Using Web-based Instruction to Promote Active Learning: Learners’ Perspectives

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ABSTRACT
This article reports classroom research on learners’ perspectives on Web-based instruction that utilizes the Blackboard course management system. The Web-based instruction aims to provide and support collaborative learning while fostering learners’ autonomy and accountability. The article also provides a description of the course design along with task-based activities. The results drawn from the questionnaires and final oral interviews show that the experience of using Web-based learning has changed the way students view the role of Internet technology in the development of their Spanish language learning. In addition to the reinforcement of learners’ writing and communication skills, Web-based learning empowers learners to be actively involved in the process and to be responsible and accountable for their own learning.

KEYWORDS
Web-based Instruction, Active Learning, Computer-mediated Communication, Learners’ Perspectives, Foreign Language Learning

INTRODUCTION
The Internet offers an effective means of opening new horizons for foreign language (FL) learning and teaching. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) through both asynchronous exchange (e.g., emails and discussion boards) and synchronous interaction in real time (e.g., chat rooms and video conferences) affords unique learning conditions for FL learners to expand the use of the target language and thus develop their communicative language skills (see, e.g., Abrams, 2003; Blake, 2000; Lee, 2002a; Pellettieri, 2000). Previous studies have documented a number of benefits that learners have gained by using online technologies (e.g., Chun & Wade, 2003; Darhower, 2002; Lee, 2002a, 2004; Sengupta, 2001; Smith, 2003; Warschauer, 2000). Online learning creates a friendly and low-anxiety learning environment that allows “all” rather than “some” students to participate (e.g., Kern, 1995; Lee, 2002a, Magnan, Farrell, Jan, Lee, Tsai, & Worth, 2003) and encourages affective support among peers to increase students’
motivation toward L2 learning (Lee, 2003; Weasenforth, Biesenbach-Lucas, & Meloni, 2002). As opposed to the traditional classroom setting in which one finds a teacher-driven approach, CMC promotes greater interaction and reduces teacher talk, while the learners equally share turns in participation (e.g., Lee, 2004; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996). Through network collaboration, learners extend their communicative abilities; they employ a wide range of discourse structures and modification devices to interact with others (e.g., Kern & Warschauer, 2000; Lee, 2002b; Smith, 2003; Sotillo, 2000; Toyoda & Harrison, 2002; Tudini, 2003). As the result of negotiated interaction, learners improve their grammatical competence (Lee, 2002a; Pellettieri, 2000) and written and oral communication skills (e.g., Abrams, 2003; Blake, 2000; Lee, 2002a; Payne & Whitney, 2002).

Given the above mentioned benefits that Internet technology has afforded FL learning, more and more instructional models and guidelines for online language learning have been created. Yet, relatively little attention has been placed on the effectiveness of Web-based instruction from learners’ perspectives (e.g., Lee, 2003, 2004; Stepp-Greany, 2002). Systematic studies on how learners perceive necessary conditions for online learning need to be carried out. Furthermore, there needs to be documentation on just how the learners’ own language learning backgrounds and experiences can change the way they view network-based instruction. By listening to the voices of learners, FL educators have the opportunity to reflect on their intended pedagogical efforts and further modify their strategies and instruction to meet the needs and interests of learners.

It is within this context that the present study explores learners’ perspectives on online-based instruction using the Blackboard course management system. The study presents findings on how learners’ roles, learning conditions, beliefs, and attitudes shape our understanding of Web-based instruction for FL acquisition. First, a theoretical framework for language learning will be discussed. Second, a design model, the participants in the project, and the technological tools and the procedures used for online activities will be described. Then, the results of the study using surveys and final oral interviews will be reported and discussed along with suggestions for future improvement and research.

**SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE LEARNING**

The primary goal of FL teaching is to create a learner-centered environment in which learners use the target language to interact with others and further develop their communicative competence. Current language instruction often goes beyond just providing comprehensible input; it also creates socially interactive contexts in which learners actively engage themselves in the learning process. Learning is viewed as processes embedded in cognitive and social contexts. Social interaction is more than the action of one person delivering information to another; rather, it shapes and constructs learning through collaborative effort and scaffolding in expert and novice interaction (Kinginger, 2001). Through socialization, learners use the target language as a cognitive tool to perform and assist each other in a shared activity (Lantolf, 2000). Importantly, collaborative scaffolding allows learners to expand their linguistic and cognitive skills to engage in problem-solv-
ing situations (e.g., negotiation of meaning and form) and knowledge building (Swain, 2000).

From a sociocultural perspective, language learning is about the understanding of learners themselves as agents whose conditions of learning affect the learning outcome (Lantolf, 2000). The degree of interaction and involvement in the shared activity depends on learners’ motives, beliefs and attitudes, and their investment in the learning situation. The quality of social interaction relies on the participants, all of whom equally contribute their time, turns, roles, and knowledge of subject matter in a shared agenda which van Lier (1996) has called “contingent interaction” (pp. 175-180). The “contingent interaction” stems from multidimensional levels—between the instructor and the learner(s) and among the learners themselves. Ohta (2000) argues that the nature of the task and the goals of the learners also affect how participants interact with each other. Tasks should expose students to a wide range of structures appropriate to their level in order to make both meaning and form connections (Skehan, 1998). In sum, learners’ linguistic, cognitive, and affective domains play a significant role in the sociocultural perspective of language learning because they affect the degree and the quality of social interaction.

Within this theoretical framework, the purpose of the project described here was to advance research that examines Web-based instruction from language learners’ perspectives. Course management systems (CMS) such as Blackboard have been widely used for FL instruction. The multichannel Web tools of CMS allow language educators to create task-based activities which promote L2 interaction and collaboration among learners (for a discussion of online task-based instruction, see Lee, 2002a). This study investigated whether participation in a one-semester network-based course of instruction affected learners’ attitudes and beliefs toward the development of their Spanish skills and the use of Internet technology.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

A total of 35 students from a state university in the northeast enrolled in two third-year Spanish courses. They were required to use the Blackboard program to support their language acquisition. A biographical survey revealed that the majority of the students enrolled in this course were either Spanish majors or minors. Most of these students had 2 or 3 years of Spanish in high school and 2 semesters of Spanish in college prior to the study. They did not have opportunities to use Spanish outside the classroom. The majority of the students had reached the intermediate level of language proficiency based on the results of the Spanish Oral Proficiency Test (SOPT) designed by the researcher. The SOPT adheres to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (for details of the test, see Lee, 2000). In terms of computer access and literacy, the majority of the students owned a computer or a laptop and had used Blackboard for their classes on campus prior to the study. Most of the students were familiar and comfortable with Internet and Web-based instruction.
Procedures
At the beginning of the semester, the researcher informed students that they were required to use Blackboard to carry out a variety of online tasks in order to develop their Spanish skills throughout the semester. For this project, Blackboard served as two major instructional tools. One was the content tool which organizes, presents, and delivers course materials using “Course Information” and “Assignments” features, and the other is the communication tool which allows all users to interact with each other in cyberspace using “Communication” and “Group Page” features of Blackboard (for more information about Blackboard, (http://blackboard.com).

The online task-based activities were scheduled in the course syllabus and were available online. Students used their email account and password to login into the course. No particular training was needed since the students were already familiar with Blackboard. To avoid the possibility of confusion and to make sure the students knew where to go to complete online assignments, the researcher demonstrated to the students the major tools they would be using. The Blackboard program maintains a relatively simple navigation interface with cross-platform compatibility. However, one of the challenges in the FL field is its use of non-Roman alphabet characters (e.g., accent marks). A list of shortcut keys for special characters in Spanish was provided to all students so that they could learn how to correctly place the accent marks in Spanish writing.

Online Essay
For each class, students wrote approximately a one-page essay to answer the open-ended questions found in the A escribir ‘to write’ folder under the “Assignment” in Blackboard. Open-ended questions were based on everyday topics, such as the role of men and women in modern society or environmental issues in Latin America. Posted online were a set of different topics, each with a dozen open-ended questions for daily essay writing (see sample essay questions in Appendix A). The students were encouraged to use a dictionary and/or online grammar reference when necessary. After completing the assignment, students sent it to the researcher via the “Digital Drop Box.” The researcher then corrected the students’ essays by writing comments and correcting mistakes on usage, vocabulary, and grammar. For instance, the researcher underlined each error and wrote the code for the correction, such as “vt” for verb tense, “voc” for wrong word, and “prep” for incorrect preposition. The assignments were then returned to the students through the “Digital Drop Box.” The students retrieved the documents and then responded to the researcher’s feedback and corrected the errors. Finally, they downloaded the revised copy and placed it in their portfolio as part of the course requirement.

Online Discussion
In addition to daily essay writing, students were required to share, discuss, and debate issues related to class readings via a chat room. The aim of online chats
was to allow students in a small group to freely express through informal social interaction their opinions and exchange ideas on the assigned topics (see sample online chat questions in Appendix B). It is extremely difficult to chat online with a group of more than three students. The researcher, therefore, divided the class into small groups. Each group consisted of three students. Each group determined the common time to be online and chatted for about an hour weekly. Students first read the topic-based questions posted in the *A charlar* ‘to chat’ folder under the “Assignment” and then logged into the “Group Page” for online exchange. Once students logged into the “Group Page,” they typed their messages and clicked to send them to their partners in the chat room. No particular instructions were given to the students, and they were encouraged to focus on the topics. At the end of each week, the researcher retrieved online discussions from the archives and sent comments and feedback to the students via the “Digital Drop Box.” The researcher used the same procedure for online essays to identify students’ mistakes. Students then made the correction as well as responded to the researcher’s questions and/or comments. Revised copies of online exchanges were placed in the students’ portfolio for the final evaluation.

**Online Grammar Practice**

Students at the intermediate level of language proficiency in Spanish often encounter difficulty understanding and using certain complex grammatical structures, such as the aspeceuctal meanings of the preterite and the imperfect and the subjunctive mood. Although Spanish grammar learning was not the major focus of this course, grammar reference and exercises related to reading and writing assignments were created and made available online for students to review and practice when needed. These exercises were placed in the *A practicar* ‘To practice’ folder under the “Assignments.” Short quizzes in class followed to check students’ progress. Significantly, students had the opportunity to apply specific grammar points to their essay writing. For instance, the expressions that require the use of the subjunctive, such as *Me parece que* … ‘It seems to me that …’ and *Vale la pena que* … ‘It is worthwhile to …’ were incorporated into essay questions and students were encouraged to use these expressions in responses to their essay.

**LEARNERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON USING THE WEB-BASED COURSE: SURVEY RESULTS**

A survey regarding students’ perspectives and attitudes toward Web-based learning was given to all students at the end of the semester. In the survey, students were asked to rank their level of satisfaction on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) “Strongly Disagree” to (5) “Strongly Agree.” Overall, the results show that students reacted positively to the inclusion of the Web-based course (see Table 1).

When asked if *Blackboard* was useful to them, most students agreed that they enjoyed using *Blackboard* and were comfortable using it (statements 1 and 3).
Students reacted positively to both essay writing and online exchange (statements 4 and 5) and they believed that online activities enhanced the development of their Spanish skills (Statement 2). The students also believed that the online essays helped them improve their writing skills (statement 6) and that the online chats helped them improve their communication skills (statement 7). In addition, students enjoyed the topics for essay writing and online discussions (statement 9). After a semester-long experience with the Web-based course, students had an upbeat attitude toward Internet technology and expressed interest in continuing to use it in the future (statement 10).

Table 1
Learners’ Perspectives of Web-based Instruction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item statements</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I believe Blackboard was useful to me</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Online activities helped me improve my Spanish skills.</td>
<td>4.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I felt comfortable using Blackboard.</td>
<td>4.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I enjoyed writing topic-based online essays.</td>
<td>4.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I enjoyed chatting online with my peers.</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I believe online essays have improved my writing skills.</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I think chatting online has enhanced my communication skills.</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Working with someone online was beneficial to me.</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I found the topics to be interesting assignments.</td>
<td>4.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I will continue to explore Internet technology beyond this course.</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LEARNERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON USING THE WEB-BASED COURSE: FINAL ORAL INTERVIEW RESULTS

In addition to the survey, a final oral interview was given to all students at the end of the semester (see interview questions in Appendix C). During the final interview, students were asked to describe their experiences with online activities and to explain the most valuable, interesting, and difficult aspects of the Web-based instruction. All the interviews were recorded for the data analysis. Analysis of the qualitative data from oral interviews revealed that the majority of students viewed the online-based learning as having a very beneficial impact on their language development. However, they made some suggestions for future improvements. The following discussion highlights important issues that learners expressed regarding the Web-based instruction for FL learning.

Beyond Language Learning: Learners’ Autonomy and Attitude Change

One of the major functions of Blackboard is supported by the content tool (e.g., “Course Document” and “Course Information” features) by which course materials are organized and presented in a logical manner in a single shared space. The
results of the study showed that easy access to all materials and tools facilitated the learning process. Most of the students quickly adapted to doing and checking their homework online. Of particular importance, they learned how to organize their work by retrieving documents from the “Digital Drop Box” and placing them into different folders, such as mis ensayos ‘my essays’ and mis charlas ‘my chats’ in Blackboard. The following comments from the oral interviews demonstrate just how much the students felt that the use of Blackboard enhanced their organizational skills and motivated them to become independent and self-directed learners:

- I’m not a very organized person. After sending and receiving so many assignments from the “Digital Drop Box,” I couldn’t find them to make revisions. Quickly I realized that I should place everything in the order so I don’t get lost. Blackboard made me organize things better.

- It is easy to get lost if you don’t know where things are. As we had to do so many things through Blackboard, I had to learn how to organize them in a logical manner for me.

Other students stated that their increased range of learning skills would help them in other classes in the future.

A few students, however, remarked that it was confusing and easy to get lost at the beginning, given the abundant information presented in Blackboard. Each document the students sent to the instructor’s “Digital Drop Box” showed the time and the date of that document. Several students had difficulty keeping up with their work and complained about the amount of work required for this course. These students often did their homework at the last minute and/or were late for the online discussions. One student admitted that he had quickly learned to organize his work by making plans and not falling behind in the course schedule. This student further explained that Blackboard forced him to be efficient and self-disciplined; he also claimed that he was not very good at technology and tended to procrastinate. These comments imply that learners’ self-sufficiency and independency play a crucial role in Web-based instruction. In other words, students need to learn to be in charge of their own learning and become actively involved in the learning process as previous studies have shown (e.g., Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999; Lee, 2002a).

Additionally, the learner-controlled networking changed the way the students viewed the role of Internet technology in their learning of Spanish. The experience of using Blackboard gave them the personal feeling of accomplishment. Students felt that the course had a very positive impact on how they perceived the online-based instruction. The following quotations drawn from the final interviews exemplify this sentiment:

- The Spanish 632 class was different from my other classes. It was interesting because before I used the network for fun but in this class I used it
everyday for homework and chats. I never thought a class on the network like this could be so effective. It was a very good experience for me and I learned to write and communicate better in Spanish.

• Blackboard allows us to use different forms of communication to study the language. We have done a lot of work for this class through the network: homework, chats, projects and I have learned a lot from my classmates. It was a surprise for me. I have achieved a lot by using Blackboard. I think we should use it for all Spanish classes.

These results confirm the increasing motivation of students and changes in attitude toward the use of technology which have repeatedly been addressed in previous studies on online-based learning (e.g., Gonzales-Bueno & Perez, 2000; Lee, 2003).

**Collaborative Learning Community: You Are Not Alone in Cyberspace**

The **Blackboard** program created an active and supportive learning environment in which students interacted socially with each other as they expanded their use of the target language beyond the classroom. Most of the students praised the unique learning community created by **Blackboard**, a community in which they learned from each other. Being able to work and share opinions with others was a valuable concomitant benefit of online exchanges. The students acknowledged that **Blackboard** made communication very efficient and effective because they were able to receive responses very quickly from their peers and constructive feedback from the instructor. The following quotation drawn from the final interviews demonstrates how one student believed that **Blackboard** became an important place for her to share and exchange ideas with others:

> The Blackboard environment was phenomenal. I knew that I had all the support from my classmates if I needed help in anything. It was very easy to communicate with them and the professor. The professor sent us many e-mails to remind us of things that we needed to do. Blackboard was a very special place for me. I knew I was not alone in cyberspace where I shared my ideas with others.

Another student enthusiastically expressed his view of the effectiveness of using email to discuss his writings with the instructor. This student further commented that the instructor played a vital role as a facilitator who provided feedback and answered questions. The involvement of the instructor fostered scaffolding through expert-novice (instructor-student) exchanges. Prompt feedback from the instructor motivated the majority of the students to make the effort to check and revise their work before and after they submitted it to the “Digital Drop Box.”

As networking has become an increasingly important medium by which FL students can engage in exchanging ideas and opinions in a low-anxiety social setting, CMC is particularly helpful to shy students as they often are too intimidated
to express themselves during a face-to-face conversation. One student during the final interview expressed her feeling of ease while being online,

As I don’t like to speak in front of people, I felt comfortable chatting with my peers online. Although I was pretty slow in composing my ideas, I did not feel nervous or pressured in the chat room. Now I’m more comfortable expressing myself in Spanish. Blackboard was very helpful and valuable for me. It motivated me to speak more in class.

Web-based learning offered a great affective support to the shy students so they could carry out the shared task without feeling pressure as intensively as they would in front of the class. CMC built up students’ confidence and encouraged those who were reluctant to participate in oral discussions to speak up in class (e.g., Chapelle, Compton, Kon, & Sauro, 2003; Lee, 2002a). The student benefited from equally shared time and voice through online discussions and learned to respect and appreciate others’ opinions.

In spite of generally positive attitudes toward network-based learning, some students experienced a challenge in working as a team and expressed concerns about the collaborative effort. The joint task (i.e., the online exchange) required each team to work together to accomplish the assignment and maintain a high level of performance. In order to successfully carry out each assignment with their partners, individuals needed to be accountable to the group. For instance, one student indicated during the final interview that working with someone is fun but challenging because you know your partners count on you and you must take things seriously as you know you are responsible not only for yourself but also for them. It takes a lot of commitment to work in a team. I had to constantly remind myself to be on time as I sometimes arrived late or forgot to be online. My partners were patient with me but I felt embarrassed when I missed the meeting.

Looking back on her experience, one very serious student expressed her dissatisfaction at online collaboration due to the lack of dedication on the part of her partner.

I’m a perfectionist and I’m responsible for everything I do. I got very frustrated and impatient with my partner who did not seem to care about the homework. He did not show interest in working with me. I often had to wait online for him to show up and we ended up chatting less than 30 minutes. I hope this did not affect my grade because it was not my fault. This wasn’t a very good experience for me.

The negative experience did affect this student’s motivation to be online. She further suggested that the instructor should allow students to choose their own partners. Finding a common time to meet online became problematic for some
students because of their other commitments. These comments corroborate the findings of previous studies which argue that learners’ accountability, effort, and contribution affect the quality of the teamwork (Lee, 2003; Magnan et al., 2003).

**Development of Writing Skills via Daily Essay Writing**

Crucial to FL learning is selecting a task that promotes meaningful use of the target language. The goal of daily essay writing was to build proficiency at the advanced level through describing, narrating, explaining situations, and expressing opinions in different contexts. Readings related to current issues of real life topics served as vehicles for writing practice. After the one-semester intensive-writing course, the majority of the students felt that their writing skills had improved. The following comments made during the final interviews revealed students’ rewarding experiences with online essay writing:

- I realize now that I have gained more confidence in my writing through writing so much in this class.
- At the beginning, I had problems with the grammar and vocabulary. I spent a lot of time looking for words in the dictionary. I feel that I write better now and I’m able to express my opinions easily.

Students agreed that at the beginning of the semester writing every day was a lot of work. By the end of the semester, many of them were proud of how much and how easily they could write. One student during the final interview recalled her change of attitude toward the writing requirement, stating

At the beginning I was skeptical about using Blackboard for writing assignments. But after a few weeks, I got used to it and found the online writing very rewarding because I could focus on specific topics, and I wrote about my own perspectives and personal experiences concerning these topics. The topics were very interesting to me. I had never written so many essays in Spanish. I believe my writing skills have improved.

Although this study did not attempt to measure students’ progress in L2 writing, after reviewing the essays that the students wrote throughout the semester, the quality of their writing indeed showed some improvement, especially in their use of lexical items and grammatical structures. For instance, students demonstrated their understanding of certain lexical items, such as the difference between *darse cuenta* ‘to realize’ versus *realizar* ‘to carry out,’ *guardar* ‘to save something’ versus *salvar* ‘to save life,’ and *mudarse* ‘to move house’ versus *moverse* ‘to move.’ These lexical items often cause confusion for many intermediate students.

The following unedited excerpts written by the same student during the second and the seventh week give the reader a feel for her improvement in the use of the subjunctive mood in Spanish and certain lexical items.
Second week

No creo que las mujeres son tratados bien en sus trabajos. Ellas son victimas de acoso sexual de los hombres. Es una lástima que mujeres no saben defender sus derechas. En mi opinión, el ley debe proteger las mujeres.

‘I don’t believe women are treated well at work. They are victims of sexual harassment from men. It is a shame that women don’t know how to defend their rights. In my opinion, the law should protect women.’

As the above example shows, at the second week of the semester, this student confused the lexical item derecho ‘right’ with the derecha ‘right-hand side’ and had difficulty in using the correct structure of the subjunctive mood—son (indicative) versus sean (subjunctive) and saben (indicative) versus sepan (subjunctive). By the seventh week, her writing did show improvement in use of the subjunctive structure.

Seventh week

No creo que uno pueda vivir solo. Todos necesitan alguien para consejos. En mi opinión, los amigos son muy importantes. Cuando estoy triste, necesito que mi mejor amiga esté conmigo. Puedo confiarla

‘I don’t believe one can live alone. Every one needs someone for advice. In my opinion, friends are very important. When I’m sad, I want my best friend to be with me. I can trust her.’

The above example illustrates her understanding of the subjunctive mood by using both verbs pueda ‘can’ and esté ‘to be’ correctly. Through the “write and re-write” online writing process, grammatical concepts and vocabulary knowledge were reinforced.

Regarding the topics for online essays, students found open-ended questions concerning the role of women and men, multilingualism, and young adulthood stimulating and meaningful because they were able to express their voices through their own life experiences. A few students, however, experienced difficulty in being able to fully express meaning in the target language. Through the writing process, they realized how much they need to learn in order to articulate their thoughts and defend their point of view. One linguistically weak student admitted during the interview that

The topics were just too hard for me. I felt frustrated not being able to express myself in Spanish. I needed a lot of help. The writing process was overwhelming for me. It took too much of my time writing daily essays. I often ended up translating my ideas from English to Spanish. I knew it was not a good idea but I couldn’t help it.

This student further suggested that the instructor needs to provide students with more guidance on how to approach L2 writing. Additional discussions with stu-
dents who have special needs in learning to write well can be arranged via email or in a chat room where the instructor holds special office hours to answer students’ questions.

Enhancement of Communication Skills via Collaborative Online Exchanges

Lamy and Goodfellow (1999) claim that a task that simply requires social conversation may not stretch learners’ ability with language production. More important, tasks without a specified goal may not push learners to use their linguistic resources for negotiation of meaning (Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993). The goal of online exchange through social interaction was to engage students in sharing, exchanging, and debating information relevant to their life experiences. CMC not only encourages students to use the target language but also reinforces their thinking skills and communication strategies, which are crucial for successful online interaction. Students praised the opportunity to use the target language in a natural way and felt that their communication skills in Spanish had been reinforced after participating in the chat room. The following quotes from the oral interviews reveal how students experienced the synchronous interaction with their peers:

• I liked the chats more because we could share our ideas through Blackboard and because when you talk online, it is necessary to think in Spanish more rapidly than when you write the homework. This is more like the real world.

• I believe the chats are important and very interesting because I had never spoken Spanish with people online. I think it is more difficult to communicate with someone online because you cannot see the face of the person. Sometimes, my classmate did not understand me and I had to look for other words to express my ideas. It was hard for me but I enjoyed it a lot.

Linguistically, students felt that the process of composing ideas allowed them to recycle the vocabulary and structures they had previously learned as they read and responded to their peers. Cognitively, they felt that they were challenged by their limited linguistic skills and that they had to stop and think about what they could say and needed to say in order to get the ideas across to their partners. The results of the study showed that the impact of online discussions varied from learner to learner, depending on how students perceived the experience. One student made the following comments during the final interview:

Through CMC communication, I realized that I needed to improve my Spanish vocabulary as often I did not know how to say certain words and I had to ask for help or look them up in my dictionary. I have learned many new words. It was very helpful for me to be able to use my Spanish through chatting with my group. Often we helped each other to come up with ideas or solve grammar or vocabulary problems.
CMC indeed supports linguistic scaffolding which has been proven to be an effective way to foster the students’ performance through the zone of proximal development (e.g., Lee, 2004; Ohta, 2000; Swain, 2000). The unedited example below illustrates how this student, whose linguistic skills were not as strong as those of her partners, received the assistance in her incorrect usage of temporal and aspectual morphosyntax:

NNS1: Mi mamá trabajé muchas horas durante la semana.
[My mom worked many hours during the week.]
NNS2: Tu mamá trabajó mucho?
[Your mom worked a lot?]
NNS1: Sí, ella trabajó mucho. Lo siento.
[Yes, she worked a lot. I’m sorry.]

The student realized that she had made an error in the conjugation of the verb form trabajé after her partner used the recast to confirm the meaning in her response. The student immediately self-corrected it to the correct form trabajó. As a result of co-constructed knowledge through scaffolding, the weak student was able to notice the gap in her interlanguage system and managed to produce the correct verb form. In many instances, students also assisted each other with unfamiliar lexical items. For instance, when discussing job situations for women, students were able to help each other out with unknown vocabulary, such as acoso sexual ‘sexual harassment,’ turno de día/noche ‘day/night shift,’ and aumento de sueldo ‘salary increase.’ In the long run, CMC may improve the development of learners’ vocabulary acquisition.

**CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study examined the perspectives of Spanish learners on Web-based instruction. While a one-semester investigation is limited in scope and depth, the project succeeded in making many students understand what is required to be successful when using a Web-based course. The use of Blackboard as an instructional tool facilitated the development of students’ language skills, reinforced their cognitive skills, and supported an active learning environment. Students benefited from online essays that were tailored to individual writing practice. The essays were integrated into online discussions which led to collaborative exchanges among their peers. The findings show that students were content with and motivated by the well structured online tasks and that they expanded the use of the target language to enlarge their knowledge beyond the classroom setting. Multichannel web tools, such as “Digital Drop Box,” “Virtual Classroom,” and “Assignments,” made the delivery of online tasks efficient and effective in the judgment of the students. Most important, this study also reveals that online-based learning empowered the learners to be actively involved in the process and to be responsible for their own learning. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that CMC facilitated the interaction between the students and the instructor as the latter systematically guided, assisted, and provided constructive feedback to the students.
This study involved only students in advanced courses which were mainly composed of Spanish majors and minors. Further study should include learners from all levels of FL experience. How would the learners at the beginning and intermediate levels perceive Web-based instruction? What impact would online learning have on these students? Future studies could also examine learners’ perspectives on CMC including other technological tools, such as asynchronous exchange via discussion boards and synchronous interaction in real time in video conferences. Finally, further studies that include native-speaker online exchanges using Web-based instruction will advance the knowledge of how learners perceive the role of interaction in a socially collaborative context.

In conclusion, for online active learning to occur, both effective pedagogical principles including specific instructional goals and procedures, as well as technological tools must be thoughtfully taken into account at the stage of implementation. Although the results reported from this study cannot be generalized to the entire university population from which the sample was drawn, it is fair to say that Web-based instruction created by Blackboard was well suited to the students’ needs. Learners’ perspectives toward online learning has offered valuable insights into a way to make the connection between the teacher’s goals and learners’ needs while learning a FL in a Web-based instructional environment. Both FL learners and teachers would do well to take advantage of online technologies in order to become active members of a community that thrives far beyond the spatial and temporal limitations of the traditional classroom.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Sample Questions for Online Essays

Escriba un ensayo para contestar las preguntas.
[Write an essay to answer the questions.]

7 de abril
[April 7]
1. Se ha dicho que los términos “multilinguismo” e “internacionalización” definirán el siglo XXI. ¿Qué significa estos términos y ¿cómo se interpretan actualmente en los Estados Unidos? ¿Está Ud. a favor de una sociedad multicultural? Explique sus razones.

[People say that the terms “multilingualism” and “internationalization” will define the 21st century. What do these terms mean and how are they actually interpreted in the United States? Are you in favor of a multicultural society? Explain your reasons.]

2. ¿Cree Ud. que las personas que hablan más de una lengua tienen más ventajas que las que sólo hablan un idioma? ¿Cuáles son algunas de estas ventajas? ¿Cree que todos deberíamos aprender un segundo idioma? ¿Por qué sí o no?

[Do you believe that people who speak more than one language have more advantages than those who speak only one language? What are some of the advantages? Do you believe that all of us should learn a second language? Why?]

9 de abril
[April 9]

3. ¿Qué es el racismo para Ud.? ¿De dónde viene el racismo? ¿Cómo enfrentamos los problemas del racismo? Explique.

[What is racism for you? Where does racism come from? How do we confront the problems of racism?]

4. Describa la comunidad donde vive Ud. ¿Hay diversas culturas? ¿Cuáles son sus perspectivas hacia los grupos étnicos? ¿Cree que son tratados de la misma manera como los norteamericanos? ¿Por qué sí o no?

[Describe the community where you live. Are there diverse cultures? What are your perspectives toward ethnic groups? Do you believe that they are treated in the same way as Americans? Why?]

APPENDIX B

Sample Questions for Online Chats

Charla #1: Una juventud ideal
[Chat #1: An ideal youth]]

¿Cómo es una juventud ideal para Ud.? Con sus compañeros intercambien las ideas. ¿Piensa Ud. que los jóvenes de hoy día tienen demasiada responsabilidad y poca libertad? Explique sus razones.

[What is an ideal youth for you? Exchange ideas with your classmates. Do you think young people nowadays have too much responsibility and little freedom? Explain your reasons.]
Charla #2: El papel de la mujer y del hombre en la sociedad actual
[Chat #2: The role of women and men in today’s society]
¿Qué papeles hace la mujer y el hombre en la sociedad actual? ¿Tienen los mismos derechos las mujeres que los hombres? Explique sus razones.
[What are the roles of women and men in today’s society? Do women have the same rights as men? Explain your reasons.]

APPENDIX C
End of Semester Oral Interview Questions
1. Briefly explain your experience in using Web-based instruction for this course.
2. Describe your experience doing the online activities. What activities did you like the most and the least and why? Do you think your Spanish skills have improved through essay writing and online discussions?
3. Share with me the most valuable and interesting part of the Blackboard and why.
4. Describe the most difficult or least important part of the Blackboard and why.
5. Overall, tell me how the experience of this course changed your perspectives on the Web-based instruction. Do you have any concerns about Internet technology?

AUTHOR’S BIODATA
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