

Developing Language Competence in a Bilingual Story Sharing Forum

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Abstract

A web-based story sharing forum has been established to provide students in Bogotá, Colombia and in New Brunswick, Canada with the opportunity to exchange cross-cultural stories. Interaction between students from the two countries has been mediated by the teachers who have contributed to build an environment for effective language learning. Students have received feedback from teachers and other students to their personal and group blogs. Early results suggest that students' foreign language competence has been improved due to their motivation to writing to an audience of native speakers who share interests and keep a permanent communication. The feedback offered by the peers as a way to continue the dialogue that was initiated by the writing exchanges has also contributed to the language development of both groups of students. Teachers' feedback in regards to form and content of writing has also been a key factor in the language development of students.

Introduction

As new technologies are developed, there is a tendency to attempt to deploy them within educational situations with the assumption or the ambition that they will bring a significant improvement in learning or will address deficiencies in the provision of education. Technologies such as hypermedia (both in its conventional and adaptive forms), access to remote experiments and reusable learning repositories, and devices such as interactive whiteboards or mobile learning platforms have not yet made significant impact on mainstream education at any level, despite some obvious benefits.

The current initiative reported here seeks to revisit the deployment of technology, and to attempt to understand this uptake dilemma by seeking to first apply some basic pedagogic principles and by addressing a number of fundamental pedagogic issues. By considering the infrastructural and user aspects, it is intended that technology can be developed to both meet pedagogic needs and match the infrastructural realities of the context of use. In this way, the real benefits of technology within education can be achieved and resources can be appropriately deployed.

To this end an Internet mediated story sharing forum has been established that enables school age students in various countries including Colombia, Canada, Scotland, Chile and Spain to collaborate and interact. This paper focuses specifically on the interaction between Colombia and Canada. The underlying principle that is motivating the work of the forum is that effective and fulfilling engagement in the life of society depends on the citizens having a voice and the motivation to use it.

In the present informational age, children are communicating in a variety of new media unavailable to previous generations. Access to these media does not, however, guarantee effective communication.

Without effective communication, young people will neither have the means to critically appraise the world around them and their situation, nor will they have the means to engage in a dialogue of change within communities of common interest. Thus, this work is intended to explore a critical pedagogy that both equips young people with the skills to communicate, and the insights that lead to calls for opportunities and change.

Principles Underlying the Forum

Thinkers and educators such as Freire (1970) have provided a foundation of challenges and practical recommendations that not only are firmly rooted in the realities of the spectrum of Latin American contexts, but also continue to have relevance to the situation prevailing in European and North American situations. The forum builds on these principles and provides a learning environment that addresses the following pedagogic issues within a culture of peer-based learning and situated learning activities. These issues have been exposed, in consultation with teachers and educators in Scotland, in New Brunswick, Canada and in Colombia, as being important in education today, and to some extent neglected in the way educational technology is implemented and deployed. They are:

1. • Reflective thinking: An impact of television and the ready access to data on the Internet has resulted in many young people producing exploratory work that reflects very little personal thought but is more a collection of ideas grasped from different sources. The forum seeks to promote discussion, collaboration and particularly, individual thought, learning to rework data into information.
2. • Media literacy: Students handle data and information in a wider variety of media than was available to them in the past, both as receivers and producers. The education systems does not tend to reflect this formally, and does not tend to equip students with both the production and the comprehension skills necessary to handle these media appropriately.
3. • Cross cultural awareness: There is a need for students to encounter, understand and respect other cultures in a global world. This is becoming increasingly true locally as societies tend to become more multicultural, as well as becoming true globally as students have ready access to chat and engage with people across the world in a wide variety of technology mediated social spaces.
4. • On-line presence and identity: As students mature socially, they need to know how to handle the various identities and modes of interaction on-line as well as face-to-face. This tends to be a topic that is not covered within any formal education context, and yet few parents or informal educators will be aware of it or able to address it.
5. • Heterogeneous learners: In conventional education contexts, the academic differences between students are recognized and accommodated as far as resources allow. In general, when technology is deployed, however, a single system, interface and learning path is prescribed for all learners. Even using systems such as adaptive hypermedia, the end goal is often to bring all students to a common learning outcome. There is a need, however, to provide a platform where all students are able to learn in ways that are appropriate for each individual learner.
6. • Multilingualism: The ability to converse, interact and exchange information in various languages is becoming increasingly important in a world where these interactions are no longer bound by time or distance.

Theoretical Considerations

Sharing Stories in the Forum

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

One aspect of the various possible roles of storytelling as part of social interactions is that people live in societies that have specific cultures that govern the way that they live. Ember and Ember (in Segall et al 1999a) defined culture as "the shared customs of a society, the learned behaviours, beliefs and attitudes that are characteristic of people in a particular society or population". Miller (1995) reports substantial evidence showing that storytelling takes place in many different cultures and between people of all ages, in support of social interaction. The type of narrative may be highly culturally specific. Knowing the stories of another culture is a bridge into another culture.

Scott (1995), in reviewing the work of Schank and Abelson (1995), makes the point that storytelling does not automatically imply the use of words. Other forms of representation are possible, for example using pictures or images, symbols, objects or even mathematical equations.

The social implications of the ability to take pictures and make movies personally and non-professionally are explored by Chalfen in his book "Snapshot Versions of Life" (1987). He develops the notions of "Home Mode" photography, and explores the culture that they portray, encapsulating it in the term "Kodak Culture". He extends the work of Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton (1981) by including home movies as a means of recording significant events and objects from the world within which people exist. This basic need is finding new forms of expression in the current rise in popularity of blogs, personal online diaries.

In the context of technology mediated learning, Howell-Richardson (1995) defines computer mediated communication (CMC) as, "one of a set of telecommunications media supporting multi-party verbal exchange. Specifically, CMC, which comprises of computer-conferencing and electronic mail, supports asynchronous text-based communications". A new area of CMC is network-based language teaching (NBLT) whereby human-to-human interaction is the primary focus. NBLT is "language teaching that involves the use of computers connected to one another in either local or global networks" (Kern and Warschauer, 2000). As language learning and teaching shifted from an objectivist to sociocognitive perspective, so did the approaches to CALL. The teaching of Spanish online in New Brunswick espouses the latter. Kern et al. (2000).

Sociocognitive approaches to CALL shift the dynamic from the learners' interaction with computers to interaction with other humans via the computer. The basis for this new approach to CALL lies both in theoretical and technological developments. Theoretically, there has been the broader emphasis on meaningful interaction in authentic discourse communities. Technologically, there has been the development of computer networking, which allows the computer to be used as a vehicle for interactive human communication.

Building Virtual Communities

Wenger (1998) in his foundational work "Communities of Practice: Learning Meaning and Identity" lays out the principles of how being part of a learning community profoundly affects and

enhances the learning experience. Wenger's presentation of learning within "communities of practice" and the more broad "communities of interest" builds heavily on a refined model of a social theory of learning and depends on social interaction between learners. Mercer (2003) understands community as a group of people who have some common knowledge and similar interests which are shared basically through language.

From a socio-cultural perspective of learning it is believed that all learning takes place in a community. If we think of children we find that the first social milieu in which the life of them is embedded is their family, which is also the first community they belong to. This small but powerful community for those first stages of their lives is the one that helps them construct all their knowledge. Children, certainly learn thanks to the active interaction among the members. As they grow up their community also grows. Thus, the neighborhood, the school and the group of friends become communities too; all of them are sources for children's learning and knowledge construction. Within these communities, knowledge resources are basically shared and developed through language because knowledge commonly exists in the form of language (Mercer, 2003).

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

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

Learning Platform and Practices

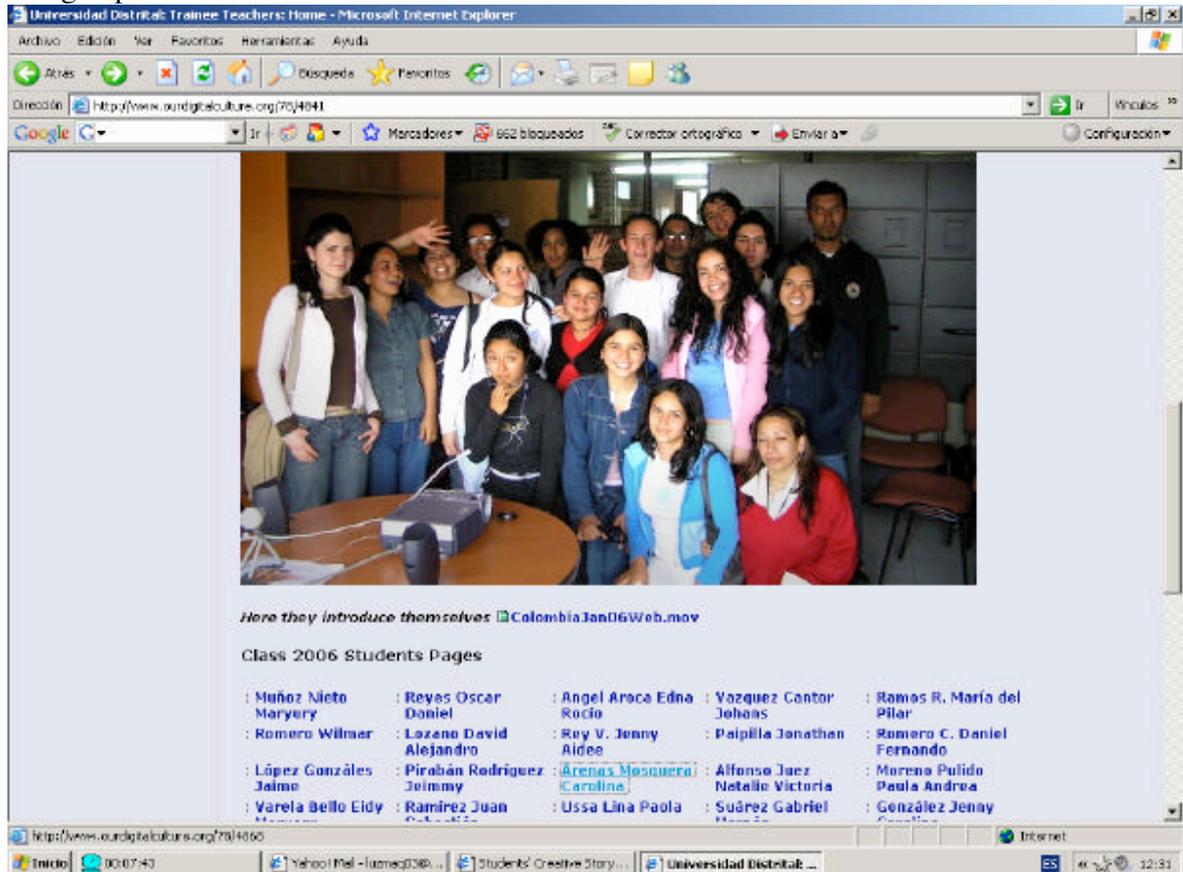
A group of trainee teachers in Colombia (17 students), and a group of senior high school students in Canada (24 students) agreed to use the forum platform to practice their foreign language skills as part of their language training courses. The Colombian students agreed to post in English rather than their native Spanish. The Canadian students agreed to post in Spanish rather than their native English. The material posted included words, photographs, video clips and music. The two groups interacted during a period of seven months and they explored topics of local culture, music and natural disasters.

A key part of the student interaction, therefore, is the experience of attempting to converse with students using a different language. This makes the platform ideal for the native English speaking students who are learning Spanish, and for the native Spanish speaking students who are learning English. Teachers from both countries played an important role in designing pedagogical activities that allowed students to have a space to meet and interact.

Some pedagogical tasks were implemented in order to set an environment for the Canadian and Colombian students to interact. There were three different web spaces in the forum depending on the nature and purpose of the activities. Students were provided with three different blog spaces. One was a personal blog, this individual space allowed students to write about any thing they were interested in.

Some students wrote stories and poems, others about personal experiences, and some others about current cultural aspects. Another space was designed to have students work in groups. There were two main topics proposed in the forum: music and natural disasters. Students could choose one, or simply alternate and write on both. Finally, there was a weekly debate which provided students the opportunity to select any topic of their interest and discuss their opinions by reacting towards others' points of view.

The group of Colombian students



The material exchanged between students are authentic texts which are embedded in communicative tasks planned by the teacher or initiated by the students.

When the exchanges were reviewed, a number of different interactions related to language development were observed.

At the beginning students wrote mainly short descriptive texts based on their likes and personal experiences. However they were meaningful since they were writing for readers different from the teacher, so they tried to write clearly in order that the Canadian readers could understand what they wanted to communicate and establish a dialogue with people who shared similar interests.

Posted at May 16/2006 02:05AM (on DR's Page):

D: my passion: My passion is singing, Because I love it a lot. I began to sing when I was 17 years old. I used to sing in the school where I studied. I began to study vocal technical in a music school in 1998. I belong to music group, We sing rock, balada and pop music. We have been in some concerts in the capital of my country. Also, I belong to the university's chorus, We have been in some concerts in other universities. In the chorus, We sing boleros, chistian and folklore

music. Besides, I sing in the church where I assit, There I play bass. I would like to play piano and saxophone. Besides, I like sports such as ; soccer, basketball. I like so much these sports

Posted at May 26/2006 03:53PM (On DR's Page):

WLSED: Hello D. That's really cool that you like to sing. I used to sing in a band, now I play the piano and keyboard. I think its great that you can play the bass.

Posted at Jun 12/2006 06:08PM (On WL's Page):

D: Hola W si alcansan a ver este mensaje eres afortunada. Gracias por escribirme a mi pagina, A mi me encanta cantar y tocar el bajo. si quizas tu sigues con nosotros el otro semestre, es decir. que continuumos escribiendonos te podria enviar videos de como cantamos ok . que pases unas buenas vacaciones que las disfrutes mucho te dejo mi msn xxxxxx@hotmail.com por si quiere escribirme algo. chao y que Dios te bendiga.

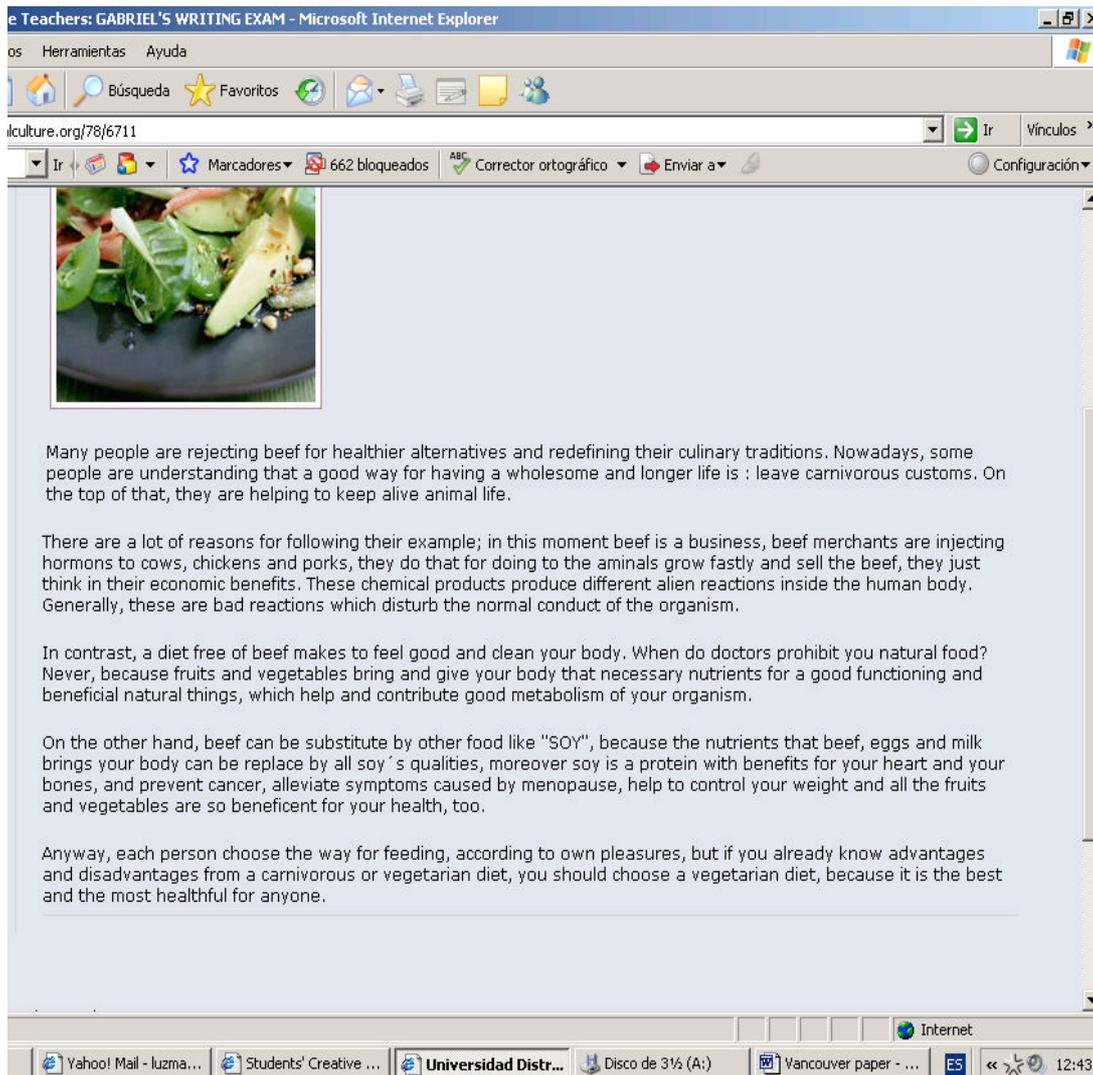
Not only does this snippet illustrate the way that the students interacted using each other's language, it also shows that the students made an effort to use language coherently so that the others could construct meaning out of their writing passages. Even though there are some mistakes, it is possible for the students to reach successful communication.

As students understood the dynamics of the forum and acquired more knowledge on the target language their language competence was also increased. It was evident in the kind of texts and language that they used to write. These texts were longer and the structures were more complex. They moved from writing short personals passages to writing short articles about some topic. This excerpt exemplifies this:



As the illustration shows students wrote an expository text to tell the story of Bambuco, which is a kind of Colombian music. They provided a very clear information about the history, the tradition and meaning of this music which was not notorious in the first writing exchanges of the students.

Finally, students produced a short argumentative essay which was more challenging for them since they did not have just to give information but to support their ideas in order to convince the others. Evidently, they had to use other kind of language devices to write this text. But still students wrote based on their own interests, since one of the purposes of the forum is to give students the opportunity to have their own voices. The following sample illustrates this:



Conclusions

The forum is working as a platform for building language learning communities and exchanging insights into knowledge and culture of the target language. The learning communities are essential for promoting collaborative language learning, and the cultural insights are helpful in contextualizing language use, and therefore the learning of language. In the attempt to communicate students seek strategies to overcome their language difficulties and also gain more understanding of the language which comes implicit within the writing exchanges. Students have written a lot since they are motivated to write for an audience who, in most of the cases, are interested in reading their texts. So, students use language with real communicative purposes and not only mechanical practice and exercise that sometimes do not represent much for them. They are motivated to write about their own interests to communicate with others. Finally, it is important to highlight that teacher's support to the students' writing in the English class and the planning of the activities have been very crucial in order to have successful outcomes and interactions.

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