

The Virtual Forum as an Alternative Way to Enhance Foreign Language Learning*

El foro virtual como una alternativa para incrementar el aprendizaje del idioma extranjero

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A web-based story sharing forum has been established to provide students in Bogotá, Colombia, New Brunswick, Canada and Dundee, Scotland with the opportunity to exchange cross-cultural stories as a complement to the regular ELT Curriculum. This paper will describe the process through which the exchange experience was established and the progress achieved by the group of Colombian students in their regular interaction through blogs, theme-based wikis, social forums and online debates. The teaching practices utilized in the forum have fostered the creation of communities of interest and practice among teachers and students in the forum. Early results suggest that this innovative way of implementing the ELT curriculum has promoted student involvement and language development through the use of ICTs.

Key words: EFL learning mediated by ICTs, learning communities, blogs as tools for language learning

El propósito de este artículo es compartir las experiencias de intercambio lingüístico y cultural que a través de un foro virtual (www.ourdigitalculture.net) se realizaron entre un grupo de estudiantes colombianos aprendiendo inglés como lengua extranjera y un grupo de estudiantes de New Brunswick, Canadá y Escocia a través de interacción regular con el uso de blogs, wikis, foros sociales y debates. El objetivo es mostrar el proceso de intercambio y los beneficios en el aprendizaje del grupo de estudiantes Colombianos. Las prácticas de enseñanza utilizadas en el foro han promovido la creación de comunidades de interés y comunidades de práctica entre los profesores y los estudiantes del foro. Los resultados preliminares sugieren que esta forma alternativa de implementar el currículo de inglés como lengua extranjera ha fomentado la participación activa de los estudiantes y el desarrollo de lengua extranjera mediante el uso de las TICs.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje de inglés como lengua extranjera mediado por las TICs, comunidades de aprendizaje, blogs como herramientas para el aprendizaje de lengua

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Introduction

The traditional foreign language curriculum in Colombia has, for many years, focused on the development of language skills and structures as a way for students to master some knowledge about the language. Within this framework, language teachers believe that knowing the structures of the target language is the most important source required to speak it. Foreign language acquisition research, however, has demonstrated that language structures need to serve a real purpose for language use in order for the language to be learned.

In this regard, Halliday (1979) proposes three basic principles to language learning: learning about language (structural aspects of language), learning through language (literature group discussions, book reviews) and learning language (inquiry projects, book talks, storytelling). The integration of these three principles makes language learning a more integrated, realistic experience.

In the context of this study, we are interested in providing learning environments that offer students and teachers new opportunities to use language to learn, mediated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). For this purpose, an international collaborative project with teachers and students was established, supported by a virtual forum, as a platform for the teaching of language. The case we report here corresponds to the pedagogical activities developed by two groups of initial preparation courses in Colombia and Canada during an academic year.

The virtual forum is a space in which currently nearly 1,200 students and teachers from five different countries participate using English and Spanish, to communicate and learn together. It is structured for the four educational levels: elementary, middle and high school and University. Four main spaces were created to promote learning and interaction among students: personal blogs, theme-based wikis, social forums and online debates. Students were introduced to the personal blog to start getting to know each other and to exchange information about themselves and their home countries. Teachers in the different geographical locations also communicate to negotiate themes and objectives for the pedagogical tasks proposed to the students. Through the use of personal, theme-based and debate spaces, participating students maintain interaction in the forum and their learning is extended beyond learning about language. Their exchanges contain information related to cultural and personal interests that motivate the creation of communities of interest.

The frequent use of language to communicate helps EFL students gain understanding of the target language and become involve in communities of practice. In practical terms, these interactions take the form of asynchronous dialogues using a variety of media such as words, pictures, video and audio clips, and music. They also take the form of the construction of narratives and stories, either by individuals or as collaborative groups, covering topics of interest or topics being proposed within the participants' wider curriculum. The learning environment of the virtual forum provides a place where authentic, living and

everyday language can be exchanged, which in turn has contributed to building virtual communities of interest and communities of practice amongst the three groups of students. The topics addressed in the forum are proposed and negotiated by the teachers and the groups of students. This participatory way of deciding the contents of the interactions helps consolidate the existing communities and generates a non-traditional way of extending the language learning beyond the curriculum which means expanding spheres of free spaces for decision making on the part of the students.

The participative agenda for curriculum exploration encouraged students to find their own voice to speak and negotiate with others in the forum, and to decide upon the curricular activities. It illustrates that when individuals participate in decisions that directly affect them, they develop the confidence that such action is possible as well as the desire to participate in even broader public activities in school and outside of it. (Beyer & Apple, 1998).

Student-teacher participation also required a change of role of the teacher in planning the instruction to use the virtual forum and create learning spaces for the communities to interact. It implied fostering dialogue rather than controlling it and encouraging instead of controlling the learning process. Engaging in a participatory dialogue with students allowed them to critically examine their previous experiences to investigate topics that mattered to them and to transform their views of themselves as learners and teachers (Wolfe-Quintero, 2000).

Principles Underlying the Forum

Thinkers and educators such as Freire (1970) have provided a foundation of challenges and practical recommendations that are not only firmly rooted in the realities of the spectrum of Latin American contexts, but also continue to have relevance to the situation prevailing in European and North American countries. The forum builds on these principles and provides a learning environment that addresses the following pedagogic issues within a culture of peer-based learning and situated learning activities.

Humans are social creatures (Read & Miller, 1995). Gossiping and storytelling is the means by which social interactions affect the balance of communities and societies (Emler, 2001). Social interaction implies interaction with people within society. We learn from others, and we share with others what we have learnt. We interact with others in various ways that influence our status and roles in social communities. Humans have more complex patterns of social interactions than any other species.

Read & Miller's work builds on that of Schank (1990) who explored many aspects of storytelling, considering it central to not only social interactions, but also as the essential organising mechanism of knowledge in memory. One aspect of this work is the idea that conversations often follow context specific "scripts", with associated "goals" and "plans", demonstrating and leading to "understanding". Whilst some of Schank's work has been criticised as being insufficiently supported by experimental data (Brewer, 1995), it has catalysed a strong

debate that has lead to renewed interest in the role of stories in human social interaction and in learning.

One further aspect of the various possible roles of storytelling as part of social interactions is that people live in societies that have specific cultures that govern the way that they live. Ember & Ember (in Segall et al., 1999a) defined culture as “the shared customs of a society, the learned behaviors, beliefs and attitudes that are characteristic of people in a particular society or population”. Miller (1995) reports substantial evidence showing that storytelling takes place in many different cultures and between people of all ages, in support of social interaction. The type of narrative may be highly culturally specific. This may not be simply a matter of vocabulary. In some cases it is manifest in culturally specific turn-taking behaviors between the communicating parties, with perhaps more than one person relating the story to other members of the conversation. The manner employed to emphasize an aspect of the story may differ from culture to culture. These attributes of storytelling identify the teller as someone who can communicate according to the norms of the culture or not. Given that storytelling is a primary method of participating in social interaction, the cultural specific aspects of storytelling may determine the success of a social interaction with people from a specific culture. Knowing the stories of another culture is a bridge into another culture.

Scott (1995), in reviewing the work of Schank & Abelson (1995), makes the point that storytelling does not automatically imply the use of words. Other forms of

representation are possible; for example, using pictures or images, symbols, objects or even mathematical equations. In the context of technology-supported education, storytelling is a creative process that enables young people to express themselves (individually and collaboratively) by bringing together information into an engaging and coherent argument (Bruner, 1986). Stories are the basis for case-based memories (Schank, 1990) and are, therefore, essential for healthy cognitive development. Stories are also vehicles for meaningful social interactions and for learning. Learning through stories happens best when accompanied by socializing through stories.

The sharing of stories, both personal and those exploring different topics within the formal curriculum, is the basis for the interactions within the online forum. In addition, teachers and educators in Scotland, Canada, Chile and in Colombia have been consulted to expose the wider issues associated with the use of ICT in education. The following points have emerged as being important in education today, and to some extent neglected in the way educational technology is implemented and deployed:

Reflective Thinking

Prensky (2001) and others have suggested that students who are constantly handling information in the form of short and easily accessed blocks seem to be losing the ability to think deeply about the meaning of the information, or to construct sequenced or coherent arguments. It is proposed, therefore, to explore the use

of multithreaded and networked blogs and hypermedia support as a means of promoting brain-forming functions in young people, where reasoned arguments are practiced and rehearsed and where knowledge is appreciated and constructed through associations between informational elements. Early experiences in the forum do suggest that students become more selective in their use of materials, knowing that others will be reading and linking to their contributions.

1. Media Literacy

Young people are growing up in an informational age where the principle commercial commodity is information. Information is available in a wide variety of media, including, but not exclusively, text, pictures, photos, drawings, video, animations, speech and audio. These media are delivered via a variety of platforms including books, magazines, newspapers, telephones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), computers, games consoles, TVs, radios, CDs and DVDs, etc. Many different people are producing and delivering information for a wide variety of reasons. Not only do young people need to have skills in making and using media, they need to be able to understand the message being conveyed to them by others. (Meyrowitz, 1998; Frechette, 2002). So, media literacy curricula should be revisited to ensure that they are comprehensive enough to equip young people with the skills to comprehend the message delivered by all these media, both alone and in combination, and in having the skills to express themselves

with these media, again both alone and in combination.

2. Cross-cultural Integration

The appreciation and respect for cultures is becoming an essential attribute for citizens of global communities, if they are to maintain their local, national, and global cultural memberships as well as their individual subjectivities. The peer group within which stories will be created, presented and defended is multicultural, which will involve the students in cross-cultural interchange, an interchange that will inevitably lead to a degree of cross-cultural understanding.

3. Online Experience

The nature of the communication and information access inevitably involves the use of the Internet, videoconferencing and other remote communication technologies (mobile telephony, short messages, community TV, etc.). Turkle (1997) and Joinson (2003) explore at length the new relationships and subjectivities that arise in these modalities of interaction. The collaboration opportunities available in the storytelling forum will enable these issues to be sensitively and comprehensively explored.

4. Heterogeneous Learners

In conventional education contexts, the academic differences between students are recognized and accommodated as far as resources allow. In general, when technology is deployed, however, a single system,

interface and learning path is prescribed for all learners. Even using systems such as adaptive hypermedia, the end goal is often to bring all students to a common learning outcome. There is a need, however, to provide a platform where all students are able to learn in ways that are appropriate for each individual learner.

5. Multilingualism

The ability to converse, interact and exchange information in various languages is becoming increasingly important in a world where these interactions are no longer bound by time or distance.

The learning platform used in this study, therefore, provides opportunities for these issues to be explored. In this paper, early experience in the context of language learning will be presented.

Theoretical Considerations

Enhancing Language Learning through the Use of ICTs

A recurring theme in the literature on computer-mediated communication is that information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer opportunities for treating teaching and learning as truly social activities where knowledge is built through interaction and dialogue rather than lectures and recitation (Brown, 2000; Hardwick, 2000; Rice, 2003). Technology goes beyond the delivery of information and lies instead in the power to create collaborative, learner-centered educational spaces (Dietering & Huston, 2004).

Thanks to technology, language teachers have a new tool that can provide students with opportunities to interact with a virtual community, they can construct knowledge and exchange cultural issues with the participants, at the same time that they encourage social and communicative behaviors to construct knowledge and language learning. Weblogs were not designed to re-create the traditional classroom but to create a learner-centre environment where the learner actually owns his or her learning (Oravec, 2003, cited in Dietering & Huston, 2004).

Weblogs as Social and Communicative Tools

Weblogs are a relatively new web tool that have spread all over the world during the last few years. However, as mentioned by Ward (2004), it was only after 2003 that language teachers started to use them for teaching/learning purposes. The general online consensus, according to Ward (2004) is that “a weblog is a website that is updated regularly and organized chronologically according to the date, and in reverse order from most recent entry backwards. Weblogs can also provide decentralized access rights which allow(s) multiple authors” (p. 2). However, these are only technical definitions of what a blog is; there are other considerations that deal with the use of the blogs.

From other perspectives, a weblog is a personal webspace where learners can post any kind of information they want. Ward (2004) states: “the weblogs are usually motivated solely by the need of self-expression, and often communicate

something about the personality, or adopted person, behind the blog, through the style of writing and choice of topics.” (p. 2). Certainly, the writings each blogger posts suggest the kind of person he/she is. As it is a very personal space, students can write about things they like and want to write about. Behind each piece of writing, there is increasing competence in terms of the language and also in terms of technology, and media literacy. Blood (2000) highlights that: “blogs are nothing less than an outbreak of self-expression. Each is evidence of a staggering shift from an age of carefully controlled information provided by sanctioned authorities (and artists), to an unprecedented opportunity for individual expression on a worldwide scale” (p. 7)

There are some studies that have shown the advantages of using weblogs to enhance students’ language development. Ward (2004) carried out a short-term study with forty non-native English speaker students with an intermediate language level. The study was developed in order to see how weblogs could benefit his composition class. The teacher chose four different tasks for students to write. He says that even though blogs are thought of as spaces where little attention is paid to form, he wanted his students to advance in their writing, so he helped them in the process of writing each text. The audience for the students was peers from the same class. His findings suggest that students enjoyed the experience a lot, and they said that it had helped them a lot in improving their English level. Other students expressed that the blog was a forum for self-expression, something similar to a diary where they could put all the things they wanted to share with others.

In general, according to the author, students were highly motivated to write. Some of them continued keeping their blog after the course finished.

A similar study was undertaken by Deitering & Huston (2004) at Western Oregon University with a group of students from the Geography and Film intensive writing courses offered in spring 2004. There were eighteen students enrolled in this class. A class weblog, *filmtalk*, was created as a space for students to publish their own ideas about course content, and also to share with the others their ideas and writings. This was a collective weblog where all students wrote at least three times a week. Based on the comments students created discussions which provided a space for informal writing. However, they were also required to write formal pieces of writing such as film reviews and critiques. The instructor only used the blog to write announcements and new tasks, the rest was entirely created by the students.

Similarly to the study previously mentioned, students felt it was a great opportunity to express themselves outside the classroom and at the same time, keep a record of the discussions to be reused later. The authors point out that the weblog, *filmtalk*, worked well as a community forum where every student contributed to the enrichment of the discussions. Additionally, the blog provided the medium for informal writing in the course without excessive attention to the mechanics or disciplinary specifics of their fields.

These two experiences suggest that weblogs can change the dynamics of our classes, especially writing classes, which sometimes appear to be a heavy load

for students and teachers. Weblogs are particularly easy to use and to integrate in traditional classes, affording students' freedom, creativity, the use of their own voice and self-learning in ways not easily achieved in normal classes. Thus, as pointed out above, using weblogs to enhance writing provides opportunities to communicate with a real audience, which offers constant feedback on the published entries in students' blogs, fosters peer work and contributes to creating and consolidating communities of interest and of practice among learners as users.

Building Virtual Communities

Wenger (1998) in his foundational work "*Communities of Practice: Learning Meaning and Identity*" lays out the principles of how being part of a learning community profoundly affects and enhances the learning experience. Wenger's presentation of learning within "communities of practice" and the broader "communities of interest" builds heavily on a refined model of a social theory of learning and depends on social interaction between learners.

Mercer (2003) understands community as a group of people who have some common knowledge and similar interests which are shared basically through language. From a socio-cultural perspective of learning, it is believed that all learning takes place in a community. If we think of children we find that the first social milieu in which their life is embedded is their family, which is also the first community they belong to. This small but powerful community for those first stages of their lives is the one that helps them construct

all their knowledge. Children certainly learn thanks to the active interaction among the members. As they grow up, their community also grows. Thus, the neighborhood, the school and the group of friends become communities too; all of them are sources for children's learning and knowledge construction. Within these communities, knowledge resources are basically shared and developed through language because knowledge commonly exists in the form of language (Mercer, 2003).

With the avenue of technological changes and thanks to the great variety of resources the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) offer, it is now possible to think of a community not only in terms of people who interact in the same geographical place but also in terms of virtual communities which share similar interests. Rheingold (1993) suggests that: "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on ... public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace." (p. 5). For this particular study, we focus on a community of individuals that share similar interests in learning about language and culture, maintain regular contact and dialogue and decide together upon the common goals for learning.

As this is fundamental to any of the pedagogic objectives of the forum, it is essential to verify that students participating in it develop language competence in their foreign language and interaction is achieved.

Learning Platform and Practices

The context in which the pedagogical practices that we describe in this section took place is Bogotá, Colombia. A group of trainee teachers in Colombia (17 students), and a group of senior high school students in Canada (24 students) agreed to use the forum platform to practice their foreign language skills as part of their language training courses. The students were of the same age, even though they were in different phases in their educational path. The Colombian students agreed to post in English rather than their native Spanish. The Canadian students agreed to post in Spanish rather than their native English. The material posted included words, photographs, video clips and music. The two groups interacted during a period of seven months and they explored topics of local culture, music and natural disasters. Towards the end of this period, a small number (6) of senior high school students the same age as the other students in Colombia and Canada in Dundee joined the community, contributing principally within the debating spaces in the forum. The Dundee students started becoming acquainted with the dynamics of the forum in order to fully join it the following semester.

A key part of the student interaction, therefore, was the experience of attempting to converse with students using their foreign/target language. It was anticipated that the forum could provide a valuable platform for the native English-speaking students to practice Spanish, and for the native Spanish-speaking students to practice English. Teachers from each country played an important role in designing pedagogical

activities that allowed students to have a space to meet and interact.

Some pedagogical tasks were implemented during the pedagogical project in order to set an environment for the students to interact considering the principles of the forum. During the early phase, each student had a personal blog in which they wrote about topics of their personal interest as well as the topic of local culture agreed with the other group. Some students wrote stories and poems, others about personal experiences, and some others about current cultural aspects. Through the exploration of students' local culture, they showed their perspectives about their own culture, learned about different lifestyles in other countries, while using the target language for regular communication. In this initial phase, the teacher played a crucial role to assist students in the uses of ICTs, appropriate ways to generate dialogue with peers and conventional uses of the language they were learning. In addition, however, peer feedback was valuable to maintain communication in the blogs. For example, in this posting that occurred early in the study period:

Posted at Apr 07/2006 10:28PM: Hi!!! I am Paula Andrea; I was born in Bogotá, Colombia in 12th /august/1988, so I am 17 years old. I have one sister her name is Lizeth and she is 14.

Posted at Apr 19/2006 10:05PM: paula I'm Paula Andrea i'm 17 years old and i'm studyng for be a teacher at Universidad Distrital I live in Bogotá Colombia and I love all kinds of music, my favorite color is blue and I love my country because it is wonderful and exciting, but I would like go to your country and see many new things. I love the salads and the candies, and I love the novels and poems. Tell me about you.

Posted at Apr 20/2006 05:30PM: AmandaSSED: well, I love to read and travel. I am now reading through all JANE AUSTEN's work. The novels are all classic English novel, set in the 1800's. I am a lacto-ovo vegetarian, which means I eat milk and egg products but not red meat, chicken or fish. I am planning to attend Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. I will be majoring in political science and business. I hope to attend McGill University for a law degree.

Posted at Apr 26/2006 09:49PM: Paula: The last photos are about the 10th iberoamerican theater festival: In Bogotá every two years, we celebrate the theater festival. It is a wonderful carnival; it always starts the first Saturday of April with a beautiful parade. This year I went there and it was fantastic. There were big puppets, musical groups, dance, music, theater, etc. There were foreign performances from: Bolivia, Republica Dominicana, Cuba, USA, etc. Finally there was a concert of Andres Cabas. From 31st march to 15th April at all the theaters of Bogotá, parks and at some malls many groups from all the world showed their performances which were successful. At Corferias, a place for expositions, was located "Ciudad Teatro" a big theater, there were: performances, concerts, clowns, puppets, lectures about theater, etc. If you don't want to go to a performance because you don't understand its language, calm down!!, the foreign performances are subtitled or translated simultaneously. It's only a bit of what the theater festival is. It is the most important theater festival of the world. It is very famous in many countries. The festival finished on 16th April with a German performance, fireworks and colorful lights. It was shown at Simon Bolivar park.

Posted at Apr 27/2006 05:25PM: AmandaSSED: wow! I love the pictures. I have never seen anything like it in Canada. Although when I was in China, they were a lot of show that I believe would create the same type of amazement that this festival does.

This interaction is between a Colombian Trainee Teacher and a student of the same age in Canada. It is an example of a dialogue that took place in English, and is similar to those that took place in Spanish between the cohorts of students that these two students belonged to. It shows a genuine spontaneous exchange of common themes and a real exchange and connection between the peers.

The materials exchanged between students are authentic texts which are embedded in communicative tasks planned by the teacher or initiated by the students. As students understood the dynamics of the forum and acquired more knowledge on the target language, their language competence also increased. This was evidenced in the kind of texts and language that they wrote. The later texts were longer and more complex structures were used than in the earlier ones. They moved from writing short personal passages to writing short articles about their chosen topic. The contribution posted below occurred approximately six months after the previous example, and is typical of the greater diversity of topics being discussed at that time.

Posted at Oct 25/2006 08:22PM:

THIS IS ME.

I'm Edward Murillo Moreno, I was born, and actually I live in Bogota with my parents, one sister and one dog. Actually I'm a trainee teacher at Distrital University Francisco Jose De Caldas. 2 years ago I lived in NYC. I'm a 19 year - old teenager. I'm a freak-o guy, and I hate normal people. I love to eat human meat every saturday and my favorite band is slayer. Are u scared? . Well, I'm not that kind of guy. I love life and laughing a lot, telling jokes and drawing my life in cartoons. Writing is my favorite hobby, also reading and see some fashion mags in my

free time, and I'm a big fan from Capote's and Sartre's books. My life is so simple, I don't know what can I say in an autobiography. I don't have good memories about my childhood and my teenage is traumatic. I'm catholic, but I don't believe in a painkiller god and a world full of sins. I've worked with british and american issues of VOGUE. I love good music and books. That's all that I can say, later on I'll tell u about my favorite stuff.

Posted at Dec 13/2006 06:28PM:

HISTORIC LUXURY IS LOEWE.

For me, luxury is not a brand; it is a tradition that was developed for many generations of artists and designers searching perfection and quality as a main goal. Luxury is not the quantity of money that you spend on something; it is the way that you live and the accessories that you use. It is a personal mood who is showed in many different ways: art, furniture, houses... not only for high society, just for people with good taste.

Today's world is filled of trademarks who believe that they sell the "true" meaning of luxury, but one of them really does and this is LOEWE. The Spanish leather, fashion and cosmetics house whose goal is to seduce the costumer with fancy and weird pieces. Always with a big touch of class and sophistication in materials and design.

LOEWE started to work 160 years ago when a craftsmen group decided to work together celebrating the Madrid commercial's opening and the brides of two very important Spain duchesses. They started to create small leather goods as wallets and tobacco packs. At 1872 Mister Enrique Loewe Roessweg, a German craftsman decided to associate with them in this moment the trademark LOEWE started to grow and its evolution is the mix between the Spanish handmade work and the knowledge about leathers of Mister Loewe Roessweg.

Time goes by and in 1892 the Spanish – German brand became a hit in the Madrid's high society thanks to its work with uncommon materials

as snake, crocodile and Iguana's leather; and the handmade in accessories as female bags and male luggage. This "fur fever" is the beginning of one of the most precious tradition of LOEWE the research of exotic materials to create its accessories, clothes and perfumes.

At twentieth century LOEWE started to expand their horizons and they opened two stores in Barcelona, one of the most famous Spanish cities and the iconic store located at Gran Via 8. This store is very important because many famous actors like Liz Taylor, Audrey Hepburn and Zsa Zsa Gabor (just naming some of them) and writers like Ernest Hemingway loved to visit that store every time that they could be in Madrid. Years later, Spain suffered the fascism and military government and LOEWE brought some shin in a very polemic Spain full of war and chaos with their shop windows full of color and exotic influences. That was the first visual merchandising technique. It is the selling activity with good shop windows, well decorated and full of imagination. Years later North American department stores like NEIMAN MARCUS and SAKS FIFTH AVENUE copied it.

The time goes on and LOEWE started to gain new costumers around the world. In 1985 the Spanish leather and fashion house (they incorporated a ready to wear line in 1966 for women and 1984 they incorporated men's clothing line.) decided to associate with the LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moet Hennessy) only to share the LOEWE's spirit with all the world.

Nowadays LOEWE counts with almost 160 stores around the world that sells the leather accessories, the clothing line and the perfumes (a hit in the entire world). Tradition is meaningful for LOEWE. All the accessories, clothing pieces and perfumes preserve the crafts spirit and the history of the Spanish brand. You can be sure that every item is handmade with the best materials and designed by the best designers. Its history is full of very known names in fashion business whose designs appeared in this house, like Giorgio Armani (LOEWE Hombre: the men's clothing line of the Spanish brand), Karl

Lagerfeld, Laura Biagotti and Narcizo Rodriguez. Actually the designer in chief is the Spanish Jose Enrique Oña Selfa.

Today, LOEWE works with 300 craftsmen whose goal is bring it to us the best fashion pieces in the world. Also their perfumes are the best sells in every department store in the world and the brand is a meaning of luxury and elegance.

This is the true meaning of luxury; a mix between history, class, power and tradition. Luxury is the best way to show how you really are with an accessory as a bag or an exclusive perfume. LOEWE is the best choice to show the fact about luxury, you can see in every item the tradition, the history and the well handcraft. This is my point of view about luxury.

As the students gained confidence as users of ICTs, they were encouraged to participate in the different activities in the forum autonomously and creatively. In addition to the personal blog, two different web spaces in the forum were created. One space was designed to have students work in groups to explore two main topics proposed in the forum: music and natural disasters. Students could choose one, or simply alternate and write on both. The other new space was a blog used for a weekly debate which provided students with the opportunity to select any topic of their interest, present their opinions and discuss different points of view with others.

Posted at Dec 07/2006 01:42AM:

POPULAR TUNES OF COLOMBIA

The Colombia's Music is the richest and most promising that can be found anywhere in the Hispanic-American world. Music is the art that best expresses the feelings of our people, it is also one of the element that most accurately reflects the racial and cultural attributes of our nation.

In reference to the general characteristics of the national soul, and sharply-defined variations of Pacific regions, we can cite the following predominant aspects: the first place, there is noble lyric sadness of the Andean tunes, in contrast to the joyous rhythmical ebullience of the Costal tunes. Secondly there are the psychological differences exhibited by the different regional types of Colombian men. these are demonstrated in ballads, those the districts of Antioquia, Santander, and Tolima, for example, reveal an enormous contrast in such sentiments as the idyllic sense of love, the tragic feeling of existence, and the humorous reaction to the vicissitudes of everyday existence.

As regards tradition, there are numerous examples which testify the faithful manner in which the people have preserved the literary and musical heritage of Spain. This was specially true of the "romance" literature and ballads acquired during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. these were transmitted from generation to generation, relatively unchanged, except for minor modifications which resulted from adjustment to differing cultural and geographical conditions.

EXAMPLES: Three memorable examples will suffice to establish the presence of music in our country's history: "La vencedora", which resounded on the battlefield of Boyacá, "La marcha fúnebre del libertador", the noble elegy which evokes powerful emotion, and "the Himno de la Nueva Granada", which was probably sung by the parents of our grandparents. As a logical consequence of Colombia's racial composition, the country's popular music clearly shows three influences: indigenous, Spanish and negro.

Part of this information was acquired in the book about the introduction to the noble song book of Colombia by Joaquin Piñeros

As the illustration shows students wrote an expository text to tell the story of Bambuco, which is a kind of Colombian

music. They provided clear information about the history, the tradition and meaning of this music in a way that was richer than in the first writing exchanges of the students. The preparation of the texts by students also required from them reading and searching for information about national history, local culture and traditions. It made them aware of the value of telling other people, from other parts of the world, about their own idiosyncrasies and cultural traditions. This cross-cultural experience contributed to raising awareness about one's own culture as well as others' cultures.

The following example shows students' participation in the weekly debates that were related to the influence of current music on people's behaviours. Because the debates are a different type of asynchronous dialogue from the personal chats within the personal blog pages, the postings were presented with the most recent postings first, in common with the conventional practice for forum blogs elsewhere on the Internet.

Posted at Oct 28/2006 01:02AM:

JamesM5SJHSD: Hi, I'm James from St. Johns High School in Scotland, I feel a bit hesitant about commenting on this debate seen as firstly I can't speak spanish and therefore don't know or understand the music you are talking about, and secondly, because I'm not a trainee teacher. I would make a general comment by saying that music is a big thing in people's lives, some may say that it doesn't have an influence, I would disagree. If we look at battle scene's from history we will always see troops singing their national anthem in order to boost the morale of their comrades, a clear sign music affects one's psyche. An example which is closer to home would be a new mother singing a song to her baby to send

them off to sleep. Music here is having a calming effect, and I'd argue that this is another clear sign music is having a psychological effect on people.

It can be argued that if these instances show the truth, and music is having a psychological effect on people, can it not therefore have a negative psychological effect on the person who is listening to said music, if said music is of this violent type which we have discussed?

I am however a supported of civil liberties, and would say that its somewhat a matter of personal choice. No one should tell you what to listen to, or what to do, its a step closer to the nanny state. However, when we look at songs like the one quoted in this form (el doctor), and consider the evidence I have put forward, I ask you, do we really want children as young as 12 to be unconsciously fed bad messages about health workers. NO!! I say be real, and whilst defending your civil liberties, CENSOR this type of material from the younger members of society, and let them have an innocent childhood just like the rest of us had!!!

James M 5 SJHSD (St. John's High School Dundee)

Posted at Oct 03/2006 08:02PM:

PILARICA: THE MUSIC MUST BE A GOOD EXPRESSION OF THE ART... IS A COMUNICATION FORM,THE MUSIC ESPRESS EACH LIFE STYLE.. AND "TELL ME WHAT DO YOU LISTEN AND I WILL TELL YOU WHO ARE YOU" SIMPLE.. I THINK THAT PEOPLE THAT ALWAYS LISTEN REGGAETON ... ONLY THINKS ON SEX... BUT IN THEIR BRAINS THERE ISN'T SOMETHING OF SENCIBILITY AND ART...LIKE POETRY ... ALTOUGH SOME SONGS OF REGGAETON HAVE A MESSAGE , AND A GOOD RHYTHM... IN THE END WE ARE LATINAMERICANS AND THIS RHYTHM IS LATIN (ALTHOUGH IT HAS SOME INFLUENCES FROM ANOTHER CONTINENTS) BUT I THINK THAT YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD LISTEN CONTRUCTIVE MUSIC

Posted at Oct 03/2006 07:57PM:

MUSIC IS CULTURE, IS ART. I LOVE THE FEELINGS YOU CAN GET WHEN YOU ARE LISTENING MUSIC, OR ON THE OTHER HAND, THE KIND OF MUSIC

YOU WANT TO LISTEN DEPENDING ON YOUR MOOD.

I'M AGREE WITH EDWARD, THE CHILHOOD HAS TO BE WATCHED BY ITS PARENTS. NOT ALL THE MUSIC IS GOOD, EVEN THOUGH, IN THIS MOMENT THERE ARE MORE BAD MUSIC THAN GOOD MUSIC. THE COMERCIAL WORLD JUST TRY TO SELL, NO MATTER WHAT THE HUMAN BEING THINK WHAT HE WANTS BE, AND HIS GROWING AS A BEING OF CULTURAL MAN.

IN FACT, WE HAVE TO BE CONCIEOUS , AND TRY TO NOT HELP THAT COMERCIAL WORLD, LOOKING FOR ANOTHER KIND OF MUSIC, WHICH BASE DOESN'T BE SEX OR BOYS, OR RYTHMS WITHOUT MEANING. WE SHOULD LOOK FOR MUSIC THAT BELIEVE IN MAN AND HIS DIFFERENTS CULTURES AROUND THE WORLD. ON THAT WAY MAYBE CHLIDREN OF TODAY AND TOMORROW CAN BE MORE SENSIBILITIES.

Posted at Sep 29/2006 07:58PM:

JOANTHAN: also I think that the music is a form to read the world, see the violence and listen to the heart then is the music bad

Posted at Oct 03/2006 07:56PM:

GABRIEL: in this moment some singers make music for finding money and becoming famous but they don't make true music

Posted at Oct 03/2006 07:50PM:

JONATHAN: THERE ARE THINGS BAD IN THE MUSIC, AS FOR EXAMPLE THE REGETON SINGERS, AND EVERY VALLENATEROS, BECAUSE THEY ARE "GUISOS, ÑEROS AND PARACOS" ALMOST THEY DEGRADE OUR CULTURE

"Posted at Oct 03/2006 07:41PM:

Edward Murillo Moreno:

But reggaeton is not the only music genre that gives a wrong behavior impression. Excessive sexuality in popular music in divas like Britney spears, Jessica Simpson, Paris Hilton or Christina Aguilera give a new conception of feminity in girls, but in a wrong way.

Today's music shows a very wrong image to our children's behaviour and we need to educate them to listened to it and understand their inner message; don't matter if it is good or wrong.

Posted at Sep 29/2006 07:57PM:

Edna Angel: OKAY GABRIEL, I AGREE WITH YOU, IT IS TRUE, ALTHOUGH REALLY CURRENT MUSIC ARE HARMFUL FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, NOWADAYS SOME CHILDREN PREFER LISTENING TO THIS KIND OF MUSIC

Posted at Sep 29/2006 07:53PM:

JaImE tO eDwArD: Thanks for your opinion, i don't like the reggaeton i only think that is a stupid kind of music, but another people love it for something.

Posted at Sep 29/2006 07:49PM:

GABRIEL: I think that reggaeton doesn't have messages, but its rhythm is cool and nice for latin people, because reggaeton dancing is hot.

This sample was taken from the set of over 30 contributions that were posted during the two week period that the topic was open for debate, and it consists of a set of contributions from a number of Colombian trainee teachers, and a Scottish high school student of the same age. It is remarkable for the range of more or less personal vs formal postings that the contributors made, and the range of linguistic competencies that the contributors possessed. One characteristic of language classes is that students often lack the confidence to contribute. In this case, however (in common with the debates of that period), the students had opinions that they felt sufficiently strongly about that they wanted to share them, even when their language skills were relatively weak compared with their peers. Some of the idiomatic and linguistic constructs more

commonly associated with mobile phone messaging and online chatting dominated over the more conventional literary styles. This, therefore, was a conversation, a dialogue, rather than a formal presentation or prepared narrative material. In this sense, it pushed the linguistic competence of the contributors in a different, but equally authentic direction.

Taken as a whole, the contributions by the students showed a clear progression in the extent of the language used, both in volume and in complexity. They are accompanied by interactions from native language peers, and demonstrate a growing competence and confidence in the use of the non-native language. The increasing use of language associated with an increase in the breadth of content can be seen in the contributions quoted above as they are presented in chronological order. For any one student, an increase in language complexity is also discernable over the study period.

The contents of the examples presented above support our discussion about the use of a virtual forum to enhance a participatory way to explore the language curriculum. The pedagogical experience planned and organized by the teachers and students required thoughtful action and guidance. It differs from a traditional language curriculum focused on learning language structures in the way that a participatory curriculum includes activities that engage teachers and learners in challenging learning situations that promote their language development and their learning to use the ICTs to communicate with other students in another part of the world. It is also evident that students

explore contents beyond the basic input provided by their teacher in a regular class.

Conclusions

The regular interactions of students and teachers from the two groups have fostered the creation of communities of interest and learning. Such communities have been consolidated thanks to the writing exchanges based on cultural issues such as festivals, places, celebrations, music and the like as well as on personal interests. This learning community has promoted collaborative language learning and democratic participation on the part of students. Collaborative, because the teacher also became a member of the community whose role was to mentor students by providing them feedback in terms of language use and how to manipulate technology. Democratic, because students were allowed to choose the topics they wanted to discuss and the activities they wanted to carry out in the virtual space. This type of learning community does not just happen, however. It needs to be nurtured and supported with activities that both encourage learning and motivate participation.

Technology was the principal element that permitted the creation of this kind of community. The learning environment empowered and encouraged Colombian students to use the target language for real communicative purposes. This new learning environment raised curiosity and motivation for students to self-express and to write their own stories to be shared with someone else who was interested in reading them, so that writing was not a

mechanical practice to be graded by the teacher, but instead actually the creation of meaning. In the attempt to communicate students sought strategies to overcome their language difficulties while at the same time, they gained more understanding of the language. Students' writing increased appreciably, since they were motivated to write for an audience which, in most cases, was interested in reading their texts. Therefore, students used language with real communicative purposes.

This pilot study has therefore demonstrated that this type of community does seem to promote language learning. One of the most powerful insights of this study is that this environment is student centered and owned; therefore students are empowered to use their own voice to say whatever is important to them. They feel freedom to tell the stories that cannot be normally told in the traditional language classroom as classes are restricted to specific contents, times and schedules. From a teachers' perspective, however, this type of learning community does not simply happen. It requires additional work on the part of the teacher to promote interactions and to catalyse the formation of the community. Students with limited access to the Internet away from the main university computer labs might be at a disadvantage, although students in this case tended to seek Internet cafés to continue to post outside classroom hours.

This pilot study will be followed up with a more in-depth consideration of the tangible outcomes and evidence of language use, and content of the writing exchanges, perhaps utilizing the "thinking together" techniques pioneered by Mercer (2003).

In particular, the on-going study will seek to explore the extent to which the on-line experience is stretching students to use language that is increasingly more powerful than that covered up to that point by the student in their language curriculum.

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