ABSTRACT

The Internet is increasingly considered as an instructional tool for foreign language learning both within and beyond classroom learning. This article reports a pilot study on the use of a combination of Internet technologies—on-line newspapers and on-line chatrooms—to enhance the learning of advanced Spanish students. The goal of the project was (a) to create opportunities for students to read authentic materials and gain cultural knowledge via on-line newspapers, (b) to enhance intercultural exchanges via on-line chatrooms, and (c) to improve students’ writing and speaking skills as well as promote collaborative learning among students. The positive results of the study indicate that foreign language teachers could well explore and experiment with the application of combined Internet resources for advanced language students.

KEYWORDS

On-line Newspapers, On-line Chatrooms, Culture, Advanced Spanish Learners, Collaborative Learning

INTRODUCTION

Using the Internet as a teaching tool to facilitate and enhance foreign language teaching and learning is no longer new. Yet, the Internet still presents challenges to many of us in the teaching profession. The rapid
growth of Internet technologies has prompted many foreign language professionals to explore the possibilities offered by this electronic networking tool. Foreign language educators are most interested in learning how best to incorporate the Internet into their teaching. Research studies on the application of technology provide foreign language teachers with anecdotal accounts and valuable insights into pursuing practical ways to use the Internet. In addition, professional conferences and workshops allow teachers to gain both pedagogical knowledge and technological training in order to assist students more effectively in the use of the expanding resources of the Internet.

Clearly, the use of the target language is crucial to the development of foreign language proficiency, but the amount of time students have in the classroom to practice their language skills and to understand the target culture is very limited. One of the main reasons for employing the Internet is to provide increased opportunities to practice and to use the target language in communicative situations outside the classroom. Previous studies have shown the impact of the Internet on foreign language (e.g., Kern, 1995; Kuttenberg & Zeller, 1997; Lee, 1997b; Oliva & Pollastrini, 1995), but these studies have mainly focused on the asynchronous communication provided via E-Mail rather than on the synchronous interaction created through chatrooms (e.g., Chun, 1994; Kelm, 1992; Warschauer, 1996). Little research exists on the use of a combination of Internet tools for advanced foreign language students. Research on using on-line newspapers to develop cultural understandings and on-line chatrooms to increase intercultural exchanges is particularly needed. The combination of tools may maximize the effectiveness of Internet-based instruction in foreign language learning.

This article reports observations and conclusions drawn from a pilot project that used two Internet tools—on-line newspapers and on-line chatrooms—to enhance the learning of advanced students studying Spanish as a foreign language. The first section below provides an overview of the Internet for foreign language teaching and learning. The second section describes in detail an integrated method of using Internet-based activities to develop student language skills in advanced Spanish courses at the university level. The final section presents a summary of observations from the pilot study and gives suggestions for future directions.

THE INTERNET AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

One of the important elements for success in learning a foreign language is the need for students to get more involved in the learning process (Lee & VanPatten, 1995; Nunan, 1988; Lee, 1997b; Scarcella & Oxford,
The use of instructional materials based on on-line based technologies offers many innovative ways of engaging students in language acquisition. Students not only can explore target cultural resources using browsers such as Netscape or Internet Explorer but can also interact with native speakers around the world via on-line communication such as E-Mail exchanges, newsgroups, and chatrooms. These tools, both non-interactive and interactive, create opportunities for students to acquire knowledge about the target culture. More important, the Internet also provides a student-centered learning environment in which students receive input through on-line readings and produce output via the Computer Mediated Communication in the target language (Lafford & Lafford, 1997).

Understanding the diversity of the target culture is necessary for successful communication with native speakers (Savignon, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980). On-line resources such as newspapers and magazines are, therefore, invaluable because they provide students with up-to-date cultural information that can lead to enhanced cultural awareness, understanding, and knowledge. Lee (1997b) has reported that students who accessed Spanish Web sites were able to relate what they had learned about foreign cultures to their own culture. Electronic communication via E-Mail exchanges offers opportunities for authentic communication and immediate sharing of cross-cultural information among users (Bernhardt & Kamil, 1998). Research projects on Internet technologies have shown that on-line based activities enhanced and improved students' language skills, especially in written communication (e.g., Cononelos & Oliva, 1993; Van Handle & Corl, 1998; Kern, 1995; Lee, 1997b; Wang, 1994). In addition, on-line activities seem to provide a stimulating learning environment which increases student motivation for further foreign language learning (Lee, 1997b).

Studies on CMC have reported improvements in students' language skills as well as a change in their attitude toward language learning in the classroom. (See Barson, Frommer & Schwartz, 1993; Beauvois, 1992 & 1997; Cononelos & Oliva, 1993; Lee, 1997b; Lunde, 1990; Sanaoui & Lapkin, 1992). Oliva and Pollastrini (1995, p. 552) have declared, for example, that “Computer network resources help students improve their language skills in a manner similar to full immersion or study abroad, but are based more heavily on written communication.” Beauvois (1997, p. 180) has asserted that “students do communicate better as a general rule in the computer lab, if better means using longer, more complete utterances, expressing less superficial ideas, and communicating generally more openly about any given subject.” Beauvois has also pointed out that the CMC allowed all students to participate in discussions, rather than only some students as is usually the case in traditional classrooms.

Among Internet resources, on-line newspapers and on-line chatrooms are particularly beneficial to students at the advanced level because they...
require a high level of language proficiency to read, comprehend, and respond to cultural readings. Advanced students who use these kinds of resources can enhance their language skills as well as develop a sense of target language communities, together with a concomitant feeling of personal enjoyment and enrichment.

On-Line Newspapers

Electronic newspapers can be easily viewed in an Internet browser. A variety of on-line Hispanic newspapers is accessible to readers, ranging from Clarín Digital published in Buenos Aires to La Jornada in Mexico City and ABC in Madrid. These on-line newspapers allow students to read “input-rich” authentic materials of their choice as “Free Voluntary Reading,” a crucial component in the acquisition of a foreign language (Krashen, 1993, 1995). In addition, access to daily newspapers makes it easier for students to acquire current lexical items, grammatical structures, and idiomatic expressions of the target language.

One of the five goals expressed in the Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1996, p. 56) is that students should be able to “demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.” Reading on-line newspapers makes students aware of current social phenomena. Different sections of newspapers such as Sports, Economics, Arts, and Entertainment provide considerable opportunities for students to compare and contrast the target and the native culture. Reading on-line newspapers also helps students understand the target culture so that they feel more comfortable when communicating with native speakers. Finally, because the process of interpreting, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating newspaper articles goes beyond the presentations of simple facts, reading on-line newspapers helps students to improve their reading skills and comprehension strategies in the target language.

On-Line Chatrooms

Electronic chatrooms have become popular places for communication and exchanges of ideas with native and nonnative speakers. Like other real-time communication tools such as M OOs which allow synchronous communication, on-line chatrooms provide environments in which real people use real language for real communicative purposes. Unlike the asynchronous communication among users via E-Mail exchanges, on-line chatrooms engage users in conversations in which they receive immediate responses and feedback.
Various chatrooms can be found on the Internet, such as the Spanish on-line chatroom originating in Mexico (see http://foros.planet.com.mx/chattiempolibre/). Another easy and user-friendly chatroom is ParaChat which allows Webmasters to set up a free chatroom for their own use (see http://www.parachat.com/faq/Webmasters.htm). By means of ParaChat, regular users can construct within-class interactions. Participants become familiar with each other through a private ParaChat room in which they can build a strong sense of community and collaboration.

The need for more opportunities to use the target language beyond classroom settings has been stressed by several researchers (e.g., Ellis, 1988; Swain & Lapkin, 1986; Swain & Wong Fillmore, 1984). The use of on-line chatrooms provides these communicative opportunities in a collaborative learning environment. Of great importance is the observation that electronic communication creates a relatively non-threatening atmosphere in which students can express, negotiate, and interpret meaning within a meaningful context (Beauvois, 1992, 1994). Indeed, the use of on-line chatrooms as a medium for communication provides an individualized, interpersonal, and interactive environment which allows students to gain active learning experiences beyond those of the traditional classroom.

Overall, both on-line newspapers and on-line chatrooms open innovative avenues for foreign language learning outside the classroom. On-line language learning activities based on on-line newspapers and on-line chatrooms allow users to access cultural information found at a great distance from the physical classroom. On-line newspapers provide students with valuable up-to-date information in authentic foreign language texts which facilitates their understanding of cultural phenomena including both products and perspectives of the target culture. (See the Cultural Goal area of the Standards for Foreign Language Learning, 1996; Knight, 1994.)

THE CURRENT STUDY

Survey of Your Experience with Internet Technology

Prior to the study described here, the researcher had designed a questionnaire, “Survey of Your Experience with Internet Technology,” to examine students’ attitudes toward using Internet technology and Internet tools. She distributed the questionnaire to 62 students enrolled in advanced Spanish courses at the beginning of the 1997 fall semester. The survey consisted of three parts: (a) background information, (b) attitude toward technology, and (c) experience with the Internet. Students were asked to respond to the survey’s statements, listed below, by ranking their level of satisfaction on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).
1. I think people should know how to use the Internet.
2. I believe the use of the Internet can enhance foreign language learning.
3. It is important for me to be able to use the Internet.
4. I believe the use of E-Mail/online chatrooms is an effective way of communicating with others.
5. My experience of using the Internet is positive and encouraging.
6. I feel comfortable using the Internet technology.
7. I would like to use Internet technology for my language classes.

Table 1 summarizes the results of students’ responses to the survey.

Table 1
Students’ Attitudes toward Internet Technology (N = 62)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>No Opinion</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<td>25 (40.3%)</td>
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<td>23 (37%)</td>
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<td>4 (6.5%)</td>
<td>9 (14.5%)</td>
<td>6 (9.7%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>23 (37%)</td>
<td>21 (34%)</td>
<td>7 (11.3%)</td>
<td>8 (12.9%)</td>
<td>3 (4.8%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>30 (48.4%)</td>
<td>19 (30.6%)</td>
<td>5 (8.1%)</td>
<td>7 (11.3%)</td>
<td>1 (1.6%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>21 (34%)</td>
<td>15 (24.1%)</td>
<td>9 (14.5%)</td>
<td>8 (12.9%)</td>
<td>9 (14.5%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>20 (32.3%)</td>
<td>17 (27.4%)</td>
<td>9 (14.5%)</td>
<td>12 (19.3%)</td>
<td>4 (6.5%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>#7</td>
<td>18 (29.1%)</td>
<td>22 (35.4%)</td>
<td>7 (11.3%)</td>
<td>6 (9.7%)</td>
<td>9 (14.5%)</td>
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</table>

For the most part, students reacted positively to using the Internet. More than 50% of students agreed that it was important to be able to use the Internet (questions 1 and 3), but a significant number of students indicated that they did not feel comfortable using the Internet (questions 5 and 6).

Design of the Study

The results of the “Survey of Your Experience with Internet Technology” showed that the students had a positive attitude toward the Internet and were interested in using it to learn the target language. Based on these
results, the researcher decided to use on-line activities in two advanced courses—two fifth-semester Spanish courses. The goal of this project was to use on-line activities (a) to create opportunities for students to read authentic materials and gain cultural knowledge via on-line newspapers, (b) to enhance intercultural exchanges via on-line chatrooms, and (c) to improve students’ writing and speaking skills as well as promote collaborative learning among students.

The most distinguishing feature of this study was the use of a combination of two tools to encourage on-line discussions. The first tool was a browser tool to access on-line newspapers. The second tool was an on-line chatroom connected to a Web site created by the researcher to promote communication and exchanges of ideas among the students in the class.

It was hypothesized that the integrated use of Internet tools would create a dynamic learning atmosphere in which students could improve their language skills both individually and collaboratively. Reading on-line newspapers requires students to process information using reading strategies and cognitive skills in order to understand and interpret what they are reading. Electronic communication via the chatroom provides students with a rich sociocultural context which encompasses interpersonal interaction, negotiation, and collaboration among learners (Warschauer, 1997). Collaborative learning is essential to help students maximize their own “Zone of Proximal Development” (Vygotsky, 1978), and collaborative learning strategies have been shown to enhance motivation and facilitate foreign language achievement (Johnson & Johnson, 1985; Nunan, 1992).

Method

The data for this study were collected through two surveys written by the researcher. The first was the “Survey of Your Experience with Internet Technology” distributed to students before the study, and the second was the “Survey of Your Experience with On-line Activities” distributed after the students completed the on-line activities. A final exit oral exam was also given to all students. The purpose of the final oral exam was to determine whether students’ oral skills had improved from using on-line activities. Finally, the researcher conducted a final interview with the students to collect additional data on their attitudes and reactions toward using the on-line activities.

Subjects

The subjects of the study were 31 students enrolled in the two fifth-semester Spanish classes mentioned above, most of whom intended to major or
minor in Spanish. The majority of the students were rated between Intermediate-Low and Intermediate-Mid oral proficiency based on a Spanish Oral Proficiency Test (SOPT) developed by the researcher. In general, the students were motivated and had a good attitude toward foreign language learning. Although most students had at least some experience using the Internet, some had never used it at all.

Survey Instrument

The second survey, the “Survey of Your Experience with On-line Activities,” contained six Likert-type questions and solicited information on students’ reactions to the use of on-line newspapers and on-line chatrooms for language learning. One of the questions focused on students’ views on the overall project, and three other questions focused on the most useful and least useful parts of the project as well as suggestions for improvement. The SOPT served as the exit oral exam for the course. Seven questions (three at the intermediate level, two at the advanced level, and one at the superior level) were included in the test. Students were given 25 minutes to read the prompts in Spanish in the test booklet and to record their responses on an audiocassette.

Web Site

In order to facilitate students’ access to Internet resources and tools used in the course, the researcher created a Web site. The Web site provided students with search engines to pursue topics of interest, to select on-line newspapers from Hispanic countries, and to access two chatrooms for weekly on-line discussions (see http://www.unh.edu/spanish/lina/spanish631.html). One of the two on-line chatrooms found at this Web site was created using ParaChat. The advantage of using a ParaChat connected to the Web site was that it offered a designated place for chatroom sessions in which students could participate on a fixed schedule. Without this kind of preparation, students could easily encounter empty or inappropriate chatrooms on the Internet. A further distinguishing feature of ParaChat is that it supports the use of foreign characters, including accent marks, thereby obviating the need to learn special commands or functional keys to type messages in Spanish. Another chatroom, one in which students could interact with native Spanish speakers, was the Tiempo Libre chatroom originating in Mexico. Students could explore topics of interest in daily Mexican life, discuss current cultural issues with native speakers, and participate in intercultural exchanges.
In sum, three Internet tools were used in conjunction with the homepage. First, search engines allowed students to explore sources for final term projects (see below). Second, a variety of on-line Hispanic newspapers were made available for weekly discussions in the target language. Third, chatrooms allowed students to exchange ideas, express opinions, and discuss selected cultural topics with their peers, their instructor, and native speakers.

Procedures

The researcher incorporated on-line activities as regular class assignments in the course. At the beginning of the semester, she explained to all students the purpose, content, and procedures for completing the activities. Students were required to read on-line newspapers and discuss the major events of the week with their peers via the ParaChat room once a week. Students were also required to write a five-page research project on a specific area of Hispanic culture of interest to them. They were encouraged to base their report on the on-line discussions so that they could develop their cultural project in depth.

At the beginning of the semester, the instructor provided students with three hours of training on how to access and use the Internet resources from the local Web site. Since most students were not very familiar with Internet tools, they were taught how to access, explore, download, and upload information with Netscape Navigator. The instructor also taught students strategies for using search engines to gather the information they needed for their final project. Finally, she gave the students a list of the schedules for the computer clusters available on campus so that they could reserve a computer station when desired.

After the initial training sessions, the instructor created a distribution list of students in the course in order to post news and topics for on-line discussion via E-Mail and distributed a list of students’ individual E-Mail addresses to all students in the course. Although students could use E-Mail to send messages to each other, the chatrooms constituted the main tool for on-line discussions. Students were required to interact with each other once a week via the ParaChat room and were encouraged to use the Tiempo Libre chatroom for intercultural exchanges with native speakers. Specific topics dealing with current events such as la muerte de la princesa Di ‘the death of Princess Di,’ los problemas del narcotraficante en Colombia ‘the problems with drug trafficking in Columbia, and El Niño as well as more general topics on deportes ‘sports,’ economía ‘economics,’ and política ‘politics’ were organized to provide students with contextualized tasks.

Students wrote one-page journal entries each week in which they ex-
pressed their opinions, asked questions, and voiced concerns regarding the on-line discussions. Students included these journals in their class portfolios at the end of the semester. In each class meeting, two students were asked to briefly report on what they found interesting in the on-line newspapers to reinforce their oral language skills.

After students had been reading the on-line newspapers for seven weeks, the instructor asked them to select a topic for their final research project. Students mostly chose topics which were related to topics they had discussed in the chatroom. To avoid repetition, students who proposed similar topics met with the instructor to discuss and select different aspects of those topics. Students also made ten-minute oral presentations in class to share their findings with other students and the instructor. A five-minute discussion among students after each presentation reinforced both their listening and speaking skills.

Evaluation

The researcher integrated holistic portfolio assessment into the Internet-based activities. (For details, see Lee 1997a.) Students’ final portfolios contained writing samples from on-line chatroom sessions, one-page journal entries, and a final written report. Each component was scored separately based on five categories: content, organization, language, style, and appropriateness.

In addition to holistic assessment, the researcher used the “Survey of Your Experience with On-line Activities” to ascertain students’ reactions to the Internet activities. Students’ comments and suggestions from the survey instrument were expected to provide useful information for future improvements.

Finally, the researcher interviewed students individually or in small groups (two to three students). She interviewed students who had researched similar topics together so that they could discuss their topics while the instructor observed their reactions and noted their opinions about the project. During the interviews, she guided students to explain the most valuable, interesting, and difficult aspects of the project; asked them to describe their experiences with the Internet activities; and encouraged them to express their reactions and concerns about using Internet technologies.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study were drawn from the “Survey of Your Experience with On-line Activities” and the final course interview. In the survey, students indicated their level of agreement with the statements below by
ranking their responses on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

1. On-line activities helped me improve my language skills in general.
2. I enjoyed reading on-line newspapers.
3. On-line newspapers helped my reading skills in Spanish.
4. Reading on-line newspapers increased my knowledge of Spanish vocabulary.
5. On-line newspapers helped me better understand Hispanic people and culture.
6. On-line chats helped me write better in Spanish.
7. I enjoyed using the chatroom weekly.
8. I felt comfortable discussing topics via on-line chatroom.
9. I would like to use the Internet technology for my other Spanish courses in the future.

Table 2 presents a summary of students’ responses to the survey items.

Table 2
Results of the “Survey of Your Experience with On-line Activities”
(N = 31)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>No Opinion</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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Students’ responses show that most found the on-line activities to be helpful in enhancing their development of language skills and their understanding of Hispanic culture and people (questions 1, 3, 4, and 5). More than half of the students agreed that on-line chatrooms helped them improve their writing in Spanish (question 6) and that they would like to continue using the Internet in the future (question 9). Although they needed guidance and assistance at first, students stated that they liked reading on-line newspapers (question 2) and especially enjoyed the on-line chatroom sessions (questions 7 and 8).

Some students indicated that three hours of training before the project was not enough and complained about the amount of time and energy needed for using the Internet in the project. Other students protested that they were not able to obtain printouts due to technical problems and the limited number of printers available in the laboratory. Finally, they suggested that both teachers and students should receive the appropriate training on how to access the Internet effectively. These results confirm the substantial need for technical instruction to achieve the best use of the new technologies (see Schneider, 1982).

On-Line Newspapers: Increase in Cultural Knowledge and Reading Skills

Most students agreed that the on-line newspapers provided an important means for obtaining up-to-date knowledge of the world and facilitating their cultural learning. The newspapers allowed them to explore and examine a variety of different kinds of information as well as read authentic materials. Students also stated that the topics and questions for on-line discussions proposed by the instructor via E-Mail the day before the actual discussion sessions also helped them focus and reflect on specific readings in the newspapers. Students found most of the topics interesting and challenging. Some students reported that individual topics required them to learn specific types of vocabulary items (e.g., items describing nature, the environment, and geographical phenomena for El Niño).

Perhaps most important, on-line newspapers provided students with texts at the advanced level which included “descriptions and narrations such as simple short stories, news items, bibliographical information, social notices, ... and simple technical material written for general reader.” (ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, 1986). The exploration of these content areas is crucial for students to achieve a high level of reading proficiency. Most of the students indicated in their final interviews that their reading skills had improved, although some students objected that they found some of the articles difficult to understand. Several students stated that on-line dictionaries and photos helped them understand the texts and indicated that they learned a large number of practical words and expressions from the
newspapers, especially terminology used in professional areas such as business and law.

I didn’t really like to read newspapers on-line at first. But since it was part of the requirement of this course, I had no choice, but got myself accustomed to reading daily at most half hour at the beginning. Then, I found myself not able to discuss topics on-line with my peers. I realized that I needed to pay more attention to the details when I read. I took notes for new words and expressions. Now I can read more and faster and I love it, especially CNN is my favorite site.

On-Line Chatrooms: Effectiveness of Communication

More than 50% of students enjoyed using both the ParaChat and Tiempo Libre chatrooms to interact and communicate with their peers, their instructor, and native speakers. Students believed that communicating with their peers via ParaChat was more private than communicating with native speakers via Tiempo Libre. They felt less anxious about using the target language and less uncomfortable expressing their ideas and opinions to their peers. On the other hand, some students commented that they gained a better understanding of cultural phenomena and a sharper perspective of the target culture by interacting with native speakers via Tiempo Libre.

Students liked the immediate feedback and collaborative responses in the on-line discussions. Students’ comments during the final interviews showed that they appreciated the extra opportunities for using the target language outside the classroom. The fact that on-line communication encouraged everyone, rather than some, to participate in the discussions demonstrates that students can indeed benefit more from on-line chatroom sessions than from the limited communicative opportunities in the conventional classroom (Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1996).

On-line interactions helped students become “individual knowledge constructors” because the electronic tools allowed them to monitor, reflect, and compose ideas at their own pace (Beauvois, 1997). During the final interviews, one student said

While using my linguistic skills as a means of communication with my peers via on-line chat, I realized that how important is for me to understand others’ ideas and to express myself effectively. At the beginning, I often felt frustrated at not being able to come up with what I wanted to say. I then had to slow down and found strategies for expressing my ideas coherently. The best thing about chatting on-line was that I learned to become actively involved in the discussions.
Going Beyond Classroom Learning

The process of composing messages also required students to use different learning strategies and styles for communication (see Oxford, 1990; Oxford & Ehrman, 1989; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). For instance, students reported that they often asked questions for clarification (a recognized communicative strategy) when they had difficulty understanding messages from their peers. The instructor at times played a central role in guiding the discussion. When the students misinterpreted a text or strayed from the target discussion, the instructor led them back to the original topic.

Interviews with students also suggested that the use of synchronous online chatroom sessions created a less stressful environment for foreign language learning than in-class discussions. Lowering the students' anxiety had the effect of improving the quality of their communication as well as their degree of motivation (Beauvois, 1993; Horwitz & Young, 1991). Students were very much involved in the interactive activities, stating that they expressed their ideas and opinions to others more willingly outside the classroom than inside the classroom (Coleman, Crookall & Oxford, 1992; Kelm, 1992; Pennington, 1996). Overall, on-line chatroom sessions with native speakers provided students with authentic written input, although those who read poorly had difficulty understanding some of the words and expressions used by their communicative partners.

On-Line Writing: Improvements in Speaking Performance

Studies on Computer Mediated Communication have revealed improvements in students' oral and written communication (see, for example, Beauvois, 1997; Kern, 1995, 1996; St. John & Cash, 1995). Students reported that weekly on-line chatroom sessions offered them seemingly real face-to-face interactions and that they felt as though they were engaged in real-time communicative situations with their peers. The interactive online chatroom sessions also allowed them to express themselves freely, to clarify ideas, and to ask and answer questions.

According to Canale and Swain (1980), students need to know how to use cohesive devices such as grammatical connectors in order to achieve communicative competence. Students' on-line writings showed that they used a variety of strategies and discourse markers such as "by the way," "anyway," "however," and "on the other hand" to express their ideas and support their opinions. As a result of semester-long practice in writing the target language in the electronic chatrooms, students' writing and speaking skills both improved, thereby confirming Pennington's (1996) assumption that those who write more frequently in the second language write better.

The results of the SOPT given at the beginning and the end of the se-
mester demonstrated that students’ oral skills did in fact improve after using on-line chatrooms. Although subjectiveness is always a factor in scoring oral performance, most of the students attained a higher level of oral proficiency progressing from Intermediate-Mid to Intermediate-High. Communicating in the target language via the on-line chatrooms not only helped students write better but also enabled them to speak more fluently, which seems to confirm the hypothesis of transferring writing skills to oral skills through the use of electronic written communication (Beauvois, 1997).

Constraints on the Use of Technology

Using the Internet can be very frustrating and troublesome because of an inadequate number of computers available for student use and slow access time to Web sites. Because the paucity of computer stations had an impact on students’ free time, some students were unwilling to wait (sometimes as long as an hour) to use a computer. Other students became discouraged; they spent less time writing on-line and produced only short messages. Students who had their own computers tended to elaborate their ideas more fully and to extend their writing tasks (see González-Bueno, 1998).

One student complained that it was very difficult to use the computer clusters on campus, especially because there was no computer laboratory designated for use by students in foreign language courses. The student then commented that until sufficient computers and reliable Internet access are available, students should not be required to use the Internet. To have a lasting impact on foreign language education, computer accessibility must be improved (Bush, 1997). Clearly, the availability of an adequate number of computers and sufficient training are essential prerequisites to successfully integrating instructional technology into foreign language learning.

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Instructor’s Observations

The instructor of the course observed several factors that affect student’s use of on-line communication. Students who did not have enough language skills to express their ideas were often able to use facial expressions and body language to clarify their statements in class. In the absence of visual cues in on-line discussions, these students tended to become either passive observers who hardly participated in discussions or risk takers,
who tried to communicate in the language. To solve the former problem, the instructor consulted individually with diffident students and encouraged them to engage in on-line discussions.

Sometimes, students lost the focus of the discussion when the instructor was not present. In these occasions, students wrote shorter messages and discussed personal interests rather than topical issues. The presence of the instructor is important to keep students focused on the task at hand. The instructor also discovered that the students wrote more informally in the on-line chatroom sessions than in the pencil-and-paper formats. Students wrote conversation-like messages with discourse markers such as “guess what” “well,” “and what,” and “O.K.” Consequently, their writings sometimes were less complete, coherent, or grammatically correct (González-Bueno, 1998). This phenomenon may derive from the informal E-Mail messages students send to their friends.

Conclusion and Future Implications

The most important aspect of this study is that students used synchronous interaction via on-line chatrooms instead of asynchronous communication via E-Mail. In spite of the limitations that must be imposed on the study because of the relatively small number of subjects (N = 31), the researcher was able to draw a number of conclusions. The use of the combined on-line resources—on-line newspapers and on-line chatrooms—offered many advantages to the students. First, on-line activities generally provided a meaningful way for the students at the advanced level to develop their language skills and their cultural knowledge, contextually and systematically. Second, reading on-line newspapers not only increased students’ cultural knowledge but also improved their reading skills. Third, composing messages via on-line chatroom sessions involved higher order thinking skills and created a community in which students used the target language beyond the classroom. Fourth, electronic communication led to better overall oral skills for the students. Finally, the use of on-line newspapers and on-line chatrooms heightened students’ interest and motivation for learning the foreign language and the foreign culture in a dynamic rather than passive way.

This study also emphasized the importance of making computers accessible to students in order for on-line activities to become an integral part of foreign language learning. Both teachers and students need to be trained in the appropriate use of the Internet resources so that they can achieve maximum results. In addition, more discussion on appropriate pedagogical frameworks and instructional designs for the use of Internet technologies are needed to establish standardized procedures.

Given the positive results described here, foreign language teachers
should be encouraged to explore and experiment with integrated Internet resources for use by advanced language students. The Internet not only provides a powerful pedagogical tool but also supports an interactive methodology that truly engages students' imagination and ingenuity as they communicate with others in the real world.

NOTE

1 See the CNN web site at http://cnnenespanol.com/.

REFERENCES


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