are of using technology in an under-resourced context. The project is positioned within Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural theory of learning and Lave and Wenger's (1991) Situated Learning theory. Students at a higher education institution were paired with English as a foreign language students at a university in France. The project is described, and the data is analysed following interviews with students and instructor reflection. The paper concludes that it is possible, despite certain challenges, to institute a community of practice within an online environment, in the under-resourced English language classroom. Although the paper is aimed at English language teachers and teacher trainers in higher education, it may be of benefit to teachers and trainers in the school context as well.

Introduction

The use of technology in language learning is a relatively new field in South African higher education institutions, largely due to the lack of resources and teacher and learner under-preparedness. However, with the inception of technology plans at such institutions, it is becoming *de rigueur* to engage technology in the language teaching and learning contexts. Research conducted into ESL teaching and learning for instance, found that the use of technology, in particular computer-mediated communication, benefits the language learning process. Online or technology-enhanced learning facilitates participation in the language class by providing a greater possibility of interaction between educators and learners, learners and learners (Burgstahler, 1997); and by enabling teachers to network (Karyan and Crowe, 1997; Harasim, 1994). Technology-enhanced language

¹ This is a refereed article.

² The first phase of this project was reported on in *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, Spring Issue, 2003, and presented at the SAALA Conference held at Rand Afrikaans University, South Africa (June 2003).

learning allows learners to reflect critically and to scaffold ideas (Wiesenberg, 1999). It also is reported to result in increased collaboration and inquiry-based learning (Brush and Uden, 2000; Cronje, 1997), reduce anxiety (Kern, 1995), enhance motivation (Warschauer, 1996, Clarke and Cronje, 1998) and augment the thinking/writing paradigm (Sakar, 2001; Warschauer, Turbee and Roberts, 1996; Mike, 1996).

The most commonly used online tools are those that enable engagement and interaction: e-mail, bulletin boards, discussion threads and chat rooms. From a sociocultural perspective, language learning is not an immediate product of the individual, but a process through which learners engage in co-constructing knowledge (Lee, 2004) and it is when learners collaborate that they achieve a high level of performance (Kern and Warschauer, 2000). The theoretical framework that follows expands this concept.

Theoretical framework

Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory of Learning and Lave and Wenger's (1991) Situated Learning Theory lend support to the basic tenets of online learning. In the 1930s Vygotsky posited that social experiences shape our ways of thinking about and interpreting the world. He regarded education not only as central to cognitive development, but also as "the quintessential sociocultural activity" (Moll, 1990: 1), maintaining that individual cognition occurred in a social situation, thus shifting emphasis away from the individual to the group. One may learn to negotiate meaning via interaction with other individuals and more knowledgeable peers in social situations (Jaramillo, 1996). Subjects therefore develop their own interpretative meaning of acts while communicating with others. In the field of language, then, one can therefore not study a student's language development by studying only the individual, but by examining the external social world as well.

In the technology-supported learning environment, theoretical support for the collaborative and social aspects of computer usage is essential in order to develop pedagogical approaches. Computers are recognised as part of the sociocultural context of the classroom, and a communicative framework based on the Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory is therefore relevant for understanding how learners work towards achieving higher-order learning outcomes using computers (McLoughlin and Oliver, 1998).

Intrinsic to Sociocultural Theory, the learner is regarded as an apprentice—as in Lave and Wenger's (1991) Situated Learning Theory. Adult (or more competent peer) and child (or learner) interaction scaffolds or assists the emerging competencies of the learner. Learning therefore becomes a form of assisted performance.

According to Vygotsky, learning occurs in the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is a metaphorical distance between what the learner can achieve independently and what can be achieved with a more skilled partner's assistance (McLoughlin and Oliver, 1998). Communication, interaction, reciprocal understanding and negotiation of meaning are therefore central to learning. Previous research into language learning has demonstrated that peer interaction in groups and pairs results in the ZPD (Brooks and Ohta cited in Lee, 2004).

Sociocultural Theory is also appropriate for technology-supported learning environments because it endorses the idea that learning takes place in a social context, it recognises that language use is fundamental to learning, it shifts focus from a teacher-dominant learning community, to one that promotes learner autonomy, and it acknowledges that learners need support and assistance to learn. Lee (2004) cites the research of Belz (2001) and Warschauer (2000), who studied network-based or technology-enhanced language learning from a sociocultural perspective. Their studies of online exchange programmes among learners in different countries lend support to the findings that learners' social values, language proficiency, and electronic literacy contribute to the development of language.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) Situated Learning Theory is compatible with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory in terms of its conceptual framework. Situated Learning Theory advocates learning in a specific context, and focuses on how individuals become members of communities of practice (Gillespie, 2001). Wenger (1998) believes that traditional education is misguided in terms of its focus, and can be enhanced by communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) His concept, like Vygotsky's, is based on learning as a social phenomenon. In essence, the theory states that the goal of education is the negotiation of meaning. The interconnectiveness of learning, participating, and the social world is emphasised.

Many educators are struggling to create learning communities in schools to support the social nature of learning. In learning communities, learning occurs as people participate and engage in common activities. The term "communities of practice" was used by Lave and Wenger in 1991 to describe learners and learning environments (Wenger, 1998). Human beings are constantly engaged in enterprise and interaction, which results in learning. Over time, the learning results in practices, which are the property of a community. Such communities are called communities of practice. We may belong to several different communities of practice simultaneously, in some as core members, in others, more peripherally. Communities share their social practices, which may include language, tools, documents, images, symbols, criteria, procedures and regulations.

Members differ in their levels of competence, ranging from apprentice to expert; therefore, their contributions may be limited or peripheral at the beginning. It is during the tension caused by the peripheral participation that learning may occur, moving the learner to the centre of the community. Participants should work in their zone, at a level above their performance ability, congruent with Vygotsky's ZPD. This is difficult to attain individually, but is attainable through collaboration and co-operation.

Duncan and Leander (2001) found that there is a connection between communities of practice and technology in online environments, but participant interaction is crucial to success in online learning. Further, communities may develop in class discussions between the instructor and learners and among the learners themselves. E-mail is one technological application that has been used creatively in the language classroom to create communities (See also studies by Sakar, 2001; Jor and Mak, 1994; and Liao, 1999). Overall, as Singal (1997) states, "e-mail can encourage students to use computers in realistic, authentic situations in order to develop communicative and thinking skills." (p. 3)

The TechPal Project

The TechPal project emerged as a result of attempting to locate my English teaching within a sociocultural framework, while simultaneously trying to operate in an online environment. For reasons of access, e-mail proved to be the most convenient vehicle. It is hoped that the description of the project will be of value to teachers and teacher trainers, since one of the most common challenges cited by teachers is that they do not know where to start implementing technology-enhanced projects.

Research Aim and Key Questions

The TechPal project arose from my interest in the reported advantages of the use of technology in English teaching and learning. Having observed students' and teachers' fascination with and fear of technology, my aim was to integrate technology-enhanced language learning into the syllabus in a non-threatening milieu.

My main focus of enquiry was:

1. could the students work effectively with online technology in the English classroom?
2. could the use of online technology contribute to a community of practice?
3. what are the benefits of using technology in an under-resourced context?
4. what are the challenges of using technology in an under-resourced context?

What follows is a description of the project, which spanned one semester (approximately twelve weeks). Refer to Appendix 1 for a schematic representation of the project.

Initiating the project

The subjects were 21 undergraduate ESL students attending a tertiary institution in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Ten were male and 11 were female, aged between 18 and 24 years old. All were second language speakers of English, registered for a language course.

Initial survey questionnaires were used to assess computer access, proficiency, experience and willingness to participate in an online project as part of the course. I trained students, based on their responses to the survey. Of necessity, this had to be done on an *ad hoc* basis, because of the absence of teaching computer laboratories. Often, I found myself training students on my own PC, but their enthusiasm was contagious. Small groups were trained to use the Internet and e-mail and less proficient students were paired with more able students within the class to practise newly-acquired skills, thus initiating the community of practice.

From the results of the computer access and proficiency survey, it was evident that both computer access and proficiency were limited, as most of the students came from rural areas, where they did not have technological resources, and very often, no electricity in their schools. Of the 21 students, only two had access to computers outside the institution. The institution had one computer

laboratory for the Faculty of Humanities, with twenty computers that had to be available to all students. Often several of the computers were not functioning well. Students had to make reservations to use the facilities. Students also did not have e-mail addresses, and had to be shown how to create free e-mail addresses.

It also bears mention that this project was conducted during the second semester of the year, and by that time I assumed that many of the students would have made use of the facilities at the computer laboratories for the purpose of typing or conducting Internet research.

Computer usage

Table 1 reflects the use of information and computer technology (ICT) among students.

	Students who had used technology		Students who had not used technology	
	Number	%	Number	%
Computers	18	85.7	3	14.28
E-mail	2	9.6	19	90.4
Internet	5	23.8	16	76.2

Table 1: Use of ICT

Most of the students had, by this time, used computers to word process assignments. They were primarily self-taught, or had learnt by observing others. Those students who had used e-mail or the Internet previously (9.6 percent and 23.8 percent respectively), had done so by experimentation. The Internet was used for random surfing, or to a lesser extent, for research purposes. The majority said they were too intimidated to access the Internet, or felt it was too much work to gain access at the institution.

Computer proficiency

The computer proficiency levels of the selection of students is reflected in Table 2:

	Low Proficiency		Average Proficiency		High Proficiency	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Computer	10	47.6	7	33.3	4	19.0
E-mail and internet	17	80.9	2	9.5	2	9.5

Table 2: Proficiency Levels

Although students said they saw the need to use technology in their studies and later in their jobs, only 19 percent claimed to be very proficient. Sandy (not

her real name³), for instance, said she lived a distance away from the institution, and that travelling, together with a very busy timetable, took up much of her time. She also did not have access at home or in her township. She simply did not have the time or the resources to attain proficiency with technology.

Students' views on the integration of technology with the course

None of the students had used Internet-based practices in any of their classes before, and they regarded the TechPal project with a mixture of enthusiasm and trepidation. Some saw the project as one that would help them become computer literate, while others saw it in a more global perspective, something that would enable them to communicate with students from other cultural groups and parts of the world. Bongi had this to say: "Technology is global, it will help me get a job. I will take any help I can get with computers, and maybe this course will help me."

Establishing contact

Contact was established with an English Foreign Language teacher based at a technical university in France via the International Exchange for Cross-cultural Communication (IECC) programme. Her class proved to be the most suitable in terms of age and level of education. Other projects have been conducted with participants of diverse age groups; however, I wanted to ensure a level of compatibility for this particular project. The instructor in France placed 20 of her EFL students on the programme. They ranged in age from 20 to 25, and came from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The table below reflects their cultural backgrounds:

Cultural background	Number of students
French	8
Brazilian	6
American	2
Russian	1
Scottish/ Greek	1
Chinese	1
Greek/ Australian	1

Table Three: Cultural background of partner students

One problem was that seven of the students could only communicate in French, not English, so we had to partner two of my students with each of the overseas students in certain instances. However, the teacher and students were keen to participate because South Africa was not a usual partner country. In addition, some of the South African students were studying French as a second language. The French teacher at the South African institution and I encouraged our

³ The real names of students are not used in order to maintain their privacy

students to communicate in French as well. This was a little difficult because of our students' proficiency level. Only one of our students maintained contact in French medium, but this is not reported on in this paper.

Implementing the project

Introductory e-mails were drafted by students on both continents. Initially contact was quite erratic with technical glitches such as incorrect e-mail addresses. Thereafter they maintained contact on their own over a period of about twelve weeks. They corresponded on a variety of themes around culture and language and communication. In order to integrate the project with the syllabus, students were asked to use class topics as a basis for discussion. Initially, I asked to be sent copies of their e-mails in order to track the discussion; however, students felt awkward about this (as I did) and I decided to permit them to communicate more freely and rely on their feedback. There were joys and frustrations on both continents, as will be reported on later in this paper. A firm favourite, though, was when my students took digital pictures with a loan camera to send to their new friends. They even wanted to send pictures of their homes, families, traditional dress and the food they eat, which was beyond the scope of the project at that time. Next time perhaps we could work on sending a 'cultural box' including postcards and a video of traditional dance and costumes.

Findings

Students were interviewed in groups and individually, and also wrote reflections in e-journals on the process. Their reflections are summarised below.

On maintaining contact

Most of my students felt that they were able to maintain contact with their e-pals during the term. Others, such as Thobi, found it difficult to maintain contact because her e-pal did not maintain regular contact. This could be because of language or technical difficulties, Thobi was uncertain, but felt marginalised while her classmates received several communications. One way of preventing this is for the instructors to intervene and ensure that students maintain regular contact, which should be an objective in this kind of project (Keogh, 2001; Ho, 2000; Sakar, 2001, Mello, 1998; Jor and Mak, 1994). Also, students should have been given more time to communicate with one another before embarking on the cultural project. Students maintained contact at a rate of once in two weeks to four times a week. One way, perhaps, of preventing such a discrepancy would be for teachers to stipulate a minimum number of contact sessions, to prevent students from feeling marginalised. Once again, this would depend on the instructors' maintaining common goals.

Language issues

Most students felt that they were able to communicate quite easily, and that they understood one another, despite the different language backgrounds. Mdu, however, often felt embarrassed because he was "only a second language speaker" and felt that his language was not good enough for the project. Having worked with this particular student for a semester, I did not agree with his view,

so perhaps it was a matter of lack of confidence. On another note, Prim felt that she could not understand her e-pal whose language usage was "too weak." No doubt, Prim was reassured about her English language usage, supporting the views of Warschauer (1996) and Kannan and Macknish (2000) that the motivation levels in online communication are high.

Level of Improvement

Most students commented that their use of computers, especially e-mail, had improved either quite a lot, or drastically. They also indicated that their language usage, writing skills and cultural knowledge had improved, as did their ability to communicate with other people and their classmates and lecturer. This supports the view that computer-mediated communication could result in the improvement of writing (Warschauer, Turbee and Robert, 1996; Brush and Uden, 2000; Karyan and Crowe, 1997; and Harasim, 1994). The downfall is that the project relied on students' views of the perceived improvement in writing skills, as pre- and post-testing was beyond the scope of the project at the time.

Benefits and challenges of the project

Benefits

The reported benefits included cultural, language and computer knowledge. Some of the advantages that were reported included that students learnt more about their own culture and the culture of others. They also felt more confident when communicating. Others enjoyed the freedom to contact me and other learners, as this helped them learn, supporting the community of practice notion (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Some students felt that the project provided them with a good opportunity to promote South Africa and to eradicate misconceptions about the country (Welcome said, "They know there is someone called Mandela, now they know where he comes from."). All the participants mentioned that they felt much more comfortable using computers, e-mail and the Internet, having participated in the project.

Challenges

On the other hand, students were in agreement that computer facilities at the institution were limited. They also felt that they should be initiated into such work by having formalised lessons on computer literacy, something that the institution was not offering to Humanities students at the time. This is a recommendation also made by Kannan and Macknish (2000), and one that I think is vital. Students were expected to attain computer literacy at their own expense, despite the institution moving towards designing a technology plan. Computers also had to be booked in advance so that students could access e-mail, which slowed down the pace of the project somewhat. Not all of the students managed to progress with the project. Four students did not continue beyond the introductory phase because they experienced difficulty creating e-mail addresses and accessing computers. One student commented that he was at the institution to get his degree and get a job, not to chat with pen pals. He preferred the lecture mode to something more interactive, and found the project too time consuming.

Teacher reflection

In retrospect, I made several errors that instructors are cautioned not to make, despite my having read widely on similar projects. I embarked on the project without clear-cut assessment goals. I also expected that the student communication would just flow unhindered, which was quite a naive view, as several of them required instructor intervention. I also could have prepared students better in terms of computer literacy in a more formalised manner. More time should have been spent on technology training; however, this was beyond the scope of the syllabus and the heavy workload. This proved to be the undoing for some of the students who lost interest in the project because they no longer felt motivated, primarily because of computer glitches.

Another shortfall of the project is that I did not maintain contact with the EFL teacher and students in France, or this report could have been a review of the pros and cons of the project from all the participants involved. For the sake of convenience at the time, the research was only conducted with my students.

With regard to assessment, while the project was integrated with the curriculum in terms of outcomes, for reasons such as loss of contact, I could not include a compulsory assessment task on the project. Students were given choices, of which an assessment task based on the online project was one option. This was to ensure that students who did not proceed to adequate computer competence were not placed at a disadvantage.

However, in terms of the initial research questions, most of the students were able to work effectively with online technology, despite several problems experienced with the resources. The use of technology did contribute to a community of practice. Students maintained contact across continents, with one another and with the instructor. Less able students were paired with more computer-literate students who shared their computer skills and were quite happy to do so. The students were also happy to extend contact within the classroom by e-mailing queries about tests and assignments, or about what was discussed in class during the week. Often they just sent out an e-mail to greet everyone. The students were also motivated because they were doing something different, which was to an extent incorporated into the syllabus. They experienced benefits and challenges, and all the students who completed the project felt that they would like to continue with such work. The task was not without excitement because the World Soccer Cup was conveniently being played at the time, and some of the students indulged in some inter-continental betting.

Phumi's words are particularly apt:

It is a great experience corresponding with international e-pals. The only thing about them is they are very stereotyped about Africa. Before, they only think if you live in Africa you must be poor. These people had a bad attitude towards African people. They seem as if they do not even consider or (are) interested in knowing what African countries are really like. This is bad because they do not take time to research Africa. They can learn from us the truth.

Conclusion

The project was not without glitches, but was rewarding to the students and instructor. The students were excited to try out something innovative and the

findings demonstrate the possibilities for a sociocultural approach within a community of practice. What needs additional consideration are the implications for further research. Much of the data relied on self-report evidence from the participants. There is need for more evidence on the impact of technology-enhanced practices on learning by looking at more quantitative data over an extended period of time.

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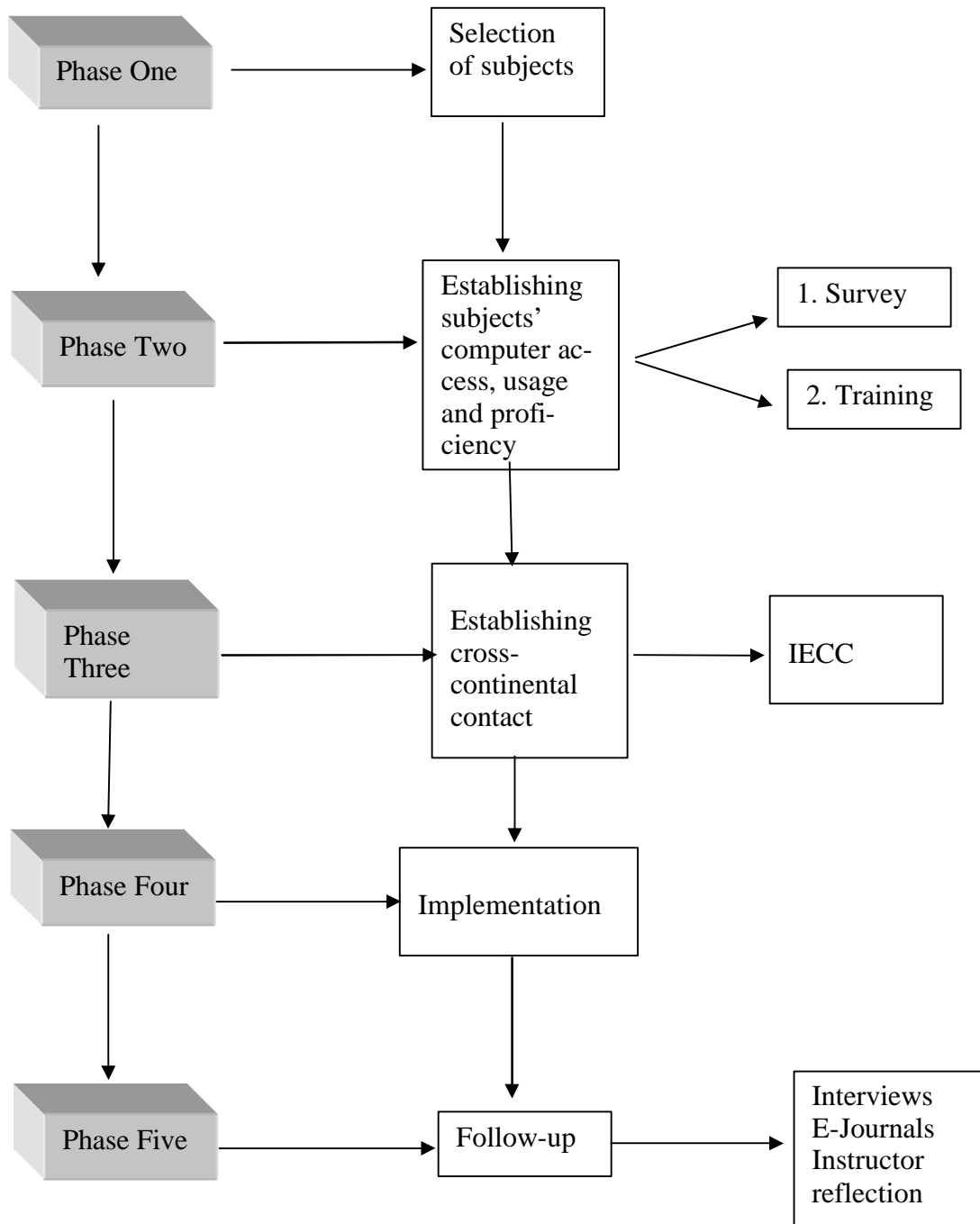
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Appendix Project Design



Language Education, Global Competency, and the Web

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Students and educators who move into the cyber-realm are amazed by the sheer volume of information and new modes of exchange available to them. They are thunderstruck—perhaps like Hellenistic visitors to the Library of Alexandria—as they see the vast cyber-universe unfold before them. Contemporary college and university administrators and academics pause to consider how they should use these vast and interconnected cyber-resources. Should they supplement curricula with web-supported classes and so expand the postmodern cyber-experience for college students? If so, which cyber-strategies might support their goals? Should they fund and create web-supported courses? Should they fund and create web-based courses? Should they fund and create eCampuses to coordinate forays into the four corners of this Brave New World? Academics are presently debating these questions .

Educators and administrators are weighing the costs and benefits of implementing web-supported learning in higher education, including college-based English language programs. There is—in some quarters—a great deal of resistance to web-supported learning. Yet statistics show that more and more students are enrolling in web-supported or web-based college classes. Students who cannot locate web-supported or web-based classes locally are seeking those classes at other institutions within their own country or through eCampuses, especially in the United States and Europe.

There are many reasons students enroll in web-supported or web-based classes. Current research suggests that web-supported learning is valuable on many levels. Bolter (1991), Branzburg (2002), Bernstein (1998), among others, have noted that web-supported learning helps faculty to reach and engage college students in unprecedented ways. One added advantage of web-supported learning is that it can play an important role not only in energizing the English language curriculum but also in internationalizing post-secondary education and promoting global competency. Altbach (2002) offers helpful definitions of globalization and internationalization in the context of higher education: “In broad terms, globalization refers to trends in higher education that have cross-national implications [while] internationalization refers to the specific policies and initiatives of individual academic institutions, systems, or countries that deal with global trends” (p. 29).

We live in an increasingly small, increasingly dynamic, and increasingly interconnected global village because of the web. There are certainly other factors in this equation—but the web has created and continues to create new and rapid ways of interacting that had not existed (in quite the same fashion) before the information age. Branzburg (2002) notes that “an increasingly wired world means more opportunities for cross-cultural experience” (p. 2). This article argues that focused web-supported learning simultaneously advances the goals of international education. Web-supported initiatives can help universities and colleges 1) reach a wide variety of learners, 2) expand the learning environment, 3) facilitate

unprecedented modes of exchange, 4) provoke critical thinking and openness to other cultures, and 5) equip college students with the invaluable technological skills required in today's complex, highly technological, and increasingly global workforce. A report by the ACIIE and The Stanley Foundation concludes that "to ensure the survival and well being of our communities, it is imperative that colleges develop a globally and multi-culturally competent citizenry" (1995, Preface). Web supported learning can and should play a pragmatic role in this process.

Web-supported curricula foster a sense of global community

One of the advantages of web-supported learning is the sense of global community and interactivity that the global web can provide. Connecting students through technology allows the student to become part of a truly global community. Universities are becoming electronically linked and many provide venues for exchange and exploration of parallel curricula by faculty and students. Students can communicate in their native language or a foreign language with other students and experts throughout the world using e-mail, listserv discussions, MOO's (Multi-user - Object-Oriented database), and MUD's (Multi-User Dimension database). Information and ideas can be exchanged rapidly through a wide range of academic and international venues. This type of cyber exchange promotes "inter-cultural skills and direct experiences" with students from other cultures (ACIIE, 1997, p. 3).

Global collaboration among students is fostered and the quality of completed assignments is often higher because students have better access to resources and greater reach. Fewer than 10 percent of American undergraduates now study abroad, and international students make up only a fraction of U.S. college enrollment overall (claim made by U.S. Senator Zell Miller, cited in Garmon 2000). (The Institute of International Education compiles data on international students in the U.S. higher education annually, cf. Davis, Open Doors, 2002.). This pattern is the case in many university settings around the world, including Mexico. Cyber-venues can advance intercultural experience.

One such venue is ePALS.com—a global classroom exchange at <http://www.epals.com>. Students can register by logging onto the ePALS Web site, completing profiles, and accessing discussions specific to their age group. There are discussions for post-secondary students and post-secondary instructors—who can also use the web site in a web-supported context-specific (Humanities, for example) classroom. This global exchange is an interesting and productive way for students to learn about other cultures via the web, to improve and expand English skills, and to make friendships that may lead to home stays and study abroad. Branzburg (2002) comments that "online experiences enhance face-to-face experiences, and vice versa" (http://www.techlearning.com/db_area/archives/TL/2002/11/whatworks.html).

In another approach, the global classroom uses e-mail to promote curricular development in higher education. Pairs of faculty from different nations are linked by discipline to jointly develop curricula and teach students in the U.S. and abroad by engaging them in important contemporary debates that are focused on global issues. Students subscribe to an e-mail listserv by contacting

listserv@uriacc.uri.edu. This idea can readily be applied to Mexican educators and their colleagues in other countries. Projects like this enable faculty to stay current about issues that directly affect their teaching. Such cyber-activities increase the intercultural experience of students, can and should affect the undergraduate curriculum, including the English-language curriculum, and can involve students in international activities and collaboration in trans-national research. Green and Bauer (2001) note that "many international collaborations involve relatively few students" (p.24), but this is hardly the case with cyber- collaborations. Since the late 1990's, more than 20,000 students in over 100 countries have logged onto ePALS to exchange ideas, learn about other cultures, experience other ways of life, and network while thousands have participated in the global classroom.

Web-supported initiatives promote critical thinking and openness to other cultures

Green and Bauer (2001) observe that "knowledge and first hand experience of those who are culturally different can be a powerful antidote to prejudice and intolerance" and state that such exposure can be accomplished "through study or work abroad, service learning, or learning about other cultures in the curriculum and co-curriculum" (p. 16). Students can move beyond the limited views by participating in critical conversations and exchanges with other students from all over the world via the web.

In 1998, faculty at Georgia State University concluded that one significant benefit of web-supported courses related to improved critical thinking. Developing students' critical thinking skills is an important goal for any educational institution, and even more important today since development of these skills has often been overlooked in many nations' education systems. Studies found that students are greatly empowered by learning how to access web resources. They frequently become independent learners motivated to explore topics on their own. They also develop strong critical thinking skills due to the interactive nature of the web. Students greatly expand on the information received by making use of links to related sites. Many students will click on a link much more readily than obtaining a print resource identified in a bibliography (Georgia State University, 1998).

There are other advantages to web-supported initiatives. Providing instruction on accessing information using the web, on-line databases, and other technology-based resources can supplement a university library that may not have adequate resources for students. Also, web forums can provide international venues in which students can express their views (about war and peace for example) in an international context. A group called Empower Peace coordinated Internet videoconferences for students to exchange information about their lives with their international peers. Students from Boston and Bahrain connected via videoconferencing, and these videoconferences were streamed for the Internet via www.empowerpeace.com.

Such experiences can also prepare students for future exchange programs—in which they can also complete on-line coursework while overseas. They can then continue to communicate and interact with acquaintances abroad via the web. This type of sustained exposure can provide students with new and broader

ways of looking at the world and their individual role in the world as well as provide an opportunity for greater exposure to the English language. Such experiences can encourage students to re-examine and re-think conventional and isolationist perspectives in favor of more international approaches. Web-supported learning can help students strengthen and exercise the critical thinking skills that are at the heart of global competence. The student who thinks critically is less likely to accept the arbitrary and prejudicial rhetoric of his/her immediate environment—but will call convention into question by using a dialectical model based upon greater knowledge of the world. The student who knows about a variety of world religions may be less discriminatory than the student who knows nothing of other religions (but who may have been taught that there is only one legitimate religion). It is easier to question the standards of one's own society if one knows something about how things work in other countries and in the world at large. It is easier to accept the "diversity, commonalities, and interdependence" in the world—as well as "the importance of all peoples" if one can get glimpses of other places and have encounters with other peoples (ACIIE, 1997, p.3). These experiences empower and promote growth. Critical thinking also prompts one to "accept the responsibility for global citizenship" (ACIIE, 1997, p.3). One has to first move beyond the narrow constraints of parochialism and nationalism to recognize one's place in and responsibility to a greater global domain.

Web-supported learning equips students with technological skills required in today's high tech global workforce

University students will become technologically savvy in many ways as they explore exciting new cyber-horizons. They will learn how to use numerous technology-based applications such as e-mail, listservs, graphics programs, PowerPoint and HTML. These are considered essential skills for today's global workforce. Students who are exposed to web-supported learning become more comfortable with postmodern technology, overcome anxiety regarding technology, and are thus better equipped to explore the potential of technological applications. They are also more likely to recognize global systems and their connectedness if they have some solid intercultural web experience (via cyber-immersion, virtual travel, discussion forums, and foreign language exchange). Green and Bauer (2001) argue that "many careers are potentially international and all sectors need employees prepared to work in a globalized world. Communities around the world which were isolated in the past are becoming contributors in the global crossroads; the need for international competence is surfacing in unexpected places" (p. 16).

There is an obvious relationship between the expansion of the information age and the increased demand for information age workers who have both technological and intercultural savvy. Universities need to provide workers who possess a more multi-cultural, multi-lingual, global perspective. Students who develop global competency will be more effective employees and more effective citizens. Universities can serve students well by providing them with the technological, diplomatic, and foreign language skills required in many economic sectors (for example, sales, banking, transportation, and tourism). Leu (2001) explains that globalization, information economies, and new forms of economic competi-

tion mean that the problem-information-resolution-communication process now takes place within collaborative teams that (more often than not) rely on the web for information and communication: this means that “the world of work has changed” (p. 568). Leu concludes that “to remain static is to become obsolete” and observes that this principle applies to all types of organizations—including educational institutions (p. 584).

Conclusion

Garmon (2000) summarizes the importance of cyber-learning as follows:

After aggressively promoting the open door, colleges must provide high-level skills to students. These should be problem-solving skills that are individualized to fit the needs of each student. Access to cyber learning is as important as is access to on-campus learning. Students should have electronic access to learn at any place and at any time, but also enjoy the opportunity to benefit from highly interactive teaching and learning in the classroom, laboratory, and on the job (p. 4).

The potential of new technology in college education is revolutionary. Web-supported learning has many advantages—and one advantage is that it contributes to the enhancement of global competencies, including language competencies. Universities can serve their students by capitalizing on the interactivity, the interconnectedness, and the global edge that the web fosters. Colleges and universities can use web course tools to accommodate diverse learning styles, expand learning environments, provoke critical thinking, and equip their students with the technological skills they require to survive in the global workforce. Educators and administrators interested in using the web to enhance global competency in the general education curriculum must continue to focus on goals and outcomes. They need to ask themselves the following questions to help guide their thinking as they move forward into a global and digital age:

- To what extent is global learning articulated as a goal of undergraduate education at the institution? How is it defined?
- Does the institution's general-education curriculum include global perspectives?
- Do collaborative activities with institutions in other countries affect the experience of undergraduates?
- Do the international activities of faculty members have an impact on undergraduates?
- How does the institution implicitly or explicitly encourage or discourage study abroad?
- How does the institution review and assess the global dimension of undergraduate education? (Green and Bauer, 2001, p. 24).

All of these pragmatic questions must be explored if educational institutions hope to promote web-focused global competency.

One can look back at another time and place, very distant in time and space, but a place that nonetheless was facing new horizons, a new threshold of expanding ideas much like the present. During the Renaissance people were exploring concepts, beliefs, and ideas, new and old. People were traveling, meeting, and mixing. Opinions were being exchanged and debated. Those times are being mirrored today in the Postmodern cyber experience. The civic centers of the Ren-

aissance cities were dynamic because there was so much emphasis on great conversation and dynamic international exchange. As educators, we must take advantage of the new opportunities that technology offers in order to continue and expand this interchange.

Whether one is in Renaissance Florence or 21st Century Tijuana or Managua, conversation and dynamic international exchange often enrich civilization and lead to increased understanding and open-mindedness. We can find great conversation and dynamic international exchange today—and unquestionably via the web. Cyber- experiences can be broadening on many levels and certainly in academia. Universities can use a variety of web-supported strategies to support their pedagogical goals and extend the learning environment beyond traditional boundaries—and into promising new global directions. The Kellogg Commission on the Future of the State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges of the United States is convinced that universities must employ new technologies to transform access, speed the generation and diffusion of knowledge, transcend the dimensions of time and space, accelerate economic development, and connect our institutions with their communities, states, and the rest of the world (Magrath, 2000). I daresay that educational institutions everywhere should work toward those same goals.

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CALL in Mexico: The Process of Change

MERCEDES ROSSETTI SANTAMARÍA, PROGRAMA EDUCATIVOS MULTIMEDIA, S. A. DE C. V.

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has grown in Mexico in the last five years. This report will focus on that development, starting with a brief introduction to CALL history, followed by examples of projects implemented in Mexico, and the importance of teacher training with instances of successful implementation. The paper will also briefly discuss the importance of multinational agreements for CALL development and teacher training, both in full distance or blended modalities.

Introduction to CALL History

Integrating computers into second language learning has developed during the last 40 years at an incredible pace. CALL has undergone stages that can broadly be described as a behaviourist phase, followed by a communicative stage, and finally an integration stage, with the advent and integration of multimedia resources and the Internet (Warschauer, 1996).

Behaviourist Phase

During the first phase of CALL, implemented in some language-learning settings during the 1960s and 1970s, behaviourist-like programs were developed in which the computer acted mainly as a tutor; these programs were fundamentally based on the Pavlovian theories prevalent at the time. The programs were used (and still are in many language labs) to introduce a practice element into language learning, with the computer just providing correction feedback.

In the first years of CALL, the computer was viewed as a tool for practice, to repeat exercises endlessly with impartial and immediate feedback. Often the student had access could choose among different types of exercises, with varying degrees of difficulty, and could design his/her own individual learning path.

Communicative Stage

In the late 1970s and into the 1980s, as a new vision of language learning emerged, CALL became a more communicative, more significant process. CALL programs evolved to incorporate more complex interaction among users and software, and at the same time they included motivational learning items beyond routine practice.

During this stage, language teachers who had access to computers and language labs designed their curricular programs to incorporate, sometimes in trial-and-error- processes, blended instances where the teacher used class time to teach fundamental language aspects and relied on computers to do practice work of varying degrees of communication or just drill practice.

Integrative Stage

With the advance of technology, new opportunities have arisen for incorporation of activities based on problem solving and project work as an alternative to acquiring discrete skills in a mechanical way. Developments in multimedia technology (as in CD-ROMs and DVDs) and the advent of the Internet have turned into reality the possibility of pedagogic integration of language with real-time communication, not only within classroom walls but also with the rest of the world.

Instructional design using hypermedia now allows for a meaningful combination of skills since the student can now see a video, listen to its text, write and record his/her production and at the same time compare it with a pattern or standard. For example, for spoken language skills, the latest voice recognition software is able to discriminate among different accents and detect spots in the student's speech patterns in which phonetic problems are present.

For the first time the student has access to a tool which provides a lesson supplemented and supported by dictionaries, encyclopaedias, glossaries, pronunciation tools and even guidelines and learning tips to help the student reach his/her learning objectives.

The development of programs that incorporate artificial intelligence and simulators has provided greater access to learning and communication tools than ever before.

CALL Stages in Mexico

CALL in Mexico today shows the existence of programs in all three stages of CALL development, from programs that just incorporate simple e-mail as a tool, to the appearance in the market of highly sophisticated products geared specifically to the CALL market. For example, at MEXTESOL 2004, a new interactive magazine for teenagers was presented. The package includes a CD-ROM with recordings of each article and contents and access to a web-page where students can practice exercises, a chat room and an avatar programmed to answer questions and even detect mistakes a Spanish speaker may make while learning English (English2Go, 2004).

A personal example shows the change in CALL awareness in Mexico in the past five years. In 2000, I gave my first CALL presentation at a MEXTESOL conference. The focus was on teacher training and examples of on-line and CD-ROM implementation that I had observed in Brazil and Argentina (Rossetti, 2000). The audience consisted of a handful of people, most of them editors from publishing houses eager to find out what was going on in schools in South America. Five years later, at MEXTESOL 2005, I spoke about technology and language learning to an audience of 200 informed participants with many questions about on-line teaching (Rossetti, 2005).

Over the past five years, Mexico has moved toward the integration of technology and has witnessed the development of diverse projects, not only in language teaching but also in teacher training, using a variety of technological tools, CD-ROMs, e-mail and the World Wide Web. Some of these projects have incorporated distance learning to overcome teachers' constraints regarding time and travel.

CALL Projects in Mexico

I will briefly review some of these projects, including some in which teacher training has been carried out using new methodologies and technology. The projects discussed here are the National Self-Access Project, several projects in public and private schools, and several distance teacher-training projects. (Grounds, 2004)

As part of its National Program of Education, The Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), the top government educational body of Mexico, proposed quality improvement both in teaching and learning in higher education in the country. Specifically, its efforts targeted the use of technology for the development of teacher training programs and programs that would help students become -independent learners and thus improve their command of English.

In November 1993 the SEP, together with the Mexican British Council and rectors from 33 public Mexican universities, signed a two-year agreement to provide Self-Access Centres to these institutions. The primary aim was to offer access to multimedia technology both for teachers and for students.

Two projects were then designed to fulfil these objectives: the Proyecto para la Profesionalización de la Enseñanza de Inglés en las Universidades Estatales Mexicanas and the Proyecto Nacional de Centros de Auto-Acceso (Self-Access Centres, or SACs) The first project was aimed at providing teacher training opportunities for both teachers and supervisors, while the second project was aimed at providing technological resources to public universities in Mexico. Both projects are outstanding instances of technological and curricular innovation in Mexico grounded in a very ambitious vision of what self-access centres can bring to language learning.

This plan was extended to five years, and its implementation had to overcome a number of obstacles mainly due to the diverse institutional organizations and differing visions of their supervisors. Project reports indicate that ingenuity and negotiation were necessary throughout the project while dealing with each different university. In its original draft, this project included standardized study and work material, the design of study guides, and a nation-wide tutoring system. However, the marked diversity and individualism prevalent in public institutions, together with local politics, prevented this ambitious goal from becoming reality for all the institutions involved. As a result, today some institutions have expanded their number of SACs to provide service to their ever -increasing populations while other SACs have closed.

Now that the National Self-Access Project is officially over, its impact can be seen in the adoption of SACs in many parts of the country, national conferences dealing exclusively with SAC-related issues, and research being conducted in this area.

CALL Projects in Mexican schools—several examples

Schools in Mexico (both private and public) have been incorporating technology into their language classrooms at different rates depending on their particular scenario. Even many who have not actually implemented such programs have included technology and language labs into their planning for future implementation. In its Plan Educativo 2000-2006, the Secretaria de Educación Pública

(SEP) stated its goal that by 2006, public schools all over the country would be equipped with basic pedagogic infrastructure that included language centres. Mexican states have made progress toward this goal, some more and some less, depending on different political and educational visions of leaders and different situations.

One successful effort has been SEPAInglés (2004), a joint venture of the SEP with private parties to provide open and distance English language courses all over Mexico by means of video through the educational satellite EDUSAT and computers. In this program students are provided with the book *Look Ahead* (Hopkins & Potter, 1996), cassette tapes and a teacher providing tutoring both face-to-face and at a distance using e-mail and telephone. Students have access to SEPAInglés web page support, and the Centro de Asesoría y Auto Estudio (CASA) in different states of the Republic, and their successful work is certified by the SEP which, in the case of English teachers, also means they get credits for their official portfolio in public schools.

States in which English has been made compulsory in public primary schools have also made progress towards the incorporation of technology in their classrooms. One example is the Programa de Inglés en Primaria in the State of Coahuila, which has implemented the Programa de Apoyo y Actualización Docente and the Programa de Instalación y Equipamiento de los Centros de Autoaprendizaje y Desarrollo de Material Didáctico. These programs operate in language centres equipped with sixteen computers each, where both teachers and students work with specially designed software, vocabulary programs, songs, and other resources. (Programa de Inglés en Primaria, 2002)

At the same time that these advancements have been taking place in the public sector, many private schools have implemented their own language labs, where students learn English one or two periods per week. These labs are used mainly for self-access in self-paced programs, preparation for the TOEFL exam and, if there is an internet connection, for collaboration in national and international projects.

In addition, key private institutions such as Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM) use Blackboard (2002) as their main Learning Management System at all levels. Teachers upload exercises, and Blackboard serves as a tool for out-of-class practice.

Teachers report common concerns regarding CALL in their classrooms. For example, many teachers have expressed concerns about using various platforms, either commercial or open-source. They also report common issues regarding support in their institutions, for example, cases where technological innovations have been implemented and not enough support or training has been given to its teaching staff. Other teachers have mentioned situations in which they have had to find their own solutions based on their ingenuity and will to carry out projects, sometimes with little or no institutional or technical support.

Teacher training at a distance—four examples

CALL implementation and distance learning cannot be envisioned without adequate teacher training. With or without government support, institutions and

teachers have slowly incorporated teacher training into their development plans with varying results. Four sample programs are briefly discussed here.

PROMEP

The Programa de Mejoramiento del Profesorado (PROMEP, 2005), active since 1996, has been offering grants and scholarships for post graduate work in foreign universities that offer both their MA and Doctorate degrees at a distance. Examples are the University of Manchester and Aston in the UK and the University of Alberta in Canada, among others.

UNAM Diplomado

The Centro de Lenguas Extranjeras from the Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM) has been conferring its Diplomado de Actualización en Lingüística Aplicada a Distancia para Profesores de Lenguas since 1999. The Diplomado introduces teachers to the use of technology and distance learning and provides theoretical background on language learning and linguistics. Participants can take part in forums, and a tutor is available for consultation. (UNAM, October, 2204)

UGTO Teacher Training Program

Another instance of teacher training using technology can be found at the Universidad Autónoma de Guanajuato (UGTO, October, 2004) where CALL is already part of its curriculum design. This innovative design has led to the provision of forums, CALL materials design courses and visits from international consultants to work together with University teachers with different kinds of software for their classes.

UDG Distance Teacher Training Program

A distance teacher training program that began with print materials and now combines print materials with technology is the Licenciatura Semi-Escolarizada a Distancia offered by the Universidad de Guadalajara. The program opened in 1996 with only 18 students. Originally based on print materials delivered by surface mail, with the support of e-mail for submitting assignments, the project now includes a web site and reaches 200 students in all states in Mexico (UDG, October, 2004)

Conclusion

CALL development in Mexico has varied; sometimes it has been slow, sometimes fast. As the examples here show, programs range from those with basic resources and plans, with little or no support, to highly-developed integrative programs with strong support. In the future, leaders will need to develop powerful educational visions that include a global strategy and a coherent nationwide plan that incorporates technology at all levels of public education and supports teacher training.

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Nicenet: A Free On-line Classroom that Works

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As an instructor in a small college with limited resources, I look for economical ways to include more technology in my ESL classes. Two years ago, I started using an on-line classroom called *Nicenet*. I implemented it into my classes gradually. Student reactions were mixed at first, but as I became more knowledgeable about the site and more creative in use of it, students began to use it more willingly. While there have been some problems in our use of *Nicenet*,—it is a valuable tool for anyone to consider who would like to try a readily-available, free on-line classroom management tool.

In this paper, I provide background about the selection and features of *Nicenet*, explain my early efforts to use it with my advanced writing students and gradual expansion of use, and offer recommendations about choosing and using this kind of classroom tool.

Background

Several years ago, the Academic Dean at my college asked whether any ESL instructors were regularly using any Internet technology other than computer software in their classes. I had to answer No. While we had actually just begun to use the computer lab and its software effectively, we were not using other Internet tools. The Dean's question was the impetus that led me to search for and begin to use an on-line classroom tool to help my students learn English.

Several factors were important. I knew of a professor in the college who required his students to log on to a site that he maintains through a textbook publisher. While I knew nothing about the site, I realized my students would eventually need to know how to navigate sites for other courses. Also, as our college is very small and does not have the infrastructure or financial resources to support our posting course materials on an intranet, whatever I did would have to be web-based. With that in mind, I began by conducting a search on Yahoo for free on-line classrooms. One of the first sources listed was Kameron (2003), a review of various free on-line classroom management systems. The first tool mentioned was one I had tried before without much success: Yahoo! Groups. I had not been confident about how to use it effectively, and at the time, access to Yahoo! Groups had been blocked by my campus Internet Service Provider.. I had decided then not to pursue an on-line component for my classes because of the frequency of our face-to-face meetings coupled with the uncertainty of access to the site. The other options reviewed by Kameron seemed either too complicated or not suitable for my needs.

Sparked by the Dean's question, I continued to look for the "perfect" tool. Another listing in the web search for a free on-line classroom tool was *Nicenet* (www.Nicenet.org). It seemed easy to use and yet had many features, allowing me to expand my use of the site as I grew more comfortable with it. As a writing teacher, I saw immediate applications for my classes for exchanging information

and posting assignments, though at that time I did not know how I might use it beyond those initial features.

Brief Description

The Internet Classroom Assistant (ICA) offered by Nicenet is a free resource designed primarily for high school and college classrooms but available to anyone who would like to use it. It requires only an Internet connection and a web browser. There is no software to download or complicated setup. It is not specific to any one operating system. The main resources offered by Nicenet are threaded conferencing, scheduling, document sharing, personal messaging and link sharing. See the Nicenet website for more information about Nicenet and the ICA (Nicenet Releases a New Internet Classroom Assistant, 1998),.

First Use

I began with my most advanced students, introducing *Nicenet* mid-semester, when students were about to begin writing research papers. As I had divided the overall assignment into several smaller chunks, I used the Class Schedule section of the on-line classroom to post those assignments and due dates. I also set up some of the assignments (including topic choice and the preliminary bibliography) to be turned in on *Nicenet* by selecting that option as I posted the assignment. Students were then able to submit the assignment by pasting it into a box provided for that purpose.

Not everything went smoothly in that first experiment, for example, bibliographies lost their formatting when posted into *Nicenet*. Also, some students did not embrace use of the on-line classroom to the extent I would have liked. One reason was that students did not use it enough or meaningfully enough to gain real familiarity with it. Furthermore, I made limited use of the site, as I was unfamiliar with it and its capabilities. At that time, *Nicenet* was merely an adjunct to my class, not a key part of it. . Despite the early problems, I was certain that this was a tool I wanted to continue to exploit.

Expanded Use for Assignments

The following semester I expanded my use of *Nicenet* in my advanced writing class. I included *Nicenet* in the course syllabus and awarded points to students for using it. Also, I posted the course syllabus to *Nicenet* at the beginning of the semester and made sure all the students were signed up for the "class" within the first two weeks. Once again, we primarily used it as students worked on research papers. When I assigned the research paper, I took the class to the computer lab and showed them the assignments and the links. I explained that I expected them to use *Nicenet* on a regular basis throughout the research and writing stages of the assignment. I posted links that I thought students might find helpful when they began doing research for their papers.

One way that I got students more involved in using *Nicenet* was to require them to post additional links related to the research topic. Since everyone was arguing either for or against the same issue (the death penalty), each student's links could contribute to the body of knowledge available to the entire class. That process also allowed me to monitor some of the web sites students were using

and to direct a student who needed additional support for an argument to a link posted by a classmate. As students saw the value of using *Nicenet*, they were much more willing to use it.

Use for Peer Response

In the summer of 2004, as a fellow of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project, I set up a *Nicenet* "class" for our group so that we could easily read and respond to each other's writing. That experience led me to another application of *Nicenet* for my ESL advanced writing classes in the fall of 2004, using the ICA for peer response. My students had always been reluctant to participate in this important step in the writing process. My hope was that by removing the face-to-face element and allowing them to think more about their responses and about how to express them well, students would be less reluctant to respond to each other. I also hoped that they would learn to accept the responses of others as valid.

First I changed the way in which I have my students keep journals. I gave them a topic each day and stressed that this was free-writing, that they are not expected to turn out a coherent piece of writing at this point. After two weeks I gave students time in class to read over all their free-writes up to that point, looking for a piece or a portion of a piece to expand and develop into a personal essay. Students then posted their essays to *Nicenet* and responded to the writings of their classmates. Students were asked to identify the portions of the essay that were confusing, those that were especially good, and could also comment on overall organization and effectiveness.

I chose to have students send their responses as personal messages to the writer rather than posting them to a more public forum, the conference. This allowed responders to deal directly with the writer and freed them from worry about how others would perceive their responses. Since I also submitted a piece of writing when my students did and expected them to comment on my pieces, I was able to monitor the kinds of responses that were made. I also used their responses to my work as an opportunity to guide them in the art of responding to the writing of others. Overall, students found the on-line response group to be less threatening than responding and being responded to in person. Students reported receiving more constructive comments on their writing and expressed overall enthusiasm for the process.

Posting Multiple Drafts

After seeing the ease with which my students adapted to posting their writing on *Nicenet* for peer response, I decided to have them post all their work online. This facilitated work for all of us. Previously, as we worked on multiple drafts of two or more essays at the same time, it was easy to get confused as to which draft we were on with which paper. By posting each of the individual drafts for each essay as a separate assignment, students were able to turn in their essays in the appropriate place and therefore were better able to see where they were in the process with each essay. For these more academic essays, I decided not to use peer response. This was in part a time-saving measure and in part a conscious decision to distinguish these assignments from the journal-inspired pieces

for which we used peer response . With these essays, I made use of the option in *Nicenet* that allows some documents to be visible to all members of the class and others to be available only to the instructor. I made early drafts visible only to me, allowing for greater confidentiality for the student when his or her work was in its early stages. All final drafts were available to everyone, however, at the request of the students themselves.

There was some initial confusion about where to post individual pieces of writing when there were multiple drafts of various essays in process, but that confusion lessened as students became more familiar with the web site. To encourage them in this adjustment period, I assigned a process essay outlining the steps required for students to post an assignment on *Nicenet*. This forced them to analyze what they were doing on the site, and it reduced the number of essays subsequently posted in the wrong place. I continue to learn, too. For example, I have realized that I need to refine my own skill in structuring assignments. I have explained this to my students, and they accept that we are learning together how to use the site effectively.

Projected Use with Other Classes

I have also developed plans for extending my use of *Nicenet* to my other classes. I envision using *Nicenet* with intermediate-level reading students, having them turn in certain assignments on-line, and post weekly summaries of their outside reading, allowing me to monitor their progress without taking up valuable class time. I also plan to use *Nicenet* with these students to post links for additional information on topics studied in class. As this would be the first exposure of these students to *Nicenet*, I anticipate the need for orientation and encouragement, as was the case with the advanced students. The main difference now is that I have learned a great deal about the site and how to use it. I feel confident that *Nicenet* will be useful for my intermediate students as well.

Recommendations

I would encourage any teacher interested in using this type of on-line classroom to do so. Depending on your purposes and needs, *Nicenet* may or may not be the best option. After you choose an on-line classroom tool, you need to use it multiple times to become familiar with and truly comfortable with the site and what it has to offer. I would recommend the following:

Take time to get to know the site. Set up a test classroom and see what happens when you post documents. Alternatively, you might set up the class you want to use and try different features before you have your students sign up. You can always delete practice materials later;

Be aware of what you cannot do with a tool. For example, if the formatting of documents is of particular importance, you may want to look for a site other than *Nicenet*;

Start small. It is better to begin with something manageable, perhaps one class and a limited number of assignments with that class, and gradually make it a regular part of all your classes. Don't overwhelm yourself or your students.

Conclusion

While I have continued to expand my use of *Nicenet's* Internet Classroom Assistant, I do not feel that I have begun to utilize it to its full potential. Yes, there are problems, but the drawbacks seem inconsequential when compared to the benefits of the site. I look forward to each new semester with the goal of finding more ways to use this valuable free on-line classroom tool.

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The Electronic Village Online

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The Electronic Village Online, sponsored by TESOL's Computer-Assisted Language Learning Interest Section, is a response to the need for teachers to become more aware of and skilled in the use of technology for teaching languages. It also serves as a means to support and continue the professional development of the international association's Convention, Academies, and Symposia. It is well known that not everyone can afford to come to an annual convention--both time and money constrain many international participants. The Electronic Village Online (EVO) brings the convention to the world.

EVO takes place in January-February of each year and serves over 1,000 English teachers and administrators from all over the globe. Participants do not have to be members of the TESOL association, though moderators do. The moderators need not have more than basic word processing and Internet skills, because they undergo a six-week training period before the EVO gets underway. Moderators learn to use a free online resource, Yahoo! Groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com>), which provides a discussion forum, chat facility, archives for files and URLs to good resources, photos, polls, and even a database which can be used as a wiki to write and revise projects together. Yahoo! Groups (YG) has many of the features of expensive course management systems, such as WebCT or Blackboard, yet it is far easier to manage and use, and has the additional advantage of being free.

In addition to learning how to manage the online resources of YG, moderators discuss the advantages and possible pitfalls in conducting an online course. They discuss several readings about online education and access information that has been developed over the four years of past EVO experience in such areas as:

- Online community building
- Tips on "netiquette"
- Creating good online discussions
- Using voice and Webcam for chat

Mentors are assigned from experienced past EVO presenters, and they help the "newbies" through the steps of setting up and organizing their groups.

EVO sessions tend to fall into three categories:

(1) Discussions based on academic sessions or other events at the TESOL convention. For example, at the Salt Lake City convention in 2002, the CALL-IS Academic Session, on the theme "CALL and the Human Spirit," was preceded by a "run-up" EVO session, "The Human Face of CALL" (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Human_CALL). In 2003, a colloquium for TESOL Adult Education Interest Section was supported by an EVO session "Reading Online" (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Reading_Online).

(2) Virtual "hands-on" workshops in which some aspect of technology is explored. These may be quite advanced or very "low tech" for the novice technology user. In the 2005 EVO, for example, sessions were held on movie making with

digital video; constructing and using blogs; using Moodle, another free resource used to form online classes; and how to create language games using a word processor. One very popular course each year has been "Becoming a Webhead," which introduces participants to the tools and techniques used by an advanced group of experimenters in online teaching learning. At the other end of the spectrum, each year an introduction to the Internet has also been held to help beginners find and use such amazing free resources as Filamentality <http://www.filamentality.net/wired/fil/index.html>.

(3) Discussions about general themes in the TESOL profession. This year's event included discussion groups on content-based learning in the EFL curriculum, how to create ESP lessons using tools on the Internet, and how to combine cooperative learning with a global education curriculum.

Detailed descriptions of all this year's sessions may be found at <http://www.geocities.com/ehansonsmi/evo2005/announce.html>.

As can be seen from this brief discussion of the EVO topics, the appeal is truly international. Moderators represent many different regions of the world: Brazil, Spain, Portugal, Taiwan, Japan, Mexico, Korea, Kuwait, as well as different regions of the USA. One of the most enjoyable parts of EVO is meeting and "talking with the fingers" to other participants from all over the world. As one participant stated:

I've really appreciated these online courses. I do feel much more connected to the "big picture," after hearing from so many folk around the world, and getting some individual feedback from a couple . . . It gives me such a feeling of being a part of things. Thanks so much. This was very important for many of us who are teaching around the world . . .

Once the moderators have volunteered their time and expertise—and the EVO is totally volunteer-organized—the sessions are advertised through electronic lists, the CALL-IS Website (<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~call>), and an "e-blast" from TESOL to its members. Participants can sign themselves up for as many sessions as they believe they can handle (and usually they sign up for too many because the topics are so interesting). Next year's call for moderators will appear near the beginning of September, and the signups for the new sessions will begin in early January. The EVO invites you to participate and take advantage of this wonderful free resource.