
*Bimodal CMC: The Glue of Language Learning at a Distance*¹

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ABSTRACT

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) forms an integral part of the first-year Spanish course, *Spanish Without Walls (SWW)*, designed for distance education. The CMC component of SWW supports bimodal (i.e., oral and written) interactions among students and the instructor and provides the same kinds of benefits as those in face-to-face interactions well documented in the literature on second language acquisition (SLA). The study described here illustrates the progress of a typical first-year language student as she interacts with the course instructor. Analysis of the transcripts of this student's interactions shows that she remained engaged in the language-learning process, actively participated in negotiation of meaning, repaired her language errors, and was able to satisfy her own language-learning needs.

KEYWORDS

Synchronous Computer-mediated Communication, Oral and Written Communication, Interactionist Second Language Acquisition, Virtual Language Learning

INTRODUCTION

It is commonplace in the foreign language (FL) classroom to acknowledge the positive role that linguistic interactions or exchanges play in second language acquisition (SLA). Most recent SLA theories and best practices are firmly grounded in interactionist notions such as the *zone of proximal development*, *focus on form*, *negotiation of meaning*, *task-based learning*, *pair work*—all constructs, simple or complex, that rely on the power of human interactions to stimulate the process of second language acquisition. While cooperative exchanges among L2 learners—or between native speakers and L2 learners for that matter (see Blake & Zyzik, 2003)—cannot be said to be a direct cause of second language acquisition, they most certainly prime the pump, as Gass (1997) has explained, by focusing the learner's attention on unfamiliar structures (i.e., *noticing* in Schmidt's [1990] terms) and by providing the necessary scaffolding in the learning environment (Bruner, 1966).

Most FL instructors keenly feel this imperative to provide opportunities in the classroom for collaborative interactions. The desire to maintain or replicate this

part of the classroom experience, no doubt, accounts for some of the profession's resistance to accept distance-learning courses as a valid alternative. Nevertheless, nontraditional learning environments such as phone-based instruction, teleconferencing, and chat rooms also afford ample opportunities for collaborative work with the concomitant benefits for the language learning process (Blake, in press). At present, only the weight of tradition privileges the classroom over these other learning environments, if the latter, in fact, truly strive to foster collaborative interactions as well. The potential benefits of collaborative exchanges, whether set in the classroom or managed online, depend more on sound pedagogical design of the tasks the participants are asked to accomplish and the methods or tools with which they carry out their exchanges rather than the actual locus of the learning event.

Successful online language courses make use of an array of technological tools necessary to make the learning experience engaging—computer-mediated communication (CMC) being at the forefront of these new techniques for promoting collaborative exchanges. This study examines how synchronous CMC can provide the glue for a completely virtual first-year Spanish curriculum, *Spanish Without Walls*² (SWW), that is offered as part of the continuing education program at the University of California, Davis for working professionals in the Sacramento area. More specifically, this study examines the bimodal (i.e. sound and text) CMC interactions of a student who successfully completed the first third of the SWW sequence.

This study is unique in that the great majority of CMC language projects have been carried out with second- or third-year (i.e., intermediate or intermediate-advanced) students, often seated in the same room, using tools that primarily support textual exchanges (e.g., Kern, 1995). Only recently have bimodal chat tools with both text and sound channels had an impact on the foreign-language curriculum. While researchers tend to agree on the advantages that textual chat tools offer (Blake, 2000), the strengths and weaknesses of the bimodal options have not as yet been investigated. Accordingly, this study offers data for two new areas of research: (a) using CMC at the beginning language levels and (b) examining the effect of chat tools that include a sound-exchange option.

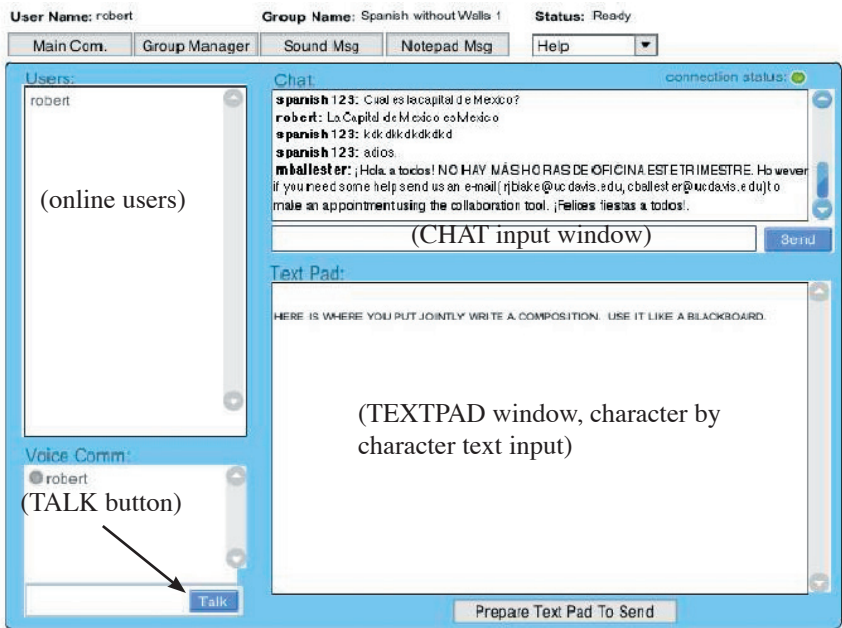
THE CURRICULAR DESIGN OF SPANISH WITHOUT WALLS (SWW)

The SWW program is a totally virtual first-year Spanish course that combines multimedia language materials from (a) *Tesoros*,³ a five-disk CD-ROM detective story (Blake, Blasco, & Hernández, 2001); (b) content-based web readings and *Flash* activities designed and implemented by María Victoria González Paganí (University of California, Santa Cruz); and (c) a bimodal (i.e., sound and text) CMC tool based on the *Flash Communication Server* software that allows exchanges in both synchronous and asynchronous format. The *Tesoros* CD-ROMs serve as the textbook for this three-part course, without any further need for Internet access. The remaining online materials are packaged into a course management system designed to teach first-year Spanish grammar and vocabulary, provide exercises, conduct testing, present authentic readings within a content-

based approach, and enable oral conversations with teachers and peers alike via the chat tool. Students alternate between use of the CD-ROMs and the *SWW* web site in order to cover the scope and sequence of a standard university first-year Spanish language course. Students are held accountable for the CD-ROM material by means of online exams that cover the vocabulary, storyline, and grammar presented by *Tesoros*.

Students are also required to chat live with their instructor at least once a week and with their assigned partners several more times in order to complete the collaborative tasks specified in the content-based web materials. This chat tool allows three different CMC modalities (see Figure 1): (a) the exchange of half-duplex sound (TALK button), (b) individual keyboard chat delimited by a carriage return (CHAT window), and (c) a shared writing space that updates output character by character (TEXTPAD window). Students must take turns using either the TALK or TEXTPAD functions, but CHAT text can be sent by anyone at anytime without waiting for or following any turn-taking protocols.

Figure 1
CHAT Interface



LEARNER OUTCOMES FOR ONLINE LANGUAGE COURSES

The data from a previous study (Blake & Delforge, in press) has shown that students enrolled in the *SWW* course fared at least as well—and most of the time better—on discrete grammar and written tests in comparison to undergraduates enrolled in conventional introductory Spanish classes at the University of Califor-

nia, Davis, demonstrating that distance language instruction offers a viable option for learners without access to the traditional classroom setting or for those who prefer the online learning environment to the traditional classroom.

Researchers (Warschauer, 1996; Blake & Zyzik, 2003; Blake & Delforge, in press) have speculated about why online students might perform so strongly vis-à-vis classroom students. The fact that the written language is the primary mode of instruction for online learning may help explain why the online learners do well on written measures. Also, the textual medium may closely correlate with an increased sense of metalinguistic awareness of the type interactionist researchers have alluded to as being a crucial priming mechanism for language acquisition (Gass, 1997). In other words, online students pay more attention to written form.

In qualitative terms, many online language learners praise the flexibility of the course materials and indicate that they like being able to work at their own pace as well as spend more time on the material that is most difficult for them (Blake & Delforge, in press; Murray, 1999). Online learners also mention that they find it much less stressful to learn language online than in a conventional language class where the potential for public embarrassment is greater. Their comments lend support to Liontas' (2002) contention that CALL materials may have the effect of lowering students' affective filter by allowing them to work with the target language without having to be put on the spot in front of other learners. Blake & Delforge (in press) also have reported that students enjoy using chat tools, despite any technical difficulties that surface during use.

However, the real test of a distance-learning course is whether or not the students' interest can be maintained over the course of the term. The dropout rates for online courses are routinely well over 50%.⁴ Interest must be sustained by exploiting the attractiveness of multimedia, delivered via Web and/or CD-ROM, and the power of CMC-based human exchanges.

In the *SWW* course, students had to use the bimodal chat tool to communicate with their instructor one hour a week, along with other exchanges with their classmates, in order to finish the collaborative homework tasks assigned by the content-based readings. In the next section, we will examine a transcript for one instructor/student bimodal chat session with an eye to illustrating how CMC engages students and helps maintain interest in an online course.

COLLABORATIVE EXCHANGES

The CMC examples cited here come from a regularly scheduled virtual "office hour" that the *SWW* instructor hosts every week with the students. This particular session involves just one adult student of beginning Spanish (*SWWI*) and, as pair-work, represents the ideal CMC situation. Discursive confusion and management issues naturally increase with more participants involved in a chat session. Any protracted silences are routinely interpreted as signs that the other party did not hear; however, that person may be taking time to think or respond or may be hopelessly confused by the original question. In situ, these potential conversational breakdowns are mitigated by body language and phatic replies (e.g., ok ..., right ..., let's see ..., like ..., uh-hu ..., oh ..., ah ...).

Again, the typical *SWW* student works full time and, because of other commitments in addition to work, would otherwise be unable to attend night language classes. The instructors judged this student to be of average ability for language learning. Adjusting for different levels of proficiency, this student's exchanges are representative of the types of exchanges that are possible with bimodal chatting, a technique that is not as easy to use at first as one might think. Both students and instructors can freely use both channels—sound and text—separately or more or less in tandem. It can take instructors some time to get used to using the textual mode as support or backup to what students are practicing in the voice channel. For the instructor, it is a bit like using the blackboard in the classroom to record what is being said or offer other pertinent information without interrupting the flow of oral conversation.

With respect to the transcripts, the time stamp is provided at the end of each exchange to show the flow of the conversation. Sound exchanges are all in capital letters; code-switching between languages is shown in italics. The portions of the text highlighted in bold are intended to draw the reader's attention to a particular grammatical or discursive point under question.

In the excerpt in (1) below, notice how the instructor insists on the student practicing orally, which affords the instructor the ability to listen to the student's response for accuracy and then provide the appropriate feedback with both oral and textual reinforcements and hints. The instructor also indulges in frequent repetitions of a highly didactic nature, much like the discourse often heard within the walls of our language classes. As discussed earlier, the instructor interprets the student's slowness to respond as a sign that she did not previously hear the instructor's helpful responses. The truth is that the student heard them but did not understand, causing a complete breakdown in the conversation and the need for negotiation or repair in order to get the exchange flowing again.

(1) Making students practice via the oral channel

- Student: **Que “trabajaste”?** 20:37:19
 [What [is] *trabajaste*?]
- Instructor: **Did you work?** 20:37:26
- Instructor: YA ESTOY AQUI CON MICROFONO. YA HE ARREGLADO
 EL PROBLEMA. EH... ¿TRABAJASTE HOY EN TU ESPANOL,
 NANCY? 20:37:40
 [I'm here with the microphone. I've solved the problem. Did you
 work today on your Spanish?]
- Student: ¿OTRA VEZ? 20:37:44
 [Again?]
- Instructor: ¿ME PUEDES OIR? 20:38:3
 [Can you hear me?]
- Student: Trabajaste? 20:38:08
 [*Trabajaste*? [what's that mean?]]
- Instructor: ¿Me escuchas? 20:38:12
 [Can you hear me?]

- Instructor: **SI ¿TRABAJASTE? DID YOU WORK? ¿TRABAJASTE? SI, TRABAJÉ.** 20:38:18
 [Yes, did you work? *Did you work?* Did you work? Yes, I worked.]
- Student: No comprendo. 20:38:25
 [I don't understand]
- Instructor: **Hablame por favor.** 20:38:34.
 [Please talk to me]

As a follow-up comment on (1), it is interesting to realize that the instructor's introduction of an unfamiliar tense (i.e., the preterit) precipitates the breakdown. The same would be true for the classroom environment: new grammatical material causes a disruption in the communicative flow of the discourse that can only be resolved through intense efforts to negotiate the meaning of the past tense. The instructor finally admits her misstep in (2) as the communication problem becomes more apparent to both parties.

(2) Breakdown, negotiation, and repair

- Student: That is the entire question? 20:38:48
- Instructor: **¿A QUE TE REFIERES? THAT'S THE ENTIRE QUESTION. ¿QUE PREGUNTAS? ¿TRABAJASTE? SI. TRABAJÉ, TRABAJÉ EN MI ESPAÑOL.** 20:38:59
 [What are you referring to? *That's the entire question.* What are you asking? Did you work? Yes, I worked. I worked on my Spanish.]
- Instructor: **¿PUEDES REPETIR, NANCY?** 20:39:21
 [Could you repeat, Nancy.]
- Student: **trabajé is third person word.** 20:39:35
- Student: **pero trabajaste?** 20:39:52
 [But what about *trabajaste?*]
- Instructor: **NO, Trabajé es la primera persona pero es pasado** 20:39:53
 [NO, *Trabajé* is the first person but it's the past.]
- Instructor: **EH ... NANCY, NO. TRABAJÉ ES PRIMERA PERSONA. PERO ES PASADO. YOU DIDN'T STUDY PASADO YET. ¿DE ACUERDO?** 20:39:57
 [Nancy, no. *Trabajé* is first person but it's the past. You didn't [sic] study past yet. Ok?]

In like fashion to face-to-face interactions, one of the most important benefits of CMC chat centers around what Swain (2000) has called *forced output*. For Swain, *forced output* means that students monitor their own interlanguage much more closely precisely because they must use L2 syntax to formulate their responses; they have no other choice. The results from this type of output create a feedback loop that creates new input for the learner and a second chance to get it right; in other words, forced output feeds self-correction and, in time, structural integration, as can be seen in oral exchanges in (3). Not only does the student finally retrieve the correction word in Spanish for 'since,' but also corrects her first

incorrect attempt at translating ‘in the afternoon (p.m.),’ which was based on an English calc. The final sound transmission gets it all correct, undoubtedly to the student’s great sense of personal satisfaction.

(3) Self-correction as a result of forced output

- Student: ¿PROFESORA? ¿DONDE ESTA CINDY? 20:24:45
[Professor? Where is Cindy?]
- Instructor: NO SE, NO SE DONDE ESTA. ¿TU ESTAS ALLI DESDE LAS OCHO? 20:24:5
[I don’t know; I don’t know where she is. You’ve been there since eight?]
- Instructor: TU TE CONECTASTE A LAS OCHO Y CINDY NO ESTABA, ¿CIERTO? 20:24:9
[You connected at eight and Cindy wasn’t there, right?]
- Instructor: PERFECTO, NANCY, PERFECTO. TENEMOS OTRO ESTUDIANTE QUE SE LLAMA “ED” PERO NO ESTA TAMPOCO. NO SE, A LO MEJOR TIENE PROBLEMAS CON LA CONEXION, ¿COMPRENDES? 20:25:11
[Perfect, Nancy, perfect. We have another student named Ed but he’s not online either. I don’t know ... maybe he has connection problems, do you understand?]
- Student: Uh...TENGO ... UH... TENGO... UH. LO ... (NO, THAT’S WRONG), TENGO ... OCHO EN TARDE. 20:25:32
[Uh, I have, uh, I have, uh, the...(No, that’s wrong), I have...eight in evening.]
- Student: LO SIENTO. NO COMPRENDO. 20:25:8
[I’m sorry. I don’t understand]
- Instructor: ¿TRABAJASTE CON EL? 20:25:53
[Do you work with him?]
- Student: NO CINDY *SINCE* OCHO EN TARDE. 20:26:28
[No Cindy *since* eight in evening.]
- Student: **DESDE...** NO CINDY **DESDE LAS OCHO EN TARDE ... DE LA TARDE.** 20:26:42
[Since ...no Cindy...since eight in evening...in the evening.]
- Student: NO CINDY DESDE LAS OCHO DE LA TARDE. 20:26:58
[No Cindy since eight in the evening.]

Another advantage often associated with chatting stems from the ease with which students can direct their own learning environment. In (4) below, the student can stop the flow of conversation with the instructor at any time and seek immediate answers to linguistic problems or miscommunications and, subsequently, try out and test new responses for accuracy. In the case at hand, this particular student has had little experience with the common verbal expression ‘to like’ which in Spanish behaves syntactically much as a psyche-verb (i.e., ‘It please [likes] me ...’). In experimenting with *gustar* the student gets in over her head and uses a

superlative adverb incorrectly, or so it appears. The instructor corrects her but it is not what the student had in mind and she quickly asks for a translation of another word, a different adverb ‘too much.’ The chat interface gives the student equal footing with the instructor to direct the path of conversation and to solve her own communication difficulties.

(4) Student-directed learning and error correction

- Student: Voy a escribir. 20:45:21 [I’m going to write.]
 Instructor: Dime (tell me) ¿Qué te gusta comer? 20:45:42.
 [Tell me. What do you like to eat?]
 Instructor: A mí me gusta comer patatas fritas y huevo. ¿y a ti? 20:46:10
 [Me, I like to eat French fries and eggs. And you?]
 Instructor: What do you like to eat? 20:46:21
 [What do you like to eat?]
 Student: Es otro tiempo? 20:46:23
 [Is that another tense?]
 Instructor: Es presente. 20:46:34
 [It’s the present tense.]
 Instructor: Pero es la expresión de GUSTAR. ME gusta, te gusta, le gusta... 20:46:58
 [But it’s the expression *GUSTAR*. I like, you like, s/he likes.]
 Student: **Me gusta spaghetti y italiano.** 20:47:29
 [I like spaghetti and Italian.]
 Student: Me gusta chocolate. 20:47:41
 [I like chocolate.]
 Student: Me gusta **muy mucho.** 20:47:54
 [I like it muchly much.]
 Instructor: Me gusta muchísimo. Es incorrecto decir [**muy mucho**] 20:48:19
 [I like it very much. It’s incorrect to say “muchly much”.]
 Instructor: ¿Te gusta comer espaguetis? 20:48:38
 [Do you like to eat spaghetti?]
 Student: **How do you say “too much?”** 20:48:44
 [How do you say “too much”?]
 Instructor: **demasiado.** 20:48:55.140316
 [too much]
 Student: Me gusta **demasiado.** 20:49:16
 [I like it too much.]
 Instructor: **How do you say: Cómo se dice** 20:49:25.
 Student: No..... Me gusta comir damasiado. 20:49:35
 [No... I like to eat too much.]
 Student: Como se dice? 20:49:49
 [How does you say?]
 Student: Sí. 20:49:54
 [Yes.]

Despite the student's initial success with *gustar*, the real syntactic difficulty for her revolves around choosing the correct object or clitic pronoun that signals who experiences this sensation of *pleasure* (i.e., *liking*). This function is syntactically coded by an indirect object clitic, not a direct one. An additional complication arises from the requirement to make *gustar* agree with what is the surface subject but the semantic object or theme noun: for example, *Me gusta eso* 'That likes me.' To complicate matters more, the indirect object clitic is often accompanied by a full noun phrase introduced by the personal *a*: *A mi esposo le gusta la carne* 'My husband, he likes meat.'⁵ The instructor successfully leads the student to grasp this last point, but as the student tries to echo what the instructor has provided as a model, the correct narrative point of view is being ignored: for example, instructor: *Do you like it? Yes, I like it.* student: *Yes, you like it* [instead of *I like it*]. Again, the textual support provided by the chat environment helps resolve these misunderstandings, much to the student's relief (e.g., *Whew* 21:02:41).

(5) Noticing the gap

- Student: Mi esposo **te gusta** patatas fritas. 20:55:59
[My husband, you like French fries (← My husband, French fries is pleasing to **you**).]
- Instructor: **A mí esposo le gustaN las patatas fritas.** 20:56:16
[My husband, he likeS French fries.]
- Student: Y carne. 20:56:29
[And meat.]
- Instructor: Ah! Tu esposo no es vegetariano, ¿verdad? 20:56:43
[Ah, your husband isn't a vegetarian, right?]
- Student: **Mi esposo** le gustan las patatas fritas y carne. 20:56:51
[My husband, he likes French fries and meat.]
- Student: No es vegetariano. 20:57:08
[He's not a vegetarian.]
- Instructor: **A mí esposo también le gusta** la carne y las patatas fritas. 20:57:16
[My husband, he also likes meat and French fries.]
- Instructor: ¿Tú eres vegetariana? 20:57:27
[Are you a vegetarian?]
- Student: No, pero ensaldas y frutas. 20:57:47
[No, but salads and fruits.]
- Instructor: **No, pero te gusta comer ensaladas y frutas.** 20:58:03
[No, but you like to eat salads and fruits.]
- Student: **No, pero te gusta comer ensaladas y frutas.** 20:58:15
[No, but you like to eat salads and fruits.]
- Instructor: **A mí también me gusta comer ensaladas y frutas.** 20:58:28
[Me, I also like to eat salads and fruits.]
- Instructor: **Me (when you talk about you as I like) TE (when you talk about you: you like).** 20:59:24
[I (when you) YOU (when you..)]

- Instructor: **Otra vez.** 20:59:36
[Come again?]
- Instructor: **Qué TE gusta comer?** 20:59:48
[What do YOU like to eat?]
- Instructor: **Otra vez (again).** 21:00:01
[Again?]
- Student: **Me gusta comer ensaladas y frutas.** 21:00:25
[I like to eat salads and fruits.]
- Student: **Correcto?** 21:00:47.
[Is that correct?]
- Instructor: **Sí, es correcto. Y a tu esposo, ¿Qué le gusta comer a él?** 21:00:58
[Yes, that's correct. And your husband, what does he like to eat?]
- Student: **A mi esposo te gusta comer patatas fritas y carne.** 21:01:37
[My husband, you like to eat French fries and meat.]
- Student: **Corrector?** 21:01:50
[Correct?]
- Student: **Correcto?** 21:01:55
[Correct?]
- Student: **Lo siento.** 21:02:01
[Sorry (for the misspelling).]
- Instructor: **No. A mi esposo LE GUSTA.** 21:02:04
[No. My husband, he likes.]
- Student: **A mi esposa le guasta comer patatas fritas y carne.** 21:02:25
[My husband, he likes to eat French fries and meat.]
- Student: **gusta.** 21:02:30
[likes.]
- Instructor: **Ahora sí.** 21:02:33
[Now it's correct.]
- Student: **Whew.** 21:02:41

The true test of success, however, comes when the instructor shifts the focus to a different third party, Michelle, the student's daughter. By now the student has had sufficient written practice in producing *gustar*-type constructions that changing the reference to the new person presents few problems, as seen below in (6); only the personal *a* is still missing, but this omission is extremely common with L2 students right up into the third year of Spanish language study. At such a time when the student finally drops the redundant *A Michelle* all together or put it after the verb (rather than following English's SVO pattern), a higher proficiency level of language competence will have been achieved.

(6) Explicit correction and practice makes perfect

- Instructor: **Qué le gusta a tu hija Michelle?** 21:02:49
[What does your daughter Michelle like?]

Student: **Michelle** le gusta comer ensalads y margaritas. 21:03:13
 [Michelle, she likes to eat salads and margaritas.]

Notice that from the examples in (5) and (6) that both the student and instructor depend heavily on textual clues to raise the student's metalinguistic awareness. But do these explicit discussions transfer into acceptable oral production as well? At the right moment in the exchange, the instructor switches to the sound mode and peppers the students with a series of oral questions until the student finally responds in kind—the final test of whether the *gustar* construction is beginning to sink in. Both the written production and the oral utterance of *A mi gato le gusta comer...* (21:07:20) in (7) constitutes convincing evidence that the student has gained significant control over this new syntactic structure.

(7) Switching into “overdrive”—the oral mode

- Instructor: **Y a tu gato?** 21:04:43
 [And your cat?]
- Instructor: NANCY, ¿QUE LE GUSTA COMER A TU GATO? 21:5:12
 [Nancy, what does your cat like to eat?]
- Student: **A mi gato le gusta comer (too much)?** 21:05:55
 [My cat, he likes to eat (too much).]
- Student: **desmaisdos?** 21:06:16
 [Too much?]
- Instructor: NANCY, ¿QUE TE GUSTA A TI COMER? ¿QUE TE GUSTA? 21:6:34
 [Nancy, what do you like to eat? What do you like?]
- Instructor: DEMASIADO. TOO MUCH IS DEMASIADO. 21:6:40
 [Too much. *Too much* is *demasiado*.]
- Student: **A MI GATO LE GUSTA COMER AND I WAS LOOKING FOR THE WORD “TOO MUCH” BUT I CAN’T FIND IT.** 21:7:20
 [My cat, he likes to eat and I was looking for the word “too much” but I can’t find it.]
- Instructor: ¿QUE TE GUSTA COMER? ¿A MI? A MI ME GUSTA COMER PATATAS FRITAS. ME GUSTA COMER PATATAS FRITAS. Y A TI, ¿QUE TE GUSTA? 21:7:22
 [What do you like to eat? Me? Me, I like to eat French fries. Me, I like to eat French fries. And you, what do you like (to eat)?]

Despite the time/turn lag so typical of networked exchanges, the student finally responds to the teacher's more personalized question, *What do YOU like to eat?* (21:6:34), in an appropriate way, setting aside for the moment the use of a bare-NP (e.g., *ensalada* ‘salad’) that is highly disfavored in Spanish when nouns function as the grammatical subject: *A MI ME GUSTA ENSALADA.* (21:9:36) [Me, I like salad].

What should be clear from the analysis of these networked exchanges is that

they parallel very closely how people carry out their face-to-face interactions and the small but steady steps forward in the SLA process, with allowances being made for the typical time *decalage* that results from overlapping or delayed turn taking in the online environment. In fact, it would be difficult to distinguish the language and discourse routines displayed in (1) through (7) from other transcriptions derived from face-to-face learner/instructor talk that took place in the classroom except for this delay effect.

These weekly sessions provide the *SWW* students with the opportunity to bring alive the language they are studying independently during the week. Despite the highly entertaining nature of multimedia materials, nothing can replace human interaction. Online students need the give and take that occurs in CMC exchanges in order to try out new hypotheses and receive immediate feedback, even if that feedback comes from other, less expert L2 learners. Without this support, I would predict that the online format would not be able to sustain the students' interest except in the case of the most highly motivated student. Making CMC a central part of the online curriculum is vital to the success of this learning environment.

CONCLUSIONS

When one thinks about face-to-face exchanges in the classroom, it is hoped that students are negotiating meaning, noticing gaps, working collaboratively, and directing the discourse in ways that satisfy their own particular learning concerns of the moment. However, the reality of the classroom is often very different, especially since many FL curricula continue to endorse teacher-centered rather than student-centered approaches. At the beginning levels, the asymmetric power relationship between the teacher (a.k.a. the all-knowing expert) and the rank beginner can also pose a significant deterrent to the necessary interactions that prime the SLA pump, over and beyond the usual learning barriers engendered by worry over public embarrassment. Still, many FL professionals hold dear the idea that the classroom locus, the physical presence of all participants being in the same time and place, affords students an inherent advantage for language learning (no matter what pedagogy is employed)—something that distance-learning language courses have to do without. Beliefs need no proof in order to be widely held and defended; most language professionals continue to be skeptical about the efficacy of online courses precisely for this reason. More to the truth would be to recognize that each instructional modality has its own strengths and weaknesses.

Although distance-learning language courses lack this physical presence, I have endeavored to illustrate in the analysis of bimodal chatting that CMC can play a crucial role in stimulating linguistic interactions in a fashion that produces similar benefits to those generated by face-to-face collaborations. Review of the transcripts reveals that negotiations of meaning are commonplace. Students have ample opportunities to focus their attention on gaps in their interlanguage, direct the flow of their own learning on an equal footing with that of the teacher, and, subsequently, carry out intensive practice of these new structures both in writing and in speech with the real expectation of adding them to their growing L2 arsenal.

These benefits accrue even during the first term of L2 study (e.g., *SWW I*), and with an average student, which was the case for the present study. The transcripts from *SWW* first-year series have generated many more sophisticated exchanges, especially with students taking the third installment, but the overall nature of interactions remains unchanged. A distance-learning course must succeed in overcoming the static nature of the medium; bimodal CMC of the sort examined here appears to provide one form of glue that helps maintain interest in the subject matter even without an in situ physical presence. These benefits do not derive from the tool itself, but rather from how it is used in the service of promoting engaging interactions. Ultimately, the same could be said of the FL classroom, whose a priori edge of the *here and now* can be thoroughly neutralized—or even undermined—by poor pedagogy, as is well known.

Both students and instructors need training in how to profit from bimodal CMC; it is not an activity that comes naturally to most teachers or students. In fact, the bimodal aspects and the persistent problems of time lag can be quite confusing, if not disconcerting, for the first few sessions. The incessant chants of *Can you hear me?* or the frequent written responses of *Are you still there?* clearly attest to those problems. To say the least, it is not intuitively obvious to even the seasoned language instructor how such a tool should be deployed in service of L2 language learning. Even for hybrid courses, where only part of the curriculum is accomplished outside of the classroom, considerable thought must go into the use of CMC tools.

In an exclusively distant language-learning course, CMC is one of the only channels available to establish the type of human interactions that help motivate us all to learn. A comedian once quipped that if you take flour and add water, you get glue; if you add an egg and sugar, you get a cake—but what happened to all the glue? Obviously, it is still there. CMC provides the glue, but only a carefully prepared curriculum can make learning languages at a distance a format palatable for the students and the profession at large.

NOTES

¹ I wish to express my appreciation to the two anonymous reviewers. Any errors that remain are mine alone.

² The development of *Spanish Without Walls* was supported by a 3-year grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) (P116B000315).

³ For a review of the *Tesoros* CD-ROMs, see Lafford (2003).

⁴ The previous *SWW* courses show retention rates running about 65% (Blake & Delforge, in press), well above the standard rate of 50% often quoted in the literature on distance learning (Carr, 2000).

⁵ An additional complication derives from the fact that the personal *a* allows for a highly flexible word order, although different pragmatic interpretation can be motivated: *A mi esposa le gusta la carne* <> *Le gusta la carne a mi esposa*.

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