

Teaching Reading Comprehension in English in a Distance Web-Based Course: New Roles for Teachers*

La enseñanza de la comprensión de lectura en inglés en un curso a distancia en la red: nuevos roles para los docentes

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Distance web-based learning is a popular strategy in ELT teaching in Colombia. Despite of the growth of experiences, there are very few studies regarding teachers' participation in these courses. This paper reports preliminary findings of an on-going study aiming at exploring the roles that a teacher plays in an EFL reading comprehension distance web-based course. Data analysis suggests that teachers play new roles solving technical problems, providing immediate feedback, interacting with students in a non traditional way, providing time management advice, and acting as a constant motivator. The authors conclude that EFL teachers require training for this new teaching roles and the analysis of web-based distance learning environments as an option under permanent construction that requires their active participation.

Key words: Distance web-based learning, reading comprehension, EFL, teachers' roles, technology.

El aprendizaje a distancia con apoyo de la red se ha convertido en una estrategia popular en la enseñanza del inglés en Colombia. A pesar de ser una experiencia en crecimiento, hay pocos estudios relacionados con la participación del docente en estos cursos. Este artículo presenta los hallazgos preliminares de un estudio que busca explorar los roles que un docente de inglés como lengua extranjera tiene en un curso de competencia lectora en un programa a distancia basado en la red. El análisis de los datos sugiere que los docentes enfrentan aspectos como la resolución de problemas técnicos, la provisión inmediata de retroalimentación, la interacción con los estudiantes en una forma no tradicional, la asesoría en el manejo del tiempo y el ser un motivador constante. Los autores concluyen que los docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera requieren formación para estos nuevos roles y el análisis de ambientes de aprendizaje a distancia como una opción en permanente construcción que demanda su participación activa.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje a distancia en la red, comprensión de lectura, inglés como lengua extranjera, roles del docente, tecnología.

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Introduction

The use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in teaching is growing dramatically. One of the major forms of ICTs use is distance web-based teaching and learning. Some empirical studies claim the effectiveness of web-based teaching and learning due to the fact that students' satisfaction, performance, attitudes and scores are similar to a traditional classroom environment. Nevertheless, Phipps and Merisotis (1999) argue that "it may not be prudent to accept these findings at face value" (p. 3).

We decided to explore how distance web-based learning and classroom-based learning influenced students' reading comprehension in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a graduate program at the Universidad de Antioquia taking into consideration the growing demand of the academic community to access higher education programs that are not restricted to the traditional classroom (Wallace, 2003) and the need to learn English, mainly in our university setting. In this paper, we report the preliminary findings regarding the roles EFL teachers may play using a distance web-based approach to teach reading comprehension. From the literature reviewed, we found a quite limited amount of information about those roles. In the case of Colombia, there are no publications documenting any study on this topic.

The paper contains four parts: one, the literature review; two, the methodology; three, the preliminary findings; and four, the conclusion and implications. Our aim is to shed light on the use of web-based teaching in reading comprehension in EFL to contribute to the improvement of English teaching in our country.

The first author of this paper was the instructor in the web-based course. The second author played the role of methodological advisor in the case study. She is a teacher educator and mentor of

the research group conducting the study. She also participated in the course design.

Literature Review

In this section, we will focus on two main theoretical topics: web-distance learning and reading comprehension in a foreign language. In web-based distance learning, we will provide some basic definitions of terms and introduce the roles of teachers in this learning environment. In the second topic, we will define reading comprehension and address the processes of efficient reading comprehension.

Web-Distance Learning

Literature in education has different names to refer to the use of computers and internet to support teaching and learning. Web-based learning, e-learning, computerized-learning, on-line learning or virtual learning are some of the most popular ways to call the instructional procedure that uses ICTs. In this paper, we will use the term "distance web-based learning" to refer to a course taught through the web and that does not have face-to-face contact between the teacher and the students. According to Sampson (2003) distance learning referred mainly to students' independent learning at a distance, developed through the means of self-study texts, non-contiguous communication, and not controlled by the teacher. Keegan (1990) defined distance learning by identifying five main elements: the separation of teacher and learner; the influence of an educational organization; the use of technical media (usually print) to unite the teacher and learner and to carry educational content; the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue; and the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes. Holmberg (1986) explained how "distance education includes the various forms of study at all levels

which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organization” (p. 26).

Distance web-based learning benefits from the opportunities and advantages the World Wide Web has to offer. According to Lawhead et al. (1997),

The new technology involves uses of the Web and hypermedia that have shown promise in providing classroom instruction superior to the current methods of instructional delivery. Innovative use by educators has allowed the Web to be used to develop viable alternatives for distance education. (p. 1)

The implementation of web resources has provided answers to the criticisms aimed at distance learning, mainly the lack of interaction between teacher and students. Lawhead et al. (1997) explained how

The many tools readily available in most browsers allow users to interact using many different modalities. These can be either be teacher initiated or student initiated. The richness of the Web provides the distance learner with an aspect that may often be lost in traditional distance education delivery modes. (p. 2)

The increasing implementation of distance web-based learning programs imposes the necessity of identifying new roles of teachers and students. The identification of these roles may start by recognizing characteristics that are common to face to face classroom and web based teaching. This is how, Shelton, Lane, and Waldhart (1999) suggested that the role of classroom teachers is more effective as facilitator than as knowledge dispenser. The role as facilitator is essential for a web-based teacher. Easton (2003) stated that web-based teaching is not about “putting up a website or turning one’s lectures into text and then stepping back” (p. 89) because this approach is not effective for learning. Wallace (2003) made explicit the growing interest in understanding the role of the

web-based teacher in courses in which communication and interaction among students and teacher is a must. She states how web-based teachers should be able to “create presence in online discussions through a number of techniques including facilitating discussions, providing direct instruction, and giving feedback to students” (p. 260). Salmon (2000) presented a model for teaching and learning in web-based environments that includes five components: access and motivation; web-based socialization; information exchange; knowledge construction; and, development.

Berge and Collins (1995) stated that the qualities of a web-based teacher are: written presentation skills, technical competencies, virtual management techniques, and the ability to engage students in virtual communication. Wallace (2003) described what people believe are obvious tasks for the web-based teacher: designing the course materials, interacting with students, giving feedback and assessing students’ work. She explained that tasks such as class discussions, small group activities and lectures may not be so obvious in the web-based environment, but they were necessary in the teaching process. Berge (1995), Paulsen (1995), and Mason (1991) agreed on three basic roles for teachers in a web-based environment. Organizational: refers to what the teacher should do in order to manage logistics of the course such as instructional procedures for registration, dates of assignments and tests, deadlines for tasks, and so forth. Social: encompasses interaction and communication. Pedagogical or intellectual: relates to create ways for delivering the course content and supporting students’ learning. Berge (1995) identified an additional role for the teacher as skillful in technical knowledge. This technical knowledge means that the teacher should be able to assist students in the use of computers and web resources.

Offir, Barth, Lev and Shteinbok (2003) illustrated six different roles for teachers in web-based environments. Social: means that the teacher should be able to create a positive atmosphere and support students' motivation students through the course; procedural: requires the teacher's willingness to provide information regarding administrative and technical issues; expository: includes the teachers' skill to present content; explanatory: considers the teacher's ability to elicit students' questions and participation in the different topics of the course; cognitive task engagement: refers to the teacher's need to promote students' involvement in discussions and tasks for understanding content; learning assistance: consist of the teachers' ability to support students' learning through interaction. Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples and Tickner (2001) saw teachers' roles in web-based environments: (1) as facilitator, assisting students in web-based activities for learning; (2) adviser- counselor, offering advice to help students through the development of the course, (3) assessor, providing grades, feedback and validating students' work, (4) researcher, producing new knowledge for enriching the course content; (5) content facilitator, making course content accessible; (6) technologist, supporting students' choices and work with technology; (7) designer, creating tasks and activities to promote learning.

One of the most popular options to develop web-based distance courses is the use of course management systems (CMS). According to Cole and Foster (2008), these were web applications that allow teachers to create a course web site and provide access to only enrolled students. The systems not only can offer "a wide variety of tools that can make your course more effective", but also "provide an easy way to upload and share materials, hold online discussions and chats, give quizzes and surveys, gather and review assignments, and record grades" (p. 1). One of the most popular CMS used in Colombia is

MOODLE. Universities, schools, businesses and individual teachers prefer this open source CMS in order to enhance learning with technology resources.

Regarding the specific use of the MOODLE for language learning, Ardila and Bedoya (2006) described its pedagogical applications in a contrastive grammar course at the Universidad de Antioquia. They concluded that using this type of learning environment has various benefits for students such as "promoting abilities and skills that allow students to self-construct knowledge through collaborative work; search and self-discovery skills; and the access to multiple and different sources of information" (p. 199).

Reading Comprehension in Foreign Languages

Dubin and Bycina (1991) defined reading in foreign language as a selective process taking place between the reader and the text, in which background knowledge and various types of language knowledge interact with information in the text to contribute to text comprehension. Alyousef (2005) expanded the definition for reading. He describes it as an interactive process that takes place between a reader and a text and that leads to automaticity, or reading fluency. The reader and the text interact dynamically as he/she tries to elicit the meaning. In reading comprehension, various kinds of knowledge are used: linguistic or systemic knowledge as well as schematic knowledge.

Alyousef (2005) identified six general skills and knowledge areas necessary for reading comprehension: automatic recognition skills; vocabulary and structural knowledge; formal discourse structure knowledge; content/world background knowledge; synthesis and evaluation skills/strategies; metacognitive knowledge; and skills monitoring. Grabe and Stoller (2002) classified two different processes for skilled readers: lower-level

processes, which are associated to vocabulary and grammar recognition when reading; and higher level processes, which are comprehension, schemata and interpretation of a text. These authors said that a fluent reader may need the combination of lower and higher level processes, otherwise his/her reading skills may not be as efficient and reliable as they should be.

Block (1986) found that more successful readers use general strategies such as anticipating content, recognizing text structure, identifying main ideas, using background knowledge, monitoring comprehension, and reacting to the text as a whole. Less successful readers relied on local strategies such as questioning the meaning of individual words and sentences, seldom integrating background knowledge with the text, and not focusing on main ideas. Singhal (2001) concluded that successful readers tend to use cognitive, memory, metacognitive, and compensation strategies far more than less proficient readers. Less successful readers generally focused on local concerns such as grammatical structure, sound-letter correspondence, word meaning, and text details. Saricoban (2002) examined the strategy use of post-secondary ESL students and found that the successful readers engaged in predicting and guessing activities, made use of their background knowledge related to the text's topic, guessed the meaning of unknown words, and skimmed and scanned the text. Less successful readers focused on individual words, verbs in particular.

Reading Comprehension and ICTs

Reading and reading instruction are redefined through the use of internet and other ICTs as new literacies (Leu, 1997; Leu & Kinzer, 2000; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Cammack, 2004). Leu et al. (2004) stated that teachers will find as a challenge guiding students' learning in information

environments because they are richer and more complex than the traditional printed material. These new environments also bring richer and more complex learning opportunities for students and teachers themselves. The conceptual transition from foundational literacies (Leu et al., 2004) to new literacies makes teachers and teacher educators ask themselves whether the new literacies are "traditional skills being used in new environments" (Boling, 2008, p. 90). We believe that these new literacies require a new view of reading and teaching reading in EFL. As Boling (2008), citing Lemke (1998), stated it "In today's information-rich, Digital Age society, being literate involves much more than simply being able to read and write the written language" (p. 95). However, a more thorough review of the emerging literature in the field goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Context of the Study

In 1997, the Universidad de Antioquia issued an internal language policy to promote foreign language learning among students, faculty, and staff. The promotion of foreign language learning aimed at increasing students' and faculty's opportunities for accessing cutting-edge scientific information, applying to scholarships, pursuing graduate studies, and expanding their cultural and personal horizons, among others. Moreover, the policy targeted the expansion of the university's contact with the international academic community. As part of the policy, students in undergraduate and graduate programs had to show proficiency in certain skills in a foreign language. Although the majority of students choose English due to its importance, students may also certify their proficiency in French, Italian, German, or Portuguese. Italian and Portuguese are very popular languages because many students believe these languages are easier than English. In the case of the Law School, students and professors favor learning of

English and Italian because most of the literature in the field is written in these languages.

The language policy stated that undergraduate students need to certify reading comprehension in a foreign language to obtain their degrees; graduate students in *Especializaciones*¹ have to certify reading comprehension to be admitted to their second semester; master's programs' students need to demonstrate reading comprehension skills in the admission and listening comprehension before completing their degree; and doctoral students have to demonstrate skills in reading comprehension to be admitted and listening and speaking abilities to register for the third semester. It is important to clarify that students and faculty have the opportunity to take courses at no cost or to take a test to demonstrate the skills. In order to assist the academic community in the fulfillment of the requirements, the Escuela de Idiomas designed courses for the different needs of the students.

Although we have gained experience in the teaching of these skills, our main challenge comes from the growing demand for English courses. The most recent academic undertaking in the reading comprehension area originated in the need to provide English reading comprehension courses for a distance web-based program in the School of Veterinary Medicine. As a response to that need, we designed the course described in this paper. It has been offered to graduate students since 2007. However, this experience has not been analyzed systematically in order to improve the course. This motivated our case study.

¹ *Especialización* (specialization) is a graduate program that lasts two or three semesters. Its objective is to provide students with up-dated information to improve their professional practice.

The Reading Comprehension Course

The web-based distance course and the classroom-based reading comprehension courses have the same syllabus. Five professors participated in the design of the activities for the CMS Moodle course. The authors of this paper were part of the designing team.

The course encompasses 5 units aiming at developing reading comprehension abilities in students using Moodle as a learning platform. Each unit has four components: (1) a set of videos, audios, power point presentations, web-sites and texts designed to provide explanations and examples about the content of the unit; (2) a group of exercises for students to development their reading skills; (3) a test for assessing students' development of reading skills; and (4) some resources for students to communicate with the teacher, such as discussion forums, wiki, and chats. The course was 14 weeks long. Every class has around 40 students registered.

Since 2009, graduate students have had the opportunity to choose between a traditional course taught in a classroom and a web-based distance course. In this study, the same teacher was in charge of the classroom-based course and the distance web-based course. We decided to have the same instructor for both courses in order to avoid the possible differences in the development of the courses due to the teachers' personality or teaching methodology.

Methodology

Our general framework in this study is the view of teachers as researchers (Freeman, 1998). We carried out the exploration of the impact of distance web-based learning and classroom-instruction on the development of reading comprehension in a graduate course using an exploratory case study (Cresswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Tellis,

1997; Yin, 2003). The research design included Yin (2003) and Creswell (2007) approaches to case studies. We chose case study methodology because it allowed us to consider personal insights from the students and the teacher as well as documents and data records from a learning platform. Additionally, a case study allowed us to approach data from an interpretive point of view (Merriam, 1998) including the constant involvement of participants (Willis, 2007).

Participants

Participants in the study were graduate students registered in an English reading comprehension course and their professor. The original class was composed of 38 individuals registered in different *especializaciones* in the Faculty of Law at the Universidad de Antioquia. All of them were involved in the practice of Law in areas such as criminal law, family law, and administrative law. The student group consisted of 25 Colombian female students and 13 male students between the ages of 23 and 49.

Although the program is open to graduates of any law university program, most of them are alumni from Universidad de Antioquia. From the initial group admitted, 29 students completed the course requirements. During the development of the 5 units, 9 students withdrew from the course because they took the proficiency exam and obtained a passing grade. They felt that after having fulfilled the requirement of the certification they had no need to stay in the course. One student failed.

The first author of this paper was the instructor in the web-based EFL reading comprehension course. He has been an English teacher for 12 years, mainly in EFL classroom-based courses. He has taught reading comprehension for 6 years, but it was only until 2007 that he had the opportunity to become a distance web-based teacher. He had no further training to do so. He had only his per-

sonal experience and motivation as an enthusiast of ICTs because he was once enrolled in an undergraduate program in journalism.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data presented here were gathered through data records in the CMS Moodle, focus group sessions, in-depth interviews of two key respondent students and the teacher, and the teacher's journal. Data were collected in the second academic semester (July-December) of 2009.

The purpose of each instrument is explained below:

Data records in the CMS Moodle: we analyzed the course content organization, evaluations, assignments, forums and chats sessions, as well as the e-mail exchanges that occurred between the teacher and the students. The course content in the platform, assignments and evaluations were presented in English. Students used Spanish in the forums, chats and e-mail communication with the teacher. They chose their native tongue because they found that their proficiency in English was not enough to express their opinions, ask questions or request clarifications and explanations. The teacher accepted Spanish as the means of communication to facilitate the learning process. The course content, readings and exercises were presented in English.

Focus groups sessions: we invited the students registered in the course to participate in focus groups sessions to comment on their academic experience in the course. The guiding questions for this instrument related to the positive and negative aspects of the course, the content, evaluation, use of the platform, interaction with the teacher, and their suggestions to improve the course. The two groups were scheduled at different times so that students could choose the best alternative for them. We selected this technique because it allows groups

to share insights about a given experience or topic, facilitates sharing ideas among participants, and gives voice to individual opinions (Debus, 1990; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Palmer, 1994). The sessions were conducted in Spanish because the students did not feel comfortable discussing in English the issues proposed. These sessions were audiotaped and transcribed using regular orthographic transcription. We tested our interpretation and conclusions of the issues discussed in the focus groups sessions through member checks (Angen, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This preliminary analysis with students allowed us to validate our on-going analysis.

In-depth interviews: we scheduled in-depth interviews (Allmark et al., 2009; Kvale, 1996, 2007; McNamara, 2009) with two students we selected as key respondents: the one who obtained the best score and the one who expressed the highest number of difficulties in the course. We used this technique to explore in more details the students' perceptions about the platform, their motivation to be part of the course, their reading comprehension improvement, and the advantages and disadvantages of this learning modality. In these interviews we also used member checks. The interviews were audiotaped. Additionally, we had an in-depth interview with the teacher to clarify his perceptions about the course and the roles he played to triangulate them with the information gathered from his teaching journal. All the interviews were conducted in Spanish.

The teacher's journal: the teacher kept a journal to record his thoughts and reflections along the course in order to construct an academic view of his practice (Bailey, 1990; Jeffrey & Hadley, 2002; McDonough, 1994). We used this technique to understand the instructor's point of view, the challenges, and roles he experienced in teaching reading

comprehension under this learning environment. The teacher wrote his journal in English.

Six members of the research team participated in the data analysis, but only two wrote this paper. Researchers did individual readings of the data to identify patterns and themes in the transcripts. Then, these notes were compared in a researchers' group meeting to code the data. We constantly compared and contrasted the data to construct the categories. We used researchers' triangulation and data triangulation to validate the data (Freeman, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We performed researchers' triangulation in the research group meetings where the authors of the paper compared our interpretations of the data with our peer researchers. For data triangulation, the focus groups sessions, interviews and the teachers' journal gave us a recurring perspective and complementary aspects of the issues addressed.

For this paper, the authors translated into English the excerpts selected from the data to support the findings. We shared our translation of the texts with our colleagues to make sure our interpretation was accurate.

Findings

The data analysis allowed us to identify some roles for the teacher. We define as roles the characteristics and teaching behavior expected from the teacher. Those behaviors may demand from him/her certain skills or training. The lack of preparation to play those roles may originate in lack of knowledge, lack of skills, limited experience or insecurity, among others. In these situations teachers may become creative and resourceful finding an effective solution or may feel stressed and frustrated. The best alternative to face teaching challenges is to learn from the own experience and share the learning outcomes with peer teachers. From the data analysis performed, we

identified the following 5 roles a regular English teacher encounters when he/she starts teaching in a web-based course as categories.

1. *Technical knowledge expert*: in this category we place knowledge related to computers, the web, and the learning platform. In our study, we assumed that students registered in the reading comprehension course had the necessary skills to accomplish the objectives proposed because they were all active professionals in a graduate program. However, the reality of the course showed big differences in the skills, familiarity and confidence to use computers and the web among students. The main factor in this difference was age. Students who were in their mid and late twenties and thirties experienced less difficulty than those older. The teacher journal shows several entries in which he claims that he spent a considerable amount of time helping students with basic questions about their computer configuration, how to navigate the Web, and how to access the learning platform. The problems with the platform use resurfaced even after having had an introductory training course to use Moodle. The following journal excerpts show the teachers' challenge: "I had to pay more attention to difficulties related to the use of the platform rather than focusing on the language learning itself".

Additionally, the teacher said:

I realized that the teacher not only needs to be able to help students through content and grade their activities, but also be able to provide technical support to students' on the different issues concerning the platform. I realized that a teacher should have a good knowledge of the platform so he/she may be able to help students through different situations that are common in the development of the course. A lot of the questions coming from students are not related to content or exercises, but about some technical difficulties students have during the development of the course.

The teacher believes that some adequate training in technical aspects is not commonly seen as a requirement. He says, "I guess this is an activity that is not taken into account when you become a virtual teacher; however, it is an important one, as it makes students' work in the course easier".

In the focus group sessions some students reported having difficulties to understand the dynamics of the learning platform. We highlight the opinions of three of them. One male student commented on his frustration with some of the exercises assigned. The program allowed students to correct a wrong answer, but he could not change it. He asked the teacher for help. Likewise, a female student said that she had problems sending her answers in one of the exercises. To resolve them, she wrote an e-mail to the teacher explaining the situation and to get extra time to do send homework to him. Another male student said that he used to do the exercises on the platform near the deadline because he was usually pretty busy with his legal work. On various occasions he had to file lawsuits that kept him so engaged he had very little time to work on the course. After several unsuccessful trials, he often did not know what to do when the platform did not work well. He said, "I felt desperate because it was the last minute and I had to send whatever, if it let me do it. Many times it denied access to the new tries and they were not open. I had to call the teacher and ask him what to do".

In our study, we were particularly lucky because the teacher had enough technical knowledge to help students with their problems. He was also patient and clear in the explanations he provided to students. They valued that help and considered it one of the best aspects of the course. Most EFL teachers use computers effectively and may be able to manage a learning platform, but some technical problems may go beyond our regular training. If we do not solve them, they may affect the learning

and teaching processes and cause some distress for students. This situation may be particularly often in our educational contexts because very few institutions have a computer technician or engineer to provide assistance.

2. *Immediate feedback provider*: Although the learning platforms may be used to assess students' performance and provide immediate feedback in activities such as multiple-choice exercises or tests, video conferences, chats, and forums, these options may not work for all the learning tasks. For our reading comprehension course, we designed some exercises and tests that required open answers or that required some argumentation from students. These activities were not graded automatically by MOODLE. They became part of the teacher's tasks in the course. Even if we realized that it gave the teacher some extra work, we agreed on doing it to have a better picture of the students' reading comprehension process. The teacher wrote in his journal that "being a virtual teacher requires a lot of time dedicated to the course. It is necessary to review constantly what students are doing, the difficulties they are having and think about different strategies for getting them to participate in the course". In the in-depth interview, the teacher said that the greatest difference between a classroom course and a web-based distance course was error correction: "I found correcting students complicated at the beginning. Finding some language clear enough to help them understand their mistakes and correct them" took him a while.

As the teacher had other academic commitments besides the course, he did not send his corrections and feedback as promptly as students expected it. In fact, many of them did assume that the platform was programmed to correct every single activity. That delayed the provision of feedback. Many students said they felt frustrated when they did not obtain immediate feedback from the

teacher, even if they knew he could not be in touch with them 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Regarding this issue, one student expressed his opinion in the focus group session:

Some of my classmates did not take the virtual course because they needed... uh, if they had any question, who would solve it? I had the same concern, but once I took the course I realized that the teacher's guidance was excellent. Well, I would say that he did not solve it immediately because it is impossible for him to be connected 24 hours, but his support was very important for me. One asked him anything and he took one or two days at most.

Two students stated in the focus group session that one of the main differences between the web-based course and the classroom-based course was the feedback students received. One of them said: "In the classroom course, you know the mistakes or the teacher tells you it's like this or it's not like that. In the other course, you ask for an explanation, but not all the time. If [the answer] is wrong, you let it go".

The other one commented that she would change the grading system. She said, "I'd like either to have everything graded by the system, but providing feedback about correct answers, or everything graded by the teacher, even if we have to wait".

About the students' anxiety to get immediate feedback, the teacher wrote on his journal:

Students seemed to be very worried when they finished an exercise and they did not find an automatic grade. They immediately wrote an e-mail or a note in the forum asking why they did so badly in the exercises if they thought they were doing O.K. When they received an answer with an explanation, they felt relieved.

After analyzing the students' opinions and the teacher's reflection, we concluded that teachers and program designers need to work closely to be able to make the necessary adjustments to provide the feedback or assessment students and teachers

would like to have. We also believe that students may require some additional training in the academic and technical possibilities of a web-based course so that they do not feel frustrated or disappointed about the quality and promptness of feedback.

3. *Interlocutor in non traditional student-teacher communication:* Interaction in the Web is definitely very different from teacher-students face-to-face encounters. Seeing the person to whom one talks makes a difference for many people as it has advantages and disadvantages. In classroom-based instruction, students and teachers establish a relationship based on meeting each other. Teachers usually identify each learner and know the particularities of his/her learning process. Students learn to relate to classmates and to the teacher. The class may exchange ideas, ask and answer questions, and monitor learning. However, some students do not feel comfortable sharing their questions or showing lack of understanding on a topic. Chats, forums, and e-mails may facilitate communication in web-based learning, but students had diverse opinions about the new type of interaction proposed in the web-based course. In our case, students tended to avoid displaying their learning process. This finding is similar to the experience Boling (2008) described for her class. She reported that her students hesitated to use blogs and other forms of online public communication with their own students. Some thinking about it allowed her to conclude that "online forms of public writing could still fall under the scrutiny and judgment of teachers and classmates" (p. 93). In our study, some students liked the possibility of saving face as they did not have to expose themselves asking questions, being corrected or acknowledging their lack of understanding in front of their peers, as it happens in a face-to-face classroom interaction. A female student referred to this saying:

In a face to face course you can't tell the teacher, "I don't understand the texts, so please repeat that" because your classmates get bored and say, "who is she? Is she the owner of the class?"

In the Web course you have that individual rapport between the teacher and the student.

The teacher commented on this face saving resource in his teaching journal. He believes that:

Students do not use the forums. It seemed to be a more complicated solution to communicate with me. Besides, some students have the feeling that some other students may have a higher level of proficiency because they participate in English in the chats, even if this is not a requirement. Those who feel insecure would use e-mail rather than forums and chats. E-mail seemed a quicker way to have an answer from the teacher, and they didn't have to expose themselves to the other classmates.

Some students found the web-based course as a more personalized learning experience. One male student said,

Whenever I have a doubt, the teacher always answers back trying to solve it while in a classroom, one may find it difficult to, let's say, ask a question, you know, or to make a suggestion. It is easier through the internet.

For the teacher, the web-based course limited his interaction with students. His idea of effective interaction included meeting the person or at least being able to connect a name with a face. Even if he had constant communication with some of his students, he found very difficult to respond just to a name or even to a picture because some of them did not use a picture to identify themselves. In some of the journal entries he said,

I don't have the possibility to interact with students as I have used to. I only have the opportunity get to know the students through the virtual environment. There are some students that do not participate either for technological reasons, they don't know how to use the platform) or because they really don't think that the teacher's guidance is necessary. That's why I considered

necessary to be available for students in an advisory session. I thought students would like the idea of having someone helping them with some of their difficulties, at least the ones they considered as a problem to continue in the course.

Being a good teacher meant to him making sure students felt the teacher's presence and support and that definitely meant some face-to-face rapport at some point in the course. He stated that: "It is not enough to answer e-mails or participate in the forums. You need to be in contact with students as much as possible so that students feel they have a teacher in the course". He also wrote:

I must say that the virtual environment limits student-student and students- teacher interactions. Although students have a lot ways to communicate or to express what they are feeling, they don't seem to be comfortable to express their feelings using the tools the platform provides... I still believe there are many students who are too "quiet", those students you never know what they are doing. I have the feeling virtual students are not quite willing to participate; they are more concerned on completing the exercises and finishing their activities.

This non traditional interaction imposed by the web-based environment represented a benefit for students as they felt they had more interaction and feedback from the teacher in this course than in any other classroom-based course. However, for the teacher, it represented some source of anxiety because he could not establish the same rapport he was traditionally used to have with his students. This journal entry reflects his initial discomfort with the interaction he had to use in the course, but how he adjusted to the new condition by the midterm:

A simple detail such as uploading a student's picture for personalizing his/her profile in the course, becomes an important issue for identifying students. It was easier for me to remember students who had a picture than those who did not. Special features in the pictures, faces or colors help you remember their

names. As the course goes on, you focus more on the language. At this time of the course, identity is not an issue anymore.

4. *Time Management Advisor*: Many of the students had not studied English for a long time and mentioned that their only motivation to take the course was to obtain the mandatory certification. All of them reported time management as the most difficult part of the course. Two reasons seem to motivate them to assert this: One, the amount of work expected from them in the course; and two, their extremely busy schedule in the graduate program. The difficulties to cope with the course tasks and tests often became a source of stress for students. Regarding the amount of work, the teacher wrote: "some students joked about being in a graduate program English instead of being in a graduate program in law".

The teacher has an additional explanation for their problem to meet the deadlines. He thinks that it may be a consequence of a cultural phenomenon. He wrote in his diary:

I don't know if cultural reasons or the design of the course make students leave all the activities for the last minute. They ask for a day or a two day-extension to complete the exercises. I used to think it came from their lack of experience using the Web, but as the course went on, I don't think so anymore... Students believe that exercises and activities can be activated whenever they need to, but there is no way a course like this would work. Although the course is flexible, it needs some time limits. If there are not deadlines for completing the activities, it would be impossible to handle the course.

As a consequence of the students' difficulty to manage time effectively, the teacher had to remind students about the platform possibilities, mainly to correct their answers and resend them to improve the grades. In his diary, he also said that he took advantage of the chats, forums, and e-mails to tell students how to distribute their time to accomplish

the objectives. When we designed the course, we assumed that students would devote two hours a day to the readings and tasks, but this was not true. The teacher said about it:

This is a very ambitious program taking into account that these graduate students have a lot of things to do... I wonder if all these exercises and the little time students have to dedicate to this web course are enough for developing foreign language reading comprehension.

Although web-based courses are supposed to promote the students' autonomy because they can make decisions regarding the content organization, learning pace, and resources used, the lack of adequate time management may interfere with the students' accomplishments. Very few students reported that time management was a positive aspect of this course. A male student stated that he particularly liked the course because he could commit himself to his own learning. He said, "You know you have certain time to do the exercises and that it's a must. In a classroom course, you do the exercises just because you are there and you learn something just for a moment".

5. *Constant motivator*: Some students reported that they had difficulties adjusting to the course. As mentioned above, some of them found the content distribution, the time required to do the activities, and the access to the platform as problematic issues for them. These problems affected their motivation in certain units and made them consider canceling the course as an alternative. They stayed registered because the certification in reading comprehension ability was a requirement to be part of the program in the second semester. Facing these drawbacks required a constant participation of the teacher as motivator. He had to contact students who did not participate in the chats or those who did not seem to be at the same

pace of the class. In the interview, he addressed this role saying:

I think that the virtual student is more likely to be unmotivated and to lose his/her enthusiasm in the course because he/she may not find timely answers... He/she may lose his/her interest to stay in the course. It is to the teacher to find the space to keep the students' interest in the course.

What the teacher wrote was particularly evident in the in-depth interview with the student that showed the lowest motivation in the course. She commented on her troubled contact with English and her lack of motivation to be in the course:

I have taken different English courses, but I have not finished any of them. I was ten months at the Binational Center, but I could never go beyond level 2. I have bought English courses, and last year I registered at the online course offered by SENA², but the experience wasn't good because the program was very difficult... I don't like English... I am here because it is a requirement for the *especialización*. If I didn't have to, I'd never take the course... Never.

Although she was not very motivated in the course, she admitted that the teacher's encouragement meant a lot to her. She referred to his assistance indicating that "the teacher had permanent communication with us. That sir, Jorge Hugo, was excellent. Everything we asked him... he responded immediately or the following day. Nothing was at loose ends...".

Conclusions and Implications

In this paper we have explored how teaching a reading comprehension course using a distance

² SENA is the national learning service institute in Colombia that offers vocational and technical training for students that cannot enter higher education. For the last four years, this institution has offered free massive English training as part of the national language policy for bilingualism called "Bilingual Colombia".

web-based demands new roles of EFL teachers. Even if he/she has previous training in teaching reading comprehension in classroom environments, his/her expertise may not be enough to meet the challenges of this situation. We have shown that the teacher has to play some roles additional to the ones he/she has in a traditional classroom. These roles as technical knowledge expert, immediate feedback provider, interlocutor in non traditional student-teacher communication, time management advisor, and constant motivator are a challenge for regular EFL teachers, and even for those who have specific training in the use of learning platforms or the web to teach English.

As the use of the web-based distance programs in teaching English is expanding, we have a first implication. Teacher education and professional development programs should include a training component that prepares teachers to be and teachers to face the challenges of these new alternatives of teaching and learning. This means that we need to expand the view of the teachers as acquainted with technology and promote their view as efficient users of the technology for pedagogical purposes. Leu and Kinzer (2000) sees this challenge related to the need to see literacy and literacy instruction from a new perspective as reading and ICTs converge more and more often. By the same token, the new roles for teachers presented in this paper have a second implication. EFL teachers, teachers to be, and teacher educators should be aware of the fact that these roles are necessary because there is no CMS or web-based program that fulfills the particular need of every context. Under this view of technology as a tool under permanent construction, and not as a panacea, teachers play different roles, but they must have a word in the design and evaluation of distance web-based programs and materials. To achieve this goal, a different training is required and that is a permanent challenge for everyone involved in the teaching and learning of English. We have just taken

the first step to explore this area. We hope to have more studies expanding EFL teachers' knowledge regarding the use of computers in reading comprehension.

In a further phase of the study, we expect to refine the existing methodology to teach reading comprehension in English to graduate students using ICTs. We also expect to offer an improved version of the program taking advantage of the new resources that we can incorporate in Moodle.

Limitations of the Study

There are three main limitations in this study that need to be addressed. The first limitation concerns the fact that the reading comprehension certification in English is mandatory graduate for students at the Universidad de Antioquia. This issue exerted pressure on the students and affected their motivation, commitment, and anxiety to pass the course. If we had a student population that did not have to certify their proficiency in such a stressful situation, we would probably have a different response in the course.

The second limitation has to do with the students' background and field of study. It seems to be that graduate and undergraduate students of law tend to show a general rejection to the learning of foreign languages, mainly English. We base this comment on the fact that many of them request exemptions and even institute proceedings against this academic requirement. Informal conversations with colleagues from other universities confirm this argument. We need to undertake further studies of this phenomenon in our local context.

The final limitation deals with our own novice experience teaching foreign language reading comprehension in English in a web-based distance course. We are aware of the need to deepen our understanding of this learning modality to better use the CMS MOODLE.

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