"Buddy System": A Pedagogical Innovation to Promote Online Interaction

Sistema de amigos: una innovación pedagógica para fomentar la interacción en línea

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Recent technological development has created new pedagogical practices in the EFL classroom to maximize the time for students to use the language by considering online tools. Whilst working in a pedagogical context with new technologies, some educators were concerned with how online interaction in EFL content-based classes could be effectively promoted with university students. It was difficult to design and carry out online activities that students would find interesting enough to participate in and interact with their peers and teachers. Thus, this pedagogical innovation shows how two EFL teachers implemented a peer feedback strategy to foster online interaction. The outcomes point to new strategies as well as pedagogical possibilities to motivate students' interaction when working in online environments.

Key words: Collaborative learning, collaborative online learning, online interaction.

El creciente desarrollo tecnológico ha creado nuevas prácticas pedagógicas en el aula de clase de inglés como lengua extranjera para maximizar el tiempo en ambientes virtuales. Por trabajar en un contexto pedagógico donde se están implementando nuevas tecnologías, algunos profesores se preocuparon por promover la interacción y participación en línea de estudiantes universitarios en la clase inglés. Dado que fue difícil diseñar y llevar a cabo actividades en línea para que los estudiantes participaran e interactuaran con sus compañeros y maestros, el artículo expone en qué consistió la innovación pedagógica que dos profesoras de inglés implementaron como estrategia de realimentación para fomentar la interacción en línea. Los resultados reflejan la necesidad de crear nuevas estrategias y posibilidades pedagógicas para motivar la interacción de los estudiantes cuando trabajan en entornos virtuales.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje colaborativo, aprendizaje colaborativo en línea, interacción en línea.

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Introduction

The use of technology in everyday life activities is becoming more popular and as a result, technological development has found itself at the core of local and national policies in countries like Colombia. In Colombia, national and local governments have made significant efforts to enhance the use of technology for educational practices with the purpose of enabling all citizens to enroll in academic programs. As stated by Bonk and Cunningham (1998), "technology is becoming increasingly interactive and distributed such that individual learners have available, at rapidly declining cost, the means to participate in incredibly complex networks of information, resources, and instruction" (p. 26).

Keeping in mind the national policies and considering the benefits of implementing technology in the classroom, the Universidad de La Sabana and its Foreign Languages and Cultures Department have implemented tools such as Virtual Sabana where fo-rums allow students and teachers to have asynchronous virtual classes and tutorials. Unfortunately, in spite of the investment, online interaction has not happened as was expected by the academic committee of the Languages and Cultures Department. A concern that has emerged in the abovementioned community centers around how to foster students' use and interaction with the tools that are available in the virtual space Virtual Sabana; especially how students can take advantage of the forums to participate, interact and enhance their learning process.

Using technology outside the EFL classroom as a way to maximize face-to-face classes has been seen and adapted as a powerful source to foster students' learning experiences. According to Curtis and Lawson (2001), "in general, while learning in online environment, students' interactions are restricted to text only messages on screen. This medium of interaction may inhibit the degree of collaboration that is possible by limiting the extent and depth of interactions" (p. 24). Making resources available for students to access at any time, enabling different types of interaction, providing students with tools to develop self-directed learning skills, and advancing students' collaborative learning are some of the valuable aspects that the use of virtual spaces such as forums and blogs can bring to the EFL classroom.

This pedagogical innovation is aimed at encouraging EFL students' participation in online forums and their describing how they experienced feedback when interacting in online environments. The article analyses students' views on peer feedback and explores students' and teachers' reflections about the collaborative construction of learning and about the implementation of the "buddy system" as the way to socialize peer feedback.

Needs Analysis

The leading concern of this pedagogical innovation was that online interaction did not happen the way teachers and administrators expected. By considering the mentioned concern, two English teachers who work for the Languages and Cultures Department decided to create a system that was implemented for one academic semester (16 weeks). The system was implemented with the purpose of making students responsible for reviewing and providing feedback for a classmate as a way of promoting online interaction and learners' autonomy. The two teachers who carried out this pedagogical innovation were in charge of the three elective courses for students who wanted to take content-based subjects so that they could use and practice English. The content-based subjects considered for this pedagogical innovation are not part of the curriculum. As mentioned before, they are elective courses that are offered for students who, after completing the levels of English that are part of the curriculum, want to improve and develop more advanced communicative skills in English. This so called "Buddy

System" consisted of pairing students up so that they knew whose work they had to revise and comment on. Giving and receiving constructive feedback was part of the evaluation of the course; students who did not participate in the forums to check their peer's participation were not graded and this had a knock-on effect on their peers' grades. Therefore, students had an academic obligation that was part of their evaluation and a moral obligation with their peers. The implementation of the Buddy System and the analysis of the experience are described throughout this article.

Other issues that were considered in the needs analysis were that the type of interaction that had taken place in the platform did not show evidence of students' awareness of their learning process and of their possibilities to learn and develop language skills autonomously. As a result, the two teachers, who were in charge of the 3 courses where this pedagogical innovation was implemented, decided to use online environments with the objective of promoting self-directed learning strategies such as self-evaluation. However, when using online environments a further issue arose: It was more time consuming and difficult for teachers to provide feedback due to the amount of students participating in the online activities and to the number of posts students were sharing, thus, the strategy of peer feedback was implemented.

Promoting online interaction in an EFL content-based course is challenging for teachers if we consider aspects such as students' and teachers' beliefs about the use of online forums and the time spent in class. When planning this pedagogical innovation, possible drawbacks were considered. This was done with the intention of foreseeing potential problems so that the teachers were prepared for all situations. The drawbacks are explained by Jochems, Kirschner and Kreijns (2002), who talk about pitfalls when interacting in online environments:

> The first pitfall is the tendency to assume that social interaction will occur just because the environment makes it possible.

> The second pitfall is the tendency to forget the social / social-psychological dimension of social interaction that is salient in various levels of non-task contexts (i.e., off-task interactions). Social interaction encompasses all interactivity between group members, including casual conversations and task-oriented discussions. (p. 9)

The pitfalls considered by the authors just mentioned were considered and as a result some actions such as including peer feedback in the evaluation of the course and assigning a buddy were planned.

As stated by Herrington, Oliver, and Reeves (2003), "unfortunately, the reality of online collaborative learning is discouraging" (p. 12). The discouragement mentioned by the authors refers to aspects such as online forums being mostly used as a tool for online distance courses where participants do not share a physical space to interact; in other words, forums have been implemented as a way to provide students and teachers with a space to interact when they do not have one. Another aspect of discouragement is that in the case of face-to-face classes where students and teachers go to the same classroom, they do not need a virtual space to interact because they have the classroom and in this way spaces like forums might seem unnecessary. As a result, this report considered how the population under study failed to interact using online forums because they could ask, comment, participate or make proposals, among other things, in the classroom and, consequently, they could have swifter and more practical answers. Considering these aspects, the two teachers who conducted this study made an effort to let students know that the online classes and forums were an extension of the face-to-face classes and that the purpose of using them was to maximize in-class discussions, debates and topics.

Similarly, another potential problem considered before the implementation was how students expressed their difficulty to comment on and grade another student's work. So, the materials were closely

linked to in-class sessions and were aimed at reinforcing the knowledge on a given topic. The resources used for peer feedback were designed to enhance student's own learning through revising the task's requirements and criteria and, thus, having to re-analyze their own work. Having a clear list of criteria, students could feel confident and sufficiently equipped to take on the role of a reviewer and provide appropriate feedback or critique their peers' work. This clarity of objectives would allow them to understand the feedback provided by their online partner, or as we called her/him, 'buddy'.

Likewise, authors like Curtis and Lawson (2001) explain why interaction in online environments can bring drawbacks:

> Online interactions lack the non-verbal cues that are a component of face-to-face contact, and this reduces the extent of the communication that occurs. Much online conversation occurs asynchronously, with substantial delays in receiving a reply. This may have both advantages and disadvantages for the participants. (p. 22)

This pedagogical innovation intended to consider the pitfalls shown and take advantage of the valuable aspects that working with technology can provide for EFL students.

Setting and Participants

The study took place in the foreign languages and cultures department of a private university near Bogotá, Colombia. The population under study was a group of advanced EFL learners who enrolled in three elective courses with the intention of improving their communicative abilities in the foreign language through the study of content rather than language systems. The courses that were available for students dealt with topics about intercultural studies and strategies to improve their oral communicative competence when interacting with people from different cultures. These courses required four hours per week over sixteen weeks; the weekly four hours were divided into three hours of face-to-face classes with the fourth hour an asynchronous virtual learning space.

The intention of the virtual hour was to maximize the time in face-to-face classes by giving students the opportunity to discuss and explore the topics without the time boundaries we have in face-to-face classes. It was essential to keep those online sessions appealing to students and ensure they would participate to improve their class performance and to broaden their knowledge on a given topic through interaction with other students.

The virtual sessions and their tasks were also designed to develop a variety of academic and study skills, such as research, analytical and communication skills as well as awareness of academic development and evaluation processes. Some of the online activities involved researching a given topic and sharing the findings in a forum; others were focused on analyzing materials provided in the online session (articles, videos, etc.) and producing tasks based on the analyzed material as well as in-class input and discussions. Similarly, the students had to participate in a reflective blog describing what they had learned during the term. The blog was a way for the participants to revise the knowledge gained in class and through online interactions; it was also a way of selecting the information that they found most appropriate and useful for them. Overall, students had specific tasks for the online sessions and they had to use forums in Virtual Sabana to participate, contribute and share ideas, questions or suggestions. Furthermore, students created their own blogs to share their final tasks and products.

Theoretical Considerations

The implementation of this pedagogical innovation considered constructs that were drawn from a socio-cultural approach to learning. This theoretical framework was built with the purpose of framing

the innovation and making it coherent in terms of evaluation and type of activities.

It is important to understand how the socio-cultural approach of learning emerged. Back in the 50's Bruner (1957) introduced a cognitive theory where he used the 'word scaffold' to describe young children's oral language acquisition. Bruner stated that a child acquires a language through scaffolds that allow her/him to go step by step from easy to more complex stages. Also, Bruner (1957) and Piaget (1929) wrote about cognitive constructivism, a theory that states that learning a language is possible due to an inner capacity that human beings have. Until that moment, theoreticians had considered only cognitive aspects to explain the language acquisition and learning processes.

It was not until Vigotsky (1986) and his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) that *context* was considered as an important factor when learning a language. Later, social constructivism relied on Vygotsky's concept of ZPD and it was there when learning was understood based on the connection with the sociocultural context in which the learner is immersed. Vygotsky, as cited by Bonk and Cunningham (1998), "stated how individual mental functioning is inherently situated is social interactional, cultural, institutional, and historical contexts. Therefore, to understand human thinking and learning, one must examine the context and setting in which that thinking and learning occurs" (p. 35). According to the authors, the cognitive functioning does not take place in isolation; rather, each individual is immersed in a context that determines ways of behaving and interacting and at the same time ways of learning.

Understanding language learning by considering the context and the individual's mind was the first step that theoreticians took in the process of approaching language learning. The initial constructivism evolved and social constructivism came about. According to

Bonk and Cunningham (1998), social constructivism views learning as a "connection with an appropriation from the socio-cultural context within which we are all immersed" (p. 32). This is the framework this pedagogical innovation considered in order to design the activities and the peer feedback system. Based on the needs analysis, it was imperative to consider an approach that takes into account the current context of students to motivate them and to implement tools that students could use in their interaction in online environments.

Within this framework culture and context are relevant factors that mediate learning. The intention in this pedagogical experience was to create a community of learning where students could learn from their peers and where each member of the community could have a real role and responsibility to contribute to the community. In agreement with Tirado and Martínez (2010), the expression learning communities describes that community where individual learning activities are incorporated in a collective effort to understand and gain the target knowledge.

At this point, it is important to understand that the concept of learning communities comes from the "communities of practice" coined by Wegner (1998). In communities of practice and learning the participation of the members is fundamental. Wegner (1998) states that "participation refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but [the] more encompassing process of being active participants in the practice of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (p. 4). This description is precisely what this pedagogical innovation aimed at: The purpose was to actively engaged students so that they could participate and collaborate in the collaborative construction of learning.

In this pedagogical innovation, learning is

> [...] thus not only participation in discourse communities, but is
> also the process by which people become members of discourse

communities, resist the membership in such communities, are marginalized from discourse communities, or make new ones. Such membership shapes opportunities to learn, and, ultimately, learning. (Moje & Lewis, 2007, p. 20)

The pedagogical proposal shared in this article intended to promote membership as an opportunity to learn and collaborate with others' learning as well.

Collaborative learning was a further construct that was considered when planning the innovation. Hine and Rodríguez (2009) explain and show evidence of how "collaborative learning fosters individual accountability in a context of group interdependence in which students discover information and teach that material to their group and, perhaps, to the class as a whole" (p. 120). The students in the courses under study met for three weekly hours that placed time restrictions on teachers' ability to work in depth on discussions and debates or to share and comment on students' pieces of writing. This concept of collaboration where learning was considered when planning the implementation was adapted to the online environment students had to use.

Taking the core concepts of collaborative learning and constructivism when working with online environments has generated proposals like the one made by Siemens (2004). The author suggests the 'connectivism theory' where knowledge is suggested to be not only in the human being but also in other sources like technology. Thus, Siemens suggests maintaining connections to ease learning processes. Technology becomes essential in this process. Having in mind the principles of this theory, the purpose of this innovation was to provide students with the necessary tool so that they could establish the necessary connections in an online collaborative learning environment to foster and motivate language learning.

Technology is part of our reality and has been deployed in many different aspects of life. Learning is no exception. The tools offered by recent electronic communication devices allow users to communicate regardless of distance or time and to access and publish information. The possibilities for learning with technology are wide-ranging due to the variety of resources available but the tools do not have to be used just because they are available; it is imperative for teachers and researchers to investigate and report on the pedagogical ways to implement technology in the classroom, especially when distance is not an issue. In this sense, Cummins (2008) suggests that

[...] an additional reason why convincing research evidence for the impact of technology on achievement is lacking is that the power of technology is very much under-utilized when it is harnessed only to transmission-oriented pedagogy and thus large effects are unlikely to be observed. (p. 66)

Technology cannot be used as a trendy methodology; to really utilize the resources, research needs to be done.

The pedagogical innovation shared in this article is based on the assumption that learning is socially mediated and constructed and that technology offers a considerable amount of resources that need to be taken into consideration. As stated by Jochems, Kirschner, and Kreijns (2002), "social interaction is important for establishing a social space in which a structure can be found that encompasses social relationships, group cohesion, trust and belonging, all of which contribute to open communication, critical thinking, supportive interaction, and social negotiation" (p. 10). In this innovation the buddy system, the virtual space Virtual Sabana and resources such as forums and blogs were combined to guarantee a social space that was not limited to the classroom time and space and in that way to promote and maintain social interaction beyond the class.

Also, it is important to consider that the activities included as part of the innovation were constructed within the same parameters; social constructivism and the connectivism theory were the basis for the type of

activities offered to the students. All of them aimed at collaborating and motivating students to improve their language knowledge. Warschauer (1995) stated how "the most potent collaborative activities involve not just finding and using information, but rather actively making use of technology to construct new knowledge together" (p. 17). The innovation and its activities responded to the intention of implementing technology and promoting social collaboration as a way of learning.

The Pedagogical Innovation

Based on the initial concerns–the assumptions and potential problems–and after integrating some theory, this pedagogical innovation was designed and implemented. The target population was three content-based elective courses which shared as a common goal and interest the importance of intercultural studies when learning a foreign language. There was another common goal that was the intention of the program and the teachers: to promote autonomy and self-direction to learn the target language.

The Project

Although the three courses that are part of the innovation shared the common goals of (1) the study and reflection of intercultural issues when studying English as a foreign language, and (2) the implementation of tools to promote autonomy and self-direction, the content of each course differs. Thus the two teachers in charge analyzed and identified appropriate topics by considering the common goals. As a result, three topics were suggested: the importance of non-verbal communication when interacting with people from different countries, looking and preparing for employment abroad and the importance of festivities and holidays as part of culture and identity. These three common topics allowed students and teachers to accomplish the objectives of the common goals and to establish a clear relation with the specific contents of each subject.

The three topics mentioned in the previous paragraph were the core of the course project, which was the same for all three courses. Each topic was

Figure 1. Planner of the Activities for the Virtual Hour

developed through the implementation of weekly collaborative tasks that established the steps to follow to accomplish a more comprehensive final task.

As previously mentioned, the courses consisted of three face-to-face instruction hours and one virtual. The face-to-face hours were planned to work on the specific contents of each subject and the asynchronous online hour was the scenario to carry out the project. In Figure 1 the planner of the activities for the virtual hour and their relation is shown. Each week students had one topic and collaborative activities aimed at a collaborative goal for each term.

The Buddy System

Since the intention of the asynchronous online session was to implement collaborative tasks, the teachers in charge decided to implement the "Buddy System". The idea of promoting online interaction through the "Buddy System" was based on the assumption that students could work well and benefit from using virtual environments effectively without having to meet in person. Teachers wanted to give students the possibility to interact with other students who were taking subjects related to inter-cultural studies. So, the teachers chose to combine three content-based courses that aimed at developing students' language and communication skills through the study of intercultural issues in creating an online project that would allow those students to 'meet' virtually, interact, and perhaps exchange ideas and different perspectives on a variety of topics.

Initially, students were working in pairs in what we called a 'buddy system'; an idea based on the assumption that 'buddies' could support each other rather than compete, as they were not classmates. This experience also enabled students to access the ideas, knowledge and materials shared in another course that was part of the project and that, in turn, would have enriched their work and further developed their knowledge on the subject. The 'buddy lists' were essentially lists of pairs of students who did not attend the same classes and therefore had to participate in on-line forums in order to provide and receive feedback.

Teacher's Role

Taking into consideration that the online project's main aims were to raise awareness of the importance of intercultural issues when learning English as a foreign language, and to develop students' autonomy as learners and to equip them with tools that would be appropriate for self- and peer-evaluation, the role of the teacher in the online interaction was in some ways limited to providing guidance, final evaluation and feedback.

However, and according to the answers gathered in a questionnaire that was applied (see Appendix B), what became an essential tool for students was the ability to provide appropriate feedback and hence was the teachers' main focus in terms of preparing students for the project. It was crucial for students to grasp the idea of providing constructive criticism; they had to learn about the importance of giving an explanation for each negative remark and, more importantly, suggestions and ideas on how their work could be further developed and improved.

Establishing and explaining criteria for evaluation was another vital part of this process and clear instructions on how to provide feedback and what each criterion meant were stressed both in class as well as in the online forums. It was also necessary to add that each week, apart from the online project forum, where the students would upload their tasks, there was also a help forum for students to post specific questions regarding the task. The platform was established to provide online support to students. This tool, however, did not prove to be very popular with the project's participants and they much pre-ferred contacting the teacher via email to ask for additional help. Based on the answers provided by the students in the mentioned questionnaire, this choice

could have been due to the fact that the tool was not sufficiently promoted in class and therefore students turned to their preferred way of communicating.

Student's Role

At the very heart of the online project was the principle that once students learned how to evaluate their own and their peers' work, they could become more independent and therefore better learners. Their role consisted mainly of firstly, completing their own assignment and uploading it on a forum on time in order to allow their 'buddy' to evaluate the work based on the criteria established by the teacher; and secondly, of checking and evaluating their partner's work and providing suggestions on how the assignment could be improved. This is where the idea of constructive criticism, often emphasized during the in class sessions, became essential to establishing meaningful and useful online interactions.

Setting up this project meant that students could benefit from the knowledge gained in class and further develop their skills outside the classroom whenever it was convenient to them. Naturally, there was concern that not setting students particular time for the online session would result in their not completing the work on time, especially in the case of less disciplined participants who have not fully developed their time management skills. This issue was addressed by establishing a time limit or a deadline for each task, allowing the students to select the most convenient time to complete set work, as well as limiting time for online peer feedback. Students' online interaction affected their grade and the ability of the partner to complete their work. For instance, if participant A did not complete the work by the deadline, it meant participant B (Buddy) was not able to fulfill all the requirement of a given task, as they could not provide feedback on a non-existent assignment. Taking into account the data gathered in the questionnaire applied, we believed that this would be a motivational factor for students to complete their work on time, so as not to be responsible for their partner's failure to complete the task.

Learning Tasks

Tasks were essentially collaborative. The main focus and purpose of introducing the online collaboration platforms were to enable students to maximize their learning experience by providing additional space for developing skills and knowledge gained in class as well as to help students to develop autonomous learning strategies. This methodology is in accordance with the philosophy of Universidad de La Sabana, where there is currently a strong emphasis on developing these crucial academic skills.

Having to provide a critique of peers' work would certainly increase students' analytical and evaluative skills as well as enhance their ability to manage their time due to specific time constraints for submitting their own work and evaluation of peer's assignment. This section explains some of the tasks that were planned for students.

- *Employment in Canada:* In this task students had to look for a job ad for them and justify in a paragraph why they chose that job and in the particular country. Also, they had to talk about the documents (visas, etc.) they need to have for this job application. They posted the document with the information required and their peer had to revise if the activity was well done and adhered to the requirements stated.

- *A successful CV:* This was another collaborative task where students chose what they considered to be the essential elements that every successful CV should have. They made a list with annotations containing additional tips about every section of the CV. They justified the chosen tips and created their CV. They posted the document with the information required and their peer had to revise if the activity was well done and adhered to the requirements stated.

- *Personal Blog:* Students created a personal Blog where they included their cv and the criteria for a successful cv. They posted the link of the blog with the information required and their peer had to revise if the activity was well done. In one of the classes the teacher had to adjust the activity because students asked to have another topic for their blog. Students wanted to write a more academic article so the teacher asked them to choose one of the topics discussed in class and then write a problem-solving essay. They posted the link of the blog with the information required and their peer had to evaluate the work.

Member Roles

Initially, the idea was to establish interaction between students of all three courses in open forums. Nevertheless, there was a concern, based on previous experience with using online forums, that the students would not participate regularly and that the criteria for evaluating each other's work would be difficult to establish.

As a result, we decided that putting students into pairs, or 'buddies', especially when pairing them up with students from a different group, would benefit them much more. The idea was to avoid having students from the same group working together online, as we feared that providing criticism of each other's work would cause friction and affect the face-to-face interactions in class. In the first term, this proved to be effective to some extent, as the students were still learning how to evaluate their own and others' work.

In the second term, and after the experience of the first one, which included late submissions and insufficient feedback, students realized that their lack of commitment could affect their performance and most importantly their peers' performance. When students commented on their responsibility with their classmates, teachers decided that students were sufficiently prepared to interact with the members of

the same group, hoping that having students from the same group interact among them would also increase the quality and quantity of the feedback. Additionally, it was much easier for students to meet deadlines, as the newly established pairs would constantly remind each other of the upcoming deadlines.

In the last term, the emphasis was put on in-class interaction due to the nature of the given task. Students were still working in pairs; however, this time the peer feedback or critique did not take place until the very end of the project. It was conducted in class. The interaction amongst students was still a crucial part of the project at that stage, but the evaluation was not the main focus. Students interacted with each other to create a presentation, a form of an advertising campaign, which required a lot of online communication (mainly due to lack of time in class) and therefore the aim of the project was still being achieved by encouraging students to organize, plan and develop set tasks as a team. This required using all the skills they had previously been taught in class.

Feedback

Initially, feedback was intended to be concise and straightforward. Formats were designed by the teachers to provide students with tools such as checklists (see Appendix a) with the intention of specifying the criteria for evaluation so that students could focus on the content of their peers' tasks by looking at specific aspects. It was clearly stated in the forums that not meeting any of the criteria according to a peer would have to be followed by detailed comments and suggestions on how to further develop the work and in this way the teachers wanted to guarantee that students would be sure about the comments they provided and those they got in return. Also, there was a separate grade for providing feedback and it comprised five percent of students' term grade, a guideline which proved to play a role in motivating the students to participate in the forums.

According to the aims of the project, the main source of feedback should have been peers. However, peer feedback was restricted to the criteria included in the evaluation form and students were asked to post additional comments only if their 'buddy' did not meet some of the criteria. Teachers' feedback consisted mainly of face-to-face interaction, where the student would receive a hard copy of the evaluation sheet with additional and much more detailed comments about their work, as well as a grade.

Although initially the idea was for teachers to also participate in the online forums, we concluded that it would have potentially affected students' interaction amongst each other and defeated the purpose of their becoming independent learners. Therefore, teachers' participation was sporadic and occurred only when there was lack of communication between students or a genuine problem with the task.

Evaluation

For the purpose of the online project, the most effective way for students to evaluate each other's work was to use a clear and concise format that would allow them to reflect upon their own work through reconsidering the task's criteria. The checklist format seemed the most appropriate. It was time-effective and considerably less complex than open questions about a peer's work. The criteria mentioned in the checklist matched the task's instructions (also provided in a straightforward, step-by-step format), which were explained in class as well as being available in the online forum.

Conclusions

It was encouraging to view the results of an online questionnaire (see Appendix B) given to students. We found that the assumptions regarding the benefits and the potential challenges linked to the development of the online project matched the comments sent by the course participants. It was extremely important for the

sessions to be closely linked to the online project in order to enable students to work independently on the topic and gain more knowledge on the subject whilst developing academic skills. According to the answers in the survey, most of the students agreed that this purpose was achieved and added that all the online sessions were an extension of the in-class sessions. They helped them understand the topic better and in many ways complemented the lessons. Students added that there was always sufficient time to complete those tasks and, furthermore, this was one of the important aspects to be considered in creating the task.

Another important point to add is that the sessions helped the students prepare for their exams, allowed them to focus and explore topics that were relevant and useful to them (i.e. CV writing) as well as expanded their vocabulary. Presentations were chosen as the most useful activity; blogs, reflective papers and mind maps were also mentioned. It seems that providing a wide variety of tasks has worked well and each student was able to benefit from the sessions and find activities suitable for their needs.

In terms of suggested improvements to the online session content, students wanted to see the instructions for the online sessions in the form of a presentation. They also thought that introducing online debates might be a good idea. One of the students suggested that keeping very strict deadlines on each task would help to motivate the participants to upload their contributions on time. Upon reflection, teachers have realized that re-opening forums in order to allow students who were unable to participate when the assignment was active ultimately led to other students assuming that they would have an opportunity to upload missing work at a later time. This made them prioritize other academic commitments over their online project and affected their motivation.

Students also suggested strengthening the links between the in class and online sessions by engaging in a discussion about the task before it is assigned.

This did take place to some extent; however, it was usually after the task was posted online, which meant there was not much room for introducing changes to the assignments. Students also thought it would be interesting to mix the topic covered in class with a free topic to allow for more creativity. We believe that this would benefit the students to a great extent as long as the criteria for each task remain clear.

All the students who took part in the survey agreed that the questions included in the feedback checklists allowed them to better understand the criteria of each task and evaluate their 'buddy's' contributions in a more objective manner. They mentioned that the 'step-by-step' instructions and the checklist criteria enabled them to understand the purpose and the expected outcome of the session and that the system made peer and self-evaluation easier. As we had hoped, the feedback provided by peers was easily understood by the students and was useful in terms of re-evaluating the work.

Students liked the fact that their 'buddy' was patient, not strict at all, yet helpful in terms of having someone look over their work before it and they were graded by the teacher. Nevertheless, we worried that if some students had been completely objective in their judgment, it would have affected their 'buddy's' grade and therefore have been an admission to being too lenient in terms of evaluating their peers' ability to meet all the criteria. As we had anticipated, this system enabled students to gain a different perspective on their work and that proved to be very beneficial to them.

Pedagogical Implications

Technology has become a useful, meaningful, and therefore important tool in educational contexts. This is why many researchers, not only in Colombia but also around the world, have been encouraged to analyze the use of ICTs within educational contexts. Important journals such as *TESOL* or *TESOL Quarterly*

have published important articles that in a practical way give accounts of the use and influence of technology in educational settings. Authors like Kern (2006) and Cummins (2008) have reflected upon technology and its use in a context like the United States and the findings of their studies have suggested teachers should take actions to use technology in the classroom due to its potential benefits. Thus, in a context as Colombia, research in the area of the use of ICTs in education can be done by considering studies and practices that local and international researchers have explored.

The comments made by students and the reflection of the teachers in charge of this innovation suggest new strategies and pedagogical considerations to motivate students' interaction when working in online environments. By giving students an academic and a social responsibility, students participated more and were more motivated because they felt what they could say was important.

Collaboration and participation are two factors that allowed students to recognize and use their academic voices, especially when commenting on their classmates' pieces of work. The recognition and use of their own voice enrich the academic experiences due to the fact that they help students avoid passivity. The role of teacher in this part is to enhance the production and socialization of individual ideas and contributions. According to Shor (1992), "Students are people whose voices are worth listening to, whose minds can carry the weight of serious intellectual work, whose thought and feeling can entertain transforming self and society" (p. 26). When encouraged to use her/his own voice the student becomes self-confident and, consequently, it is going to be easier for him/her to share and recognize his/her valuable ideas and thoughts. We hope that peer feedback will become a source of information and inspiration for teachers who are dealing with similar contexts in the EFL classrooms.

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Appendix A: Reflective Paper (Blog) Checklist

ONLINE SESSION: PROJECT

Create a blog reflecting what you have learned about the importance of non-verbal communication in modern day society.

Peer's name: _____   Date: _____

Answer the following questions based on the information your peer included in the BLOG.

Put a tick in the YES box if the BLOG includes the item or NO if it does not.

Has your 'Buddy'…

	YES	NO
Explained the purpose or the thesis of the reflective paper in the BLOG? (Introduction)		
Explained what non-verbal communication is and why it is important? (Introduction)		
Provided a minimum of three examples showing the importance of non-verbal communication in modern-day society? (Main Body)		
Ensured the examples are convincing and address the topic sufficiently? (Main Body)		
Provided evidence to support his/her examples? (Main Body)		
Summarized the key points and explained how he/she will use this knowledge in the future? (Conclusion)		
Organised the information in a clear and logical way so that it is easy to follow?		
Ensured that the language used is clear?		
Provided the sources he/she used in the reflective paper?		
Included a minimum of 600 words?		

If you have answered NO to any of the above questions, please make sure you provide details below:

Additional/general comments:

Reviewer's name: _____

Based on the comments made by your reviewer and the information in this checklist, add the missing information to the forum.

Appendix B: Project Questionnaire

Dear student, the purpose of this questionnaire is to gather information about your experience in completing the online activities. The main objective is to get honest answers that will allow us to analyze your experience and improve the course in the future. Choose one answer for each one of the statements.

1. Did you feel that the Online Project was appropriately linked to the in class sessions?
   Yes _____   No _____
   Why? _____

2. Did the activities help you to reinforce the knowledge gained in the course (e.g. body language, looking for employment, etc.)?
   Yes _____   No _____
   Why? _____

3. Were the questions included in the checklists for online activities helpful in understanding the criteria in each task?
   Yes _____   No _____
   Why? _____

4. Did the checklists enable you to objectively evaluate your 'buddy's' work?
   Yes _____   No _____

5. Was it easy to understand your peer's evaluation of your work?
   Yes _____   No _____

6. Which of the online activities did you find most useful and why? Choose one.
   ☐ Forums
   ☐ Mind maps
   ☐ Reflective Papers
   ☐ Blogs
   ☐ Presentations

7. How would you improve the online activities to make them more appealing?
8. What did you find useful about the 'buddy' feedback in your online sessions?
9. What would you improve?
10. What type of comments did you write?
    Why? _____