

The Role of Discussion Boards in a University Blended Learning Program

El papel de los foros de discusión en un programa universitario de aprendizaje mixto

Rosa Isabel González Moreno*

Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá

Discussion boards as tools in blended *English language* learning programs have unique characteristics when compared to other synchronous and asynchronous communication tools that are different. Therefore, it is important to investigate the way they operate, their role within a given program and the students', teachers' and tutors' attitudes towards them. This paper contains the report of a study that took place in an English virtual program of a public university in Colombia. Students' surveys and reflections, the tutor's and teachers' interviews and reflections were used to collect data. The results showed the main advantages and disadvantages of the use of the tool as well as ideas for new proposals to improve their use and, therefore, increase the students' performance in the program.

Key words: ALEX Virtual English program, blended learning, discussion forums.

Los foros de discusión, como herramientas en programas de aprendizaje mixto de inglés, tienen características únicas en comparación con otras herramientas sincrónicas y asincrónicas de comunicación. En consecuencia, es importante indagar sobre la forma como funcionan, el papel dentro del programa y las percepciones que tienen los estudiantes, tutores y profesores acerca de ellos. En este artículo se reporta el estudio que se realizó en un programa virtual de inglés de una universidad pública en Colombia, en el primer semestre de 2010. Se recolectó información mediante encuestas y reflexiones de los estudiantes y entrevistas y reflexiones de los profesores. Los resultados muestran las principales ventajas y desventajas en el uso de esta herramienta e ideas para generar nuevas propuestas que mejoren su uso, para así incrementar el desempeño de los estudiantes en el programa.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje mixto, foros de discusión, Programa ALEX Virtual Inglés.

* E-mail: nosemeocurrionombre@hotmail.com

This article was received on July 30, 2010, and accepted on December 14, 2010.

Introduction

The Colombian society is becoming familiar with the use of new communication tools as part of their daily lives and as part of their higher education context. Thus, it has been necessary to change the role of students and teachers to develop new learning processes properly. For this reason, Universidad Nacional de Colombia yearly invests an important amount of money to provide students access to new technologies, electronic magazines, virtual databases and virtual learning platforms such as Blackboard and Moodle. In 2001 the Academic Council of the University, as stated in its agreement 023, regulated the requirement of a certain proficiency in a foreign language for undergraduate students to be able to graduate as well as the implementation of classes to fulfill this requirement. Therefore, a program called *Programa de Desarrollo de Aprendizaje Autónomo de Lenguas Extranjeras* (Programa ALEX) was established and administered by the Department of Foreign Languages. The program aims to develop communicative competences in a foreign language with emphasis on reading comprehension as part of the professional training that undergraduate students are required to undergo in order to receive a degree.

By the time the ALEX program was thoroughly operating, it started to offer not only English courses to undergraduate students but also other language courses such as French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese and Chinese. Therefore, due to the overpopulation of students and the increase in the demand of English courses, the ALEX Virtual program was set up to respond to those in need of English courses at the university.

Virtual English courses levels I and II were created and the first one piloted in the first term of 2007. In the second term, levels III and IV were offered (Medina, 2009). This virtual environment operates on the Blackboard platform and uses

all the tools offered by it (virtual classroom, discussion boards, online assessment, e-mail, chat, online multimedia modules, etc.), and other tools customized by engineers and pedagogical experts such as the video chat. The development of students' courses is led by teachers and tutors (monitors or assistants), and are previously planned and targeted according to the students' level (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2008). To support this work done in the virtual classroom, students are also required to participate in activities that integrate the methodology of face-to-face intensive semester courses: working in the Resources Center, attending academic and cultural meetings, and participating in projects and evaluations.

The introduction of the blended modality in the EFL context has had an impact on the way communication occurs between students and teachers. For the Colombian academic context, discussion boards have been used as a bridge of communication between the teacher and the students, and most importantly, as a way to practice the subjects students have learned. Under the premise that each tool of the platform plays a unique role in the English learning process, it is necessary to inquire how students perceive each one of the tools provided in the blackboard platform. This paper aims at describing the role of discussion boards by examining students', tutors' and teachers' perceptions. Inquiring as to how they use discussion boards, for what purposes teachers and tutors use them and their opinions about the way the tool works is also relevant. Likewise, it is important to look at these boards through the teachers' and tutors' eyes as these users play a crucial role in the organization of the activities on discussion boards. This role enables them to account for the characterization of their use and the challenges they face when using boards in a virtual-teaching environment.

Context

The study was carried out at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Bogotá during the second term of 2009. Throughout the development of the project, this University faced a lot of income and budget problems which had the impact of delay on academic processes such as the opening of Virtual courses and the Resources Center. Under these conditions, English teachers as well as tutors work in difficult circumstances characterized by time required for tutoring sessions or feedback and by having a lot of students in their charge. The great demand for these courses is also an important feature revealed during the research process.

Participants

The study was conducted with students, tutors and teachers of the ALEX Virtual program levels I to IV. The group of participants was composed of 20 students from different levels of the program, selected randomly, 4 Teachers of different levels as well as 3 tutors.

The participating students were chosen from a survey to be answered voluntarily and applied to a database of 1000 students. From those 1000 students only 20 answered. Their ages ranged from 15-28 years old. The students came from different undergraduate programs such as economics, medicine, biology, engineering, mathematics, accounting, design and chemistry. Nine of the students had had previous experience in virtual education environments while eleven of them had not.

The tutors and teachers who participated in the study were working with the ALEX Virtual program during the second semester of 2009. All teachers are graduated from different English educational programs of Colombian universities and have a high English level; 3 of the 4 teachers have had previous experience in virtual program environments. All 3 tutors were 8th semester students of the Philology

and Languages-English program and all of them were between 20 and 25 years old.

Theoretical Framework

ALEX Virtual Program

The ALEX Virtual program is based on student-centered teaching. In student-centered classrooms the goal of education is to create independent, autonomous learners who take responsibility for their own learning. The ultimate goal of ALEX Virtual program is to achieve a constructivist way of learning the English Language using as a basis students' autonomous work, the teacher's guidance and the collaborative work among students. The program provides opportunities for students to successfully learn English as a foreign language by blending virtual tools (Blackboard platform) and some face-to-face complementary activities. Since its piloted stage in 2007, this program has changed in terms of organization and evaluation systems, incorporating the interaction component as a relevant element of knowledge construction (Medina, 2009).

The pedagogical model of constructivism, which inspired the design of the program, states that knowledge is built through social interaction and is the mechanism by which language is spread and by which a foreign language is acquired. Among the benefits of collaborative learning, we can pinpoint the experience gained by the learner when interacting with others. Vygotsky (1978, cited in Benson, 2001) demonstrated the importance of others as learning mediators as he believed that human mental activity is a particular case of social experience (see Figure 1). A certain amount can be learnt by a student learning on his own. In addition, their learning mentor teachers provide 'scaffolding' or support to help students and gradually withdraw this support so that the student

becomes more independent. But what happens to the communicative bond among students? Peer tutoring, where students in the same group work with one another, has the advantage of increasing effectiveness and accuracy in relation to social skills. It also facilitates knowledge for all in a way that a teacher may not perceive.

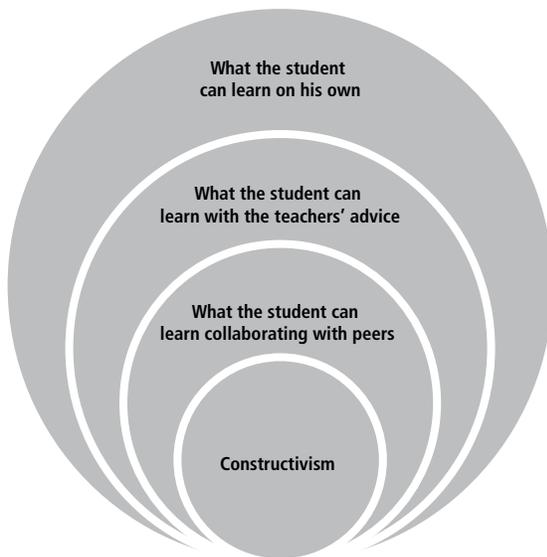


Figure 1. Zone of proximal development (theory developed by Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Benson, 2001). Adapted and edited from Carlile, Jordan, & Stack (2004).

The ALEX Virtual program is based on the notions of autonomy and collaborative work. It shares the following features with the face-to-face modality, with some modifications to adapt the contents to the virtual environment.

- **Projects:** Projects are assigned to put the student in a more communicative and collaborative environment (Medina, 2009). The main objective of doing a project is to get students aware of the different cultures sharing

the same language and of the grammatical and social aspects that model language.

- **Academic and Cultural Meetings:** Cultural meetings also foster collaborative work as well as cultural awareness among students from different majors. The activities carried out in these events relate to custom, traditions, slang and other different aspects in which culture is the one that molds the target language. In some of the cases students show the results of their projects.
- **Resources Center:** The courses place emphasis on reading comprehension; students also have access to the Resources Center, where they have plenty of material to practice the four abilities (writing, reading, listening and speaking). Advisors help the student to reflect upon learning strategies, materials and other media to develop language competence (Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras, 2007).
- **The compensation forums:** At the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010, discussion boards were given a new use: as a complementation of lesson practice. It is a forum to be set up weekly in the online classroom to facilitate students' contact with the language. It is especially useful for those students who, for their work or geographic location, have trouble developing a face-to-face or online (video chat) interaction (Coordinación ALEX Virtual, 2010).

The grading system has continued to evolve since the program was piloted. The current grading system shows that communication among students, tutors and teachers is considered a relevant factor for success in the blended course. Currently, the students' performances are evaluated according to the following aspects:

Table 1. ALEX Virtual Grading System 2009-2010. Taken from: Guía del estudiante (Coordinación ALEX Virtual, 2010)

Weekly activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekly exercises assigned by the teacher • Quizzes • Portfolio • Other activities 	30%
Course project and presentation at academic meetings, course project and presentation at academic and cultural meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The teacher evaluates both the development process and the final product. • The results are presented in academic and cultural meetings 	15%
Interaction component	<p>Weekly participation in <i>any</i> of the following modalities of interaction:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>Tutoring sessions</i> with teachers/tutors in the ALEX Virtual Resources Center b. <i>Online tutoring sessions</i> using the video chat system c. Weekly participation in the <i>compensation forum</i> d. Study with the interactive program <i>Tell me more.</i> e. <i>Session with advisors</i> at the <i>Resources Center</i> and practice with materials for learning English: auditory, visual and written aids. f. Participation in <i>conversation and practice clubs</i> in the Resources Center. 	20%
Final exam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is a requirement to have taken two achievement tests. <p>This is the only time attendance is mandatory</p>	35%

Discussion Boards

Most of the Internet tools, apart from being used to share information, are also used for Internet communication, which can be instantaneous or synchronic (chat, instant messaging) or delayed or asynchronous (e-mail, discussion forums). With asynchronous communication, participants send messages when it is most convenient for them. These Internet communication tools, when used in the academic environment, enable interaction by means of information sharing and non-verbal discussion between peers, tutors and teachers.

The forum is a virtual communication tool where the user can leave messages asynchronously;

in other words, outside of a continuous time or simultaneity between comments (Arango, 2003). The participation record of all users is stored on the server, and unlike the chat, interventions in the forum are similar to those views in a debate, closer to the discussion. Most online discussion boards implement threading. Threading is a way of displaying messages and replies to messages in an easy to follow format so that when a participant enters, he sees an indented list of messages (Horton & Horton, 2003). Usually, the first message is the main message of the thread or topic and the messages indented under it are the replies or comments to the main message (see Figure 2).

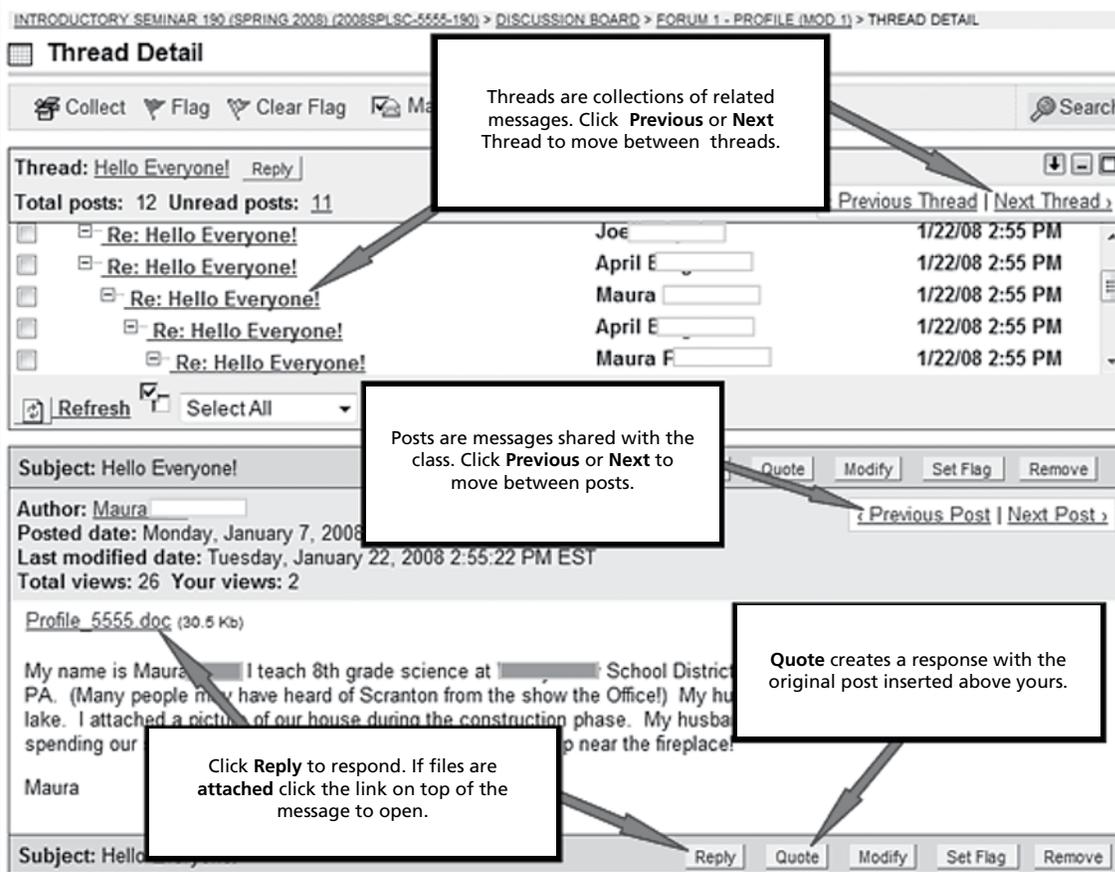


Figure 2. Discussion Board: Thread Display (retrieved from http://libweb.mansfield.edu/graduate/tutorial/images/Forum_ThreadDetails.gif).

Horton & Horton (2003) also stated that if we talk about levels of asynchrony, discussion forums are less synchronous than e-mail because there is less expectation of a speedy reply. In e-learning contexts, forums are considered the most comprehensive communication tools on the Internet as they are in themselves the sight of expression, opinion and interaction of the subscribed members and enable communication and understanding between them. The user is able to publish anecdotes, articles, questions and other kinds of items considered useful to take actions upon other participants' thoughts.

Discussion boards are attached to a bigger set of tools in educational programs and have unique

features that change according to the objectives of each curriculum. Pérez (2008) inquires about the concept of discussion boards, the roles of the participants within it, the role of an administrator and the student's profile as well as some social norms to apply in an educational forum and the utilities the forum offers. According to this author, boards are established as a valuable tool in education, especially for distance education, eliminating barriers of time and space and encouraging reflective and collaborative participation. It is also a tool that promotes collaborative learning and encourages interaction among participants who actively seek information, share it, and discuss

it with the aim of achieving common goals and objectives, sharing experiences and clarifying doubts, among others.

Discussion boards in the ALEX Virtual program are incorporated as a tool in the English course offered to students at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. The discussions there are created based on the issues, functions, concepts and structures that are taught along the course. Normally, students discuss and participate weekly in order to use and practice what is learned, and the tutor's work is to give feedback to those entries taking into account different aspects previously agreed upon at the start of the program e.g. spelling, punctuation, correctness of the verb form, and structural organization (Guía del estudiante, Coordinación ALEX Virtual, 2010).

There have been several investigations carried out by students of this University in regard to the platform, its tools, the modules that constitute each course and the methodology of the ALEX Virtual program (Barrios, 2009; Cantor, 2009; Medina, 2009; Pinzón, 2008). Pinzón (2008) explored students', teachers' and tutors' perceptions about face-to-face and online tutoring sessions in levels I and II of the ALEX Virtual program during the first semester of 2008. This exploration shows how these kinds of tutoring sessions are organized and the reasons that students attend them. In this case, students attended tutoring sessions in order to solve doubts and feel the tutors' support. Likewise, Medina (2009) described the interaction taking place between a tutor and her students during the online tutoring sessions in the ALEX Virtual English program level IV. The results showed that language itself, the methodology of the course, reflection upon learning and social and personal issues were the main traces of interaction.

Barrios (2009) intervened pedagogically by applying collaborative work strategies in the second

level of the ALEX Virtual program. The purpose of the research was to describe the answer given by students to activities of collaborative work when using synchronous and asynchronous tools. The results of this research showed that the achievement of collaborative work in virtual environments involves a number of elements such as the support among group members and the kind of activities developed by the teachers along the course. It was found that the use of different kinds of activities could foster collaborative work or autonomous work.

Cantor (2009) inquired specifically about the main characteristics of discussion boards and illustrates the importance of this tool in the transition from face-to-face education to virtual education. This author describes discussion boards in ALEX Virtual as a tool of teacher's accompaniment to the autonomous student learning, and inquires about how students use the tool by asking: When do they use them? What for? What topics do they debate? How do students participate? Her research was carried out during the second term of 2008 when the program was in the piloting stage with 4 groups of second level students.

The study reported that the tool was "used to create dialogues and debates among the students, giving them the opportunity to express their ideas about certain topics. According to Cantor, students' interaction is one of the most important functions of the tool for students (2009, p. 119). Collaborative learning was studied only in one perspective: teacher-student relationships as the accompaniment of the teacher influenced student self-awareness process towards autonomy.

Methodology of the Study

This was an exploratory case study aimed at describing the perceptions of three different participants of the same event (students, tutors and teachers) regarding their experiences with the

discussion boards. I also aimed at identifying and describing the main characteristics, purposes and functions of the ALEX Virtual - English program discussion boards. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), the case study is characterized by the use of data collection methods such as semi-structured and open interviews, observation, narrative accounts, documents and diaries as these instruments give a clear report of the participant's role that, consequently, merges and shows a more global understanding of the studied situation. It is also a research strategy that contributes to our knowledge of individuals or groups in organizational, social, political and related phenomena (Yin, 2003).

Data Collection

The first stage of the research procedure consisted of observations and documentation to account for general aspects. Data were also collected through a survey for students and teachers to glean their perceptions of the way discussion boards and the program operates. The second stage included semi-structured interviews for students, tutors and teachers to account for their perspectives on the positive and/or negative impact on the use of discussion boards. The participants provided information on their participation and interaction in the board, the process of communication and organization in groups to carry out the activities of the cultural week, perceptions about teamwork, and strengths and difficulties faced in the process. Students were asked to tell the story of their experience in the virtual program; they were

especially asked what they thought about the discussion boards as a tool for communication and as a place to practice writing skills.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis for this study consisted of a mixture of different techniques and coding procedures by which data are "broken down, conceptualized, and put back together in new ways" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990 p. 61).

The first step I took in data analysis is called open coding, in which data are observed, divided and conceptualized. The second step of data analysis corresponds to the axial coding process. In axial coding the focus is on specifying a category in terms of the conditions that gave rise to it: "the context, the strategies by which the phenomenon is carried out, and the consequences of those strategies" (p. 97). The main objective of managing the data this way is to help in the conceptualization of the data and to establish logic relationships among the emerging categories of analysis.

Findings

From the coding and preliminary categories analysis I found two main axes of categories. The first category is related to the interaction component of discussion boards, while the second has to do with the writing skill as a component of the tool and its role inside the English learning process. The descriptive elements shown in Table 2 are also inter-related as the feedback component is an element of the interaction component as well as the writing skill practice component.

Table 2. Categories found in data analysis

The Role of Discussion Boards in the ALEX Virtual Program

Category	Subcategory	Descriptive elements
Interaction through Discussion Boards	• Teacher/Tutor-to-student interaction	• The importance of feedback
	• Student-to-student interaction	• Conditions for working collaboratively
Writing Skill practice in Discussion Boards	• The students' writing process	• Challenges and difficulties in the writing process

Interaction through discussion boards

Teachers of the ALEX Virtual program are in charge of several groups of students. Each teacher works with a tutor and both of them are responsible for guiding the virtual course. During 2009-II the boards were also used to complement the interaction component. It was recurrent to hear how dynamic communication was developed in discussion boards, what teachers did to foster interaction and how students reacted to those actions. Students also spoke about their experiences when using the tool to get in contact with the tutor.

Teacher/Tutor-to-Student Interaction

All four teachers designed and used boards similarly. Two of them often posted writing activities in the board (teachers 1 and 2). Every week there was a different topic to discuss and it was based on the grammatical component worked on the respective module. Topics were normally written as a question or as an instruction and the

teacher had to write an example of a completed task in order to show students the outcome expected for each activity. Most of the activities asked students to write their opinions regarding current issues, to propose different options for a special situation and to write about personal experiences. After a week, the board was disabled for students to be punctual in doing the task and tutors began to correct those on-time participations and deliver feedback.

After that, each of the excerpts in the discussion board were revised and corrected, and then students were rewarded with a grade on the weekly activities, while participation in the compensatory forum represented a special grade on the interaction component of the program. Teachers 3 and 4 decided to assign the discussion board activities every 15 days to give students the possibility of writing on time. At the same time this gave them time to correct and grade the large number of interventions. Tutors also used the board as a way to monitor the work of a student in the whole platform.

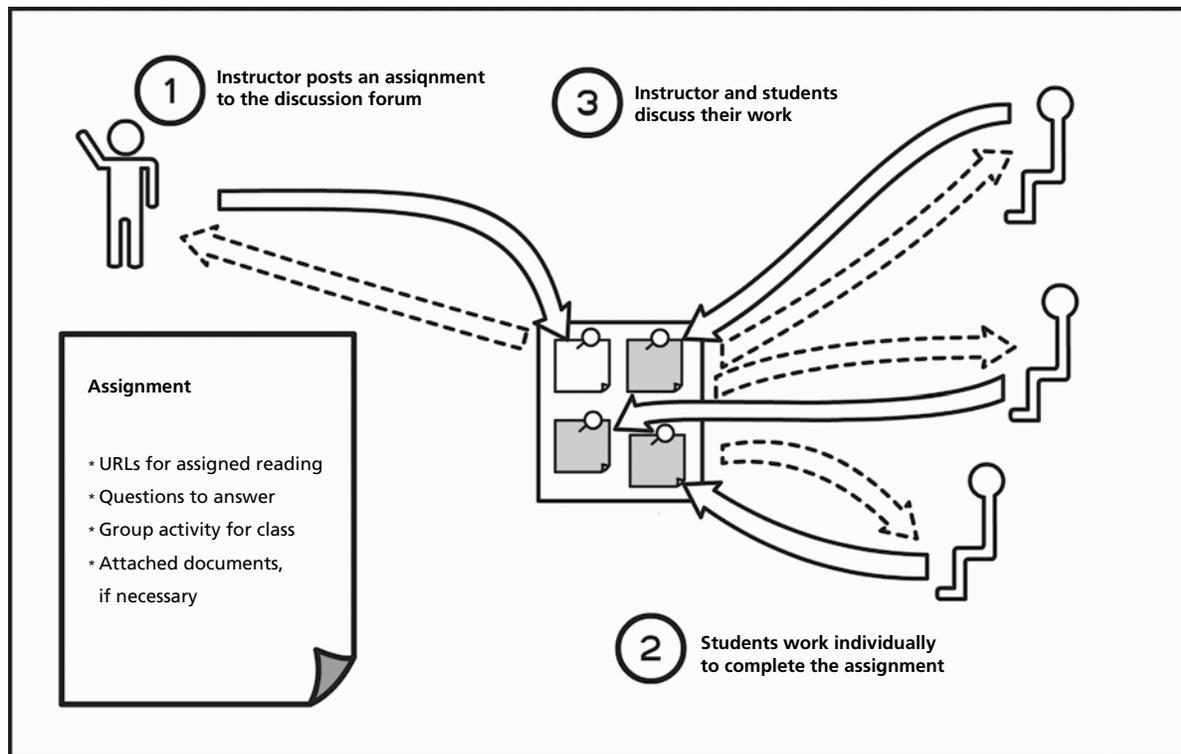


Figure 3. Discussion board implementation process (Adapted and edited from Horton & Horton, 2003, p. 217).

Only teacher 4 designed discussion forum activities to scaffold the participants' learning: they began with a few individual activities and then moved to interactive games to foster interaction and group activity. According to this plan, it can be said that the discussion board implementation normally consists of a four-stage process (see Figure 3). First, the instructor (in this case, the teacher or the tutor) posts an assignment in the discussion board. Second, learners read the assignment. They may work on it individually before posting their completed solutions back to the discussion forum, where the instructor and other students review and discuss them. Finally, the teacher or tutor corrects every intervention and gives feedback. This process is repeated several times depending on the number of assignments that the teacher implements per level.

These processes fully agree with the *pedagogic interaction model* for investigation of classroom interaction proposed by Malamah-Thomas (1987). The author described the mutual influences between the teacher and students. The teacher's action causes the students' reaction. Then, their reaction becomes an action directed towards the teacher and, as a result, evoking his or her reaction. That is, both the teacher and students are influencing each other and influenced by each other.

Here we take Malamah-Thomas' explanations of face-to-face classroom to virtual environments. The methodological device is represented by the board and the kind of assignments posted by the teacher/tutor. This generates a reaction in class that is represented by the student's individual work and then that work generates the teachers' reaction,

which is evidenced in revision and feedback. This further action starts a new round of interaction. Every action of the learners needs to be countered with corrections and feedback before starting a new utterance. That is what teachers of ALEX Virtual program are called to do with students' interventions. This practice enhances students' motivation towards the blended modality and supports the bond between the instructor and the learner.

Students also accounted for the interaction they had with teachers and tutors when using discussion boards and talked about two main aspects of the interaction: the affective and the academic aspects. A significant number of students pointed out that the contact between teacher and learner is usually limited to a specific subject, such as the solution of a particular problem or achievement of a specific project.

According to students' interviews the teacher/tutor serves as a technician or a consultant rather than an adviser or confidant on personal matters related to the English learning process. For most students with time difficulties, posting on the compensation forum was the only form of tuition that all students were able to access. Teachers and tutors were asked to evaluate from 1 to 4 (4 being the highest rating) how effective they considered discussion board as a means of communication between them.

A significant number of tutors and teachers considered the discussion forum an effective tool with which to communicate with students, whereas a minimal percentage (18%) considered the forum an ineffective tool. These results differ from the perceptions given by students. A significant amount of students graded discussion boards as ineffective for enabling free communication between them and their instructors. In contrast to the responses of the interviews, they argue

that the communication is not clearly seen as it is camouflaged as mandatory interventions that in fact are not expected to have counterargument by the teacher. They are just corrected in terms of grammar, vocabulary and structure. Inquiring more about its effectiveness in the interviews, students claimed that communication was strictly related to the kind of activities the teacher or the tutor posted. Some teachers' feedback also included some opinions, encouraging the students to keep writing. Let us read two cases in which one of the students was really engaged with the writing process and in constant communication with the teacher, while the other was not.

Her (my teacher) really encourages me to continue working on the board. My writing is horrible and I was thinking to quit the course. She told me to not be afraid to commit mistakes, then I received all the feedback for my participations and I kept trying... I mean, even if this is a virtual course I feel the teacher was always there. (Int. St10, 140-145)

In my last course the tutor was the one doing the entire job. We tried to contact our teacher but it was impossible... even our tutor was complaining about that. She did her best but we were a lot of students. We had to write an opinion or sometimes to talk about an experience, but as the tutor was working alone she decided not to give us corrections but to grade our participation... I felt abandoned. I felt everything so impersonal that I really believe I learned nothing from the course. (Int. St2, 34- 41)

While the first student has a positive perception about the communication process and guidance from the teacher, the second one argues that her poor performance is strictly related to the lack of teacher's presence and the way in which the tutor managed the activities on the board. That leads us to the conclusion that the more the students are involved with the teacher, the more motivated they are and therefore the more they will practice and interact. These affective interactions engage

students not only with the rest of the participants but with the tool, the program and with the writing skill practice. From this observation we conclude that the tutor, as a supporter and moderator, is responsible for contacting students, for providing on-time feedback. This will have an impact on the perceptions students have towards the tool and the program itself and will influence their motivation to interact with each other.

The Importance of Feedback

Teachers and tutors of the ALEX Virtual program have the responsibility of providing feedback on all students' interventions, utterances and evaluations. Feedback can be very powerful if done well. Good feedback "gives students information they need so they can understand where they are in their learning and what to do next –the cognitive factor. Once they feel they understand what to do and why, most students develop a feeling that they have control over their own learning –the motivational factor" (Carnell, 2000, p. 9). Carnell also describes the teacher's or tutor's characteristics in teacher-to-student feedback as the instructor who

Clarifies goals: For every thread the teacher clarified what he wanted us to do and gave us different examples. It's like...as if he explained the purpose of each activity so we know it is not a useless task. (Int. St10, 128-130)

Gives a sense of direction and purpose: For the cultural week [...] he read our proposals and gave us suggestions about grammar but, more importantly, he showed us like a way of doing it because I was a little bit lost. (Int. St5, 112-120)

Identifies mistakes: Well...that's like the main thing they do with our participations, right? They always show you why you were wrong, which word was spelled wrong, which word you miss to complete a sentence. (Int. St1, 40-43)

Provides advice: In my personal case the tutor was really supportive, her comments on how I could correct myself and be

aware of some characteristics of words helped me to edit my own participations before posting them. (Int. St3, 72-75)

These are the most time-consuming tasks for teachers and tutors but the most important ones as well. Consequently, students "may appreciate tutor feedback and response to their contributions, but also can lose heart if there is no moderator presence" (MacDonald, 2008, p. 83). Sometimes it may be hours or even days until a reply is received for a post and this can be frustrating for students. Delayed responses can contribute to communication anxiety in which the sender may experience concern as to whether the message was sent to the correct destination or whether it was received but was considered unworthy of a reply (Hiltz, Turoff, & Harasim, 2007).

Teachers and tutors argue about the large amount of students they have to guide and the great amount of input they should provide to students' participations they receive weekly. Besides, tutors must provide prompt feedback for students to mind their mistakes and be ready to write correctly in the following weekly activity. That means instructors will certainly need to expend extra effort to ensure that all students elicit feedback.

A disadvantage of the use of discussion boards is the time that we need to devote to feedback. At the moment, the tools we have for feedback are really time-consuming. If we could use certain applications to promptly detect common mistakes and classify them according to the type of error/mistake committed, our work would be less stressful and more efficient and feedback would be more satisfying. (Int. Tt1, 34-37)

Some students work better after receiving feedback while others do not appreciate those actions because they are studying to get a qualification and have little time for time-consuming elements of the course. This makes them commit mistakes that have already been shown to them. That relates to the comments I made on feedback, but they never read. (Int. T3, 50-54.)

Giving feedback on individual writing activities can be very demanding on a tutor's time but also really encouraging for students who are really committed to the activity. That shows some characteristics of being an autonomous learner: "The more prompt the feedback given for student postings the higher the student learning and satisfaction" (Arbaugh & Hornik, 2002; Shea et al., 2001; 2002, cited in Hiltz et al., 2007, p. 63). Let us read different experiences and opinions over this matter and some counterarguments from the teacher's point of view.

Well, in the boards we had to write about some specific questions about everyday aspects, opinions, anecdotes, etc. She gave us a week to write it and post it on the board and the next week we received feedback. One day, I don't know what happened exactly, she started to delay feedback... and then we stopped receiving it. Although we thought activities were over, she was still asking for weekly writing exercises. I never understood what the point was in keeping asking for them if she was not going to read them. At the end I just posted it for the sake of the grade. (Int. St.11-17)

Actually I failed the course, but it was because I entered the platform a couple of times and then never came back because I was really busy. The teacher I had always sent us messages and reminded us of the importance of participations... She was a very diligent teacher. So, although I failed, I know it was because of me. It was not the program's or the teacher's fault. (Int. St8, 43-47)

I always tried to come up with a good disposition and correct as many interventions as possible; however, there is great apathy on the part of students and teachers. I think that this is due to the lack of time they have to do the relevant activities. Many students believe that virtual English saves time but the truth is the other way around... Therefore, even if they write out of obligation, I have to always be there, cheering and giving feedback ... one gets tired. (Int. T4, 51-56)

The disadvantages or a negative point of the use of this resource does not depend on the tool itself but the student's attitude

towards it. (Surv. T4, when asked about which disadvantages the use of discussion boards had.)

These opinions confirm that the use teachers give to the tool as well as the initial attitude of students about the activities or the program in general terms determine students' and teachers' good or bad experiences. To Mehrabian (1971, cited in Hiltz et al., 2007), in order to be effective, feedback should be timely, and should include something that is called "instructor immediacy behaviors", which refers to communication behaviors that reduce the social and psychological distance between people. If the student is feeling left behind in accompaniment processes by the tutor or the teacher, his bonds with the program itself will break and his or her perception about the tool and even the program will be negative. Likewise, if students send and receive feedback on time and are in constant contact with the platform, they will enhance their commitment to the activities and, therefore, will express a positive perception towards the tool.

Student-to-Student Interaction

Teachers and tutors were asked to describe how they perceived interaction among their students only based on discussion boards' interventions. The majority of them emphasized that discussion boards, apart from being an English writing environment, were also created to foster participation among students.

Students are supposed to practice their writing skills while at the same time participate in the discussions. It is important for us to know what they think about a topic, not for the topic itself but to really be sure they can communicate without vocabulary or grammar being an obstacle. (Int. Tt1, 40-45)

Looking at the circumstances in past courses and in the present one in particular, the top priority was centered on student-tutor

interaction, with little interaction among students. Let's say a student post[ed] a question "I don't understand how to use the third conditional", and then it was the tutor's duty to respond. And that was all. Yeah? So, you'd make your participation, I will reply to you and then there will be no other person to respond. There's no[t] continuity to the thread. (Int. T3, 73-78)

As we see in the intervention of the teacher, collaboration is extremely attached to the participants' interaction among themselves. Administrators try to foster collaborative learning in discussion boards by implementing tasks in which it is necessary that students post on other students' participations. As some teachers said, these kinds of tasks are required to make them interact, as there are some students who are not very willing to participate and who see no value in doing so. Peer correction is not perceived as a very frequent activity in online tutoring. The levels of interaction among students are low compared with the levels of interaction between teacher and student. This tendency is due to several factors such as the time they devote to their practice on the discussion boards per week and the nature of activities which do not foster interaction and discussion.

Conditions to Work Collaboratively

Several studies conducted in online learning suggest that students will not collaborate unless collaboration is structured into the course and evidenced in the nature of the activities. Students may just present their information without considering the thoughts of others. These results are similar to the ones noted by Ellis (2001), who suggested that "hindsight training in the use of a threaded discussion is needed" (p. 175). These activities can include getting classmates to provide feedback on both work in progress and completed work. This also gives you insight into how individuals have contributed to a group piece

of work. For example, Teacher 1 and Teacher 4 designed different writing activities for different groups of students; here, they explain the outcome received:

My tutor, he's the one who has the credit for all activities done in discussion boards. He knows a lot and he knows how to keep them motivated. For example, the first week he did an icebreaker activity to IV level students. He explained the activity to the students like "Today we are going to tell a tale. I am going to start with a simple phrase and then each one of you has to continue the story. You must start your sentence using the final word of the previous comment. We have a week, at the end of the week we are going to read the whole story and to comment on it". You can't imagine the amount of comments he received next week... I think they like this kind of interactive activities... they release all stress and anxiety. (Int. T1)

Well, collaborative learning is defined as working together; working as a group and that depends on the approach that each teacher gives to the board, right?, because, for example the nature of our boards (the one that my tutors and I implemented) was not to generate or motivate students to work collaboratively. If I post a board that asks you to tell me about your personal experience as a child there is no way that you would work collaboratively with another person. Then it depends on the type of board, if the post is ... if I intend to design collaborative activities I have to change the topic of the forum ... Then, for example "we will prepare a recipe, then student 1 will put the ingredients, student 2 is going to say how the recipe is prepared and student 3 is going to tell me how to serve it. Let's prepare it together", then it would be different. But the forums that we have put ... not encourage students to work collaboratively but more to reflect about personal issues. (Int. T4, 91-101)

According to these teachers' experiences, those kinds of internet-mediated games are meaningful to students and foster participation among them because they share an inclusive factor. Students feel they are contributing to the activity and to the rest of the class while improving their writing skills.

These findings show us that asynchronous learning tools enable us to encourage and support new forms of collaboration in virtual environments, but they demand time, perseverance, and a design of new activities. In some cases, they require reflection on the syllabus and the objectives of the program. Collaborative work also calls for students' commitment to the communicative and learning process, as well as teachers' guidance and monitoring.

Writing Skill Practice in Discussion Boards

Writing skill practice is one of the discussion board characteristic components. This component was organized around weekly discussion topics. Those discussion topics were posted according the grammatical structure presented in modules.

According to students' perceptions, 79% reported the tool had helped them to improve their written production. However, 21% of students argued that participating in this tool represented neither practice nor improvement in writing skills. Further inquiry into the reasons that it is not representative leads us to special cases in which students argue that feedback was not given on time or the teacher did not use meaningful activities.

Challenges and Difficulties in the Writing Process

It has been found that the teachers encountered various pedagogical challenges, most of them related to the limitation of online instructional background and related to students' writing process. These challenges and limitations affect how teachers perceive their roles in the class and also students' perceptions towards the program.

The main challenges for teachers are the lack of students' orientation in writing processes and plagiarism. When teachers were asked whether

they first introduced writing practices, two of them said they did at the beginning of the course while the other two only used examples of a possible intervention without giving any other advice about the writing process.

Students were in level IV so I noticed they already had instruction in the writing process, although I emphasized the importance of writing an organized paragraph by giving them examples and posting links with important writing strategies for them to take into account. (Int. T4, 130-133)

The problems experienced by students in learning how to write appropriately are magnified if they are studying in a second language and perhaps accustomed to a linguistic culture which is very different to that around the course. Teachers are there to help students develop the writing process and construct awareness about the advantages of a staged plan for writing. If students are not adequately prepared to face writing assignments, plagiarism appears as a viable solution to them.

First of all, those students who have a great deficit in Spanish writing level are those who are also going to have writing problems in other languages. For them it would be advisable to have enough time to come to face-to-face tutoring sessions. However not all students who have these problems take into account the time needed to mind their errors. (Int. T1, 133- 136)

Students with low level in English have to take more time and put more effort to their writing and I think that affects their... emotions. They feel frustrated, they need to study for other different things and just use a translator! And I personally consider that as bad as plagiarism because that student is not going to know what is grammatically correct in English and what is not. (Int. T4, 112-116)

Plagiarism is also a relevant issue in virtual education. Sutherland-Smith (2008) outlines some ongoing issues in plagiarism for teachers and institutions. The main causes have to do with

difficulties in reading theoretically “dense” texts; difficulties in summarizing key ideas in more complex readings; and an inability to incorporate their own voice into students’ work, among others. Those causes are somehow evidenced in students’ perceptions about the difficulties of writing in English. However, the main cause reported by students was the lack of time to cope with activities.

Regarding Teacher 4’s testimony, findings show that students in beginner levels take two to three times longer than others to be able to read and respond to material; they may also experience a negative impact in their ability to participate equitably (Harasim et al., 1995 cited in Hiltz et al., 2007). Also, supporting Teacher 4’s reflection, students surveyed were asked about the reasons for taking a virtual course. The majority of them (26%) chose it because they lacked the time to participate in a face-to-face course.

Six of the 10 students interviewed stated that they took more time than expected to complete the writing exercises and, consequently, this affected their affective filter as anxiety interferes with the process of acquiring a proficient level of writing in a second language (Krashen, 1988). There is also an important relationship between the type of activities designed to motivate students’ writing practice and the quality of the interventions.

Being asynchronous, communication limits the type of written discourse and the naturalness of the interaction is needed when learning a language. For example, to ask two students to build a dialogue in a board would be an inconvenient exercise because it lacks authenticity. (Int. T2, 150-154)

Further research is needed regarding strategies to avoid plagiarism in students’ writing products to establish important casual relationships. One useful instructional strategy is online debates. Individuals or groups can be assigned different sides of a controversial topic, and a vote can be taken at the

end to see who had the most convincing argument. According to tutors’ and teachers’ reflections, there should be clear policies for online discussions. They need to be clear and well defined and should include how individual students or groups are graded for their contributions to discussions. Guidelines might also specify a minimum number of responses and the minimum length of messages to encourage students to think harder about the content of a message rather than just replying with very short, superficial comments.

Conclusions

Characteristics of the discussion boards vary depending on how teachers and tutors manage discussion boards. Two main components characterized the role of discussion boards in the ALEX Virtual program according to teachers’, tutors’ and students’ perceptions: interaction and writing skill practice.

Discussion boards work with two different processes of interaction: teacher/tutor-to-student interaction and student-to-student interaction. Teacher/tutor-to-student interaction is the process of weekly communication that teachers have with students and is based on assignment development. These processes fully agree with the *pedagogic interaction model* for investigation of classroom interaction proposed by Malamah-Thomas (1987). Feedback is one of the most commonly used educational interventions and a vital part in the use of discussion boards in the ALEX Virtual program. If the student is feeling left behind in accompaniment processes by the tutor or the teacher, his bonds with the program itself will break and his or her perception about the tool and even the program will be negative. If students thus receive feedback on time and are in constant contact with the teacher and platform, they will experience a positive perception towards the tool.

The levels of interaction among students are low compared to the levels of interaction between teacher and student. This tendency is due to several factors: the time per week they devote to the practice on the discussion boards, the commitment to participate in platform activities, and the nature of activities which has an impact on interaction and discussion.

Writing skill practice is one of the discussion board characteristic components. This component was organized around weekly discussion topics. Those discussion topics were posted according to the grammatical structure presented in modules. The main challenges for teachers are the lack of students' orientation in writing processes and plagiarism. Various research projects have included how process-oriented teaching influences the writer's processes (planning, drafting, revising, editing) and the products (quality, syntax, length, and number of errors). Findings show that meaningful topics that relate to classroom learning activities will promote discussion and facilitate a deeper level of thinking about a topic.

Limitations and Further Research

Participants' collaboration and availability were crucial limitations to this research. Students were chosen from a survey to be answered voluntarily by a database of 1000 students. From those 1000 students, only 20 answered and then, only ten granted permission to have an interview. Teachers and tutors were also chosen from a survey applied to all ALEX Virtual program instructors (a total of 20 people) from which only 7 responded. I considered this a limitation for further studies for very often we expect to have a greater number of participants, especially teachers. It was also expected that they were more open to collaborate in these kinds of investigations.

Further research in the field must also analyze teachers' challenges in virtual education and propose how to best empower teachers to take advantage of the new technology available in their classrooms. It would be more relevant if those objectives could be implemented following an action research design. This way, the role of the researcher in the project would be that of a tutor or a teacher and researcher at the same time, to give observational data more power.

Questions focused on how writers adapt their strategies to computer writing or on whether their composing habits change with the technology are clearly relevant for this field as writers' particular habits and strategies for composing are influenced by computers. The results of such investigation can help to control plagiarism and shed light on the use of an internet translator.

References

- Arango, M. L. (2003). Foros virtuales como estrategia de aprendizaje. Universidad de Los Andes. LIDIE-Laboratorio de Investigación y Desarrollo sobre Informática en Educación. Argentina. Retrieved on April 2009 from Web site: <http://www.rlcu.org.ar/revista/numeros/02-02-Abril-2004/documentos/Arango.pdf>
- Barrios, O. (2008). *Aprendizaje colaborativo y entornos virtuales: en la búsqueda de una comunidad de aprendizaje de lengua extranjera para los estudiantes de segundo nivel del programa ALEX Virtual*. Monografía para optar por el Título de Licenciado en Filología e Idiomas-Inglés. Universidad Nacional de Colombia Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, Bogotá.
- Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*. Edinburgh: Longman Pearson Education Limited.
- Cantor, D. I. (2009). Discussion Boards as Tools in Blended EFL Learning Programs. *PROFILE Issues in Teachers Professional Development*, 11, p. 113-121.

- Carlile, O., Jordan, A., & Stack, A. (2004). *Learning by Design: Learning Theory for the Designer of Multimedia Educational Materials*. Waterford: WIT/BBC Online.
- Carnell, E. (2000). Dialogue, discussion and feedback: views of secondary school students on how others help their learning. In Askew, S. (Ed), *Feedback for learning*, (pp. 46-61). London: Routledge.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K., (2000). (5th Edition), *Research Methods in Education*, London: Routledge Falmer.
- Coordinación ALEX Virtual. (2010). Guía del estudiante: Programa ALEX Virtual. Retrieved from: <http://guiadelestudiantealexvirtual.net16.net/>
- Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras. (2007). *Folleto divulgativo lanzamiento, ALEX Virtual*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia.
- Ellis, A. (2001). Student-centred collaborative learning via face-to-face and asynchronous online communication: What's the difference? *Proceedings 18th ASCILITE Conference Melbourne*, 9-12 December. Retrieved on April 2010 from Web site: <http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/melbourne01/pdf/papers/ellisa.pdf>
- Hiltz, S. T., Turoff, M., & Harasim, L. (2007). Development and philosophy of the field of asynchronous learning networks. In Andrews, R. & Haythornthwaite, C. (Eds.), *Handbook of E-Learning Research* (pp. 56-72). London: Sage.
- Horton, W., & Horton, K. (2003). *E-Learning tools and technologies*. Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing.
- Krashen, D. (1988). *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Prentice-Hall International.
- MacDonald, J. (2008). *Blended learning and online tutoring: Planning Learner Support and Activity Design*. Hampshire, UK: Gower Publishing.
- Malamah-Thomas, A. (1987). *Classroom Interaction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Medina, R. (2009). *Interaction in the online tutoring sessions in a group of ALEX Virtual level IV at the National University of Colombia-Bogotá*. Monografía para optar por el Título de Licenciada en Filología e Idiomas Inglés. Universidad Nacional de Colombia Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, Bogotá.
- Pérez, S. L. (2008). El foro virtual como espacio educativo: propuestas didácticas para su uso. Retrieved on April 2010 from Web site: http://www.quadernsdigitals.net/datos_web/hemeroteca/r_1/nr_662/a_8878/8878.html
- Pinzón, D. (2008). *Percepciones de los estudiantes, profesores y tutores de los cursos de inglés I y II del programa ALEX Virtual de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia, respecto a la respuesta a las tutorías presenciales y en línea durante el primer semestre de 2008*. Monografía para optar por el Título de Licenciada en Filología e Idiomas Inglés. Universidad Nacional de Colombia Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, Bogotá.
- Strauss, A.L. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Sutherland-Smith, W. (2008). *Plagiarism, the Internet and Student Learning: Improving Academic Integrity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Universidad Nacional de Colombia [ALEX]. (2008). *objetivos del programa*. Programa para el desarrollo del aprendizaje autónomo de lenguas extranjeras. Bogotá, D.C.
- Yin, R. (2003). *Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks California: Sage Publications.

About the Author

Rosa Isabel González Moreno holds a BED in Philology and Languages-English, from Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá campus. She has participated as an assistant student in the PROFILE Research Group at the same University. This article reports on her monograph project as a graduation requirement.