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Critical and Intercultural Theory and Language Pedagogy

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Editors



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Chapter 12

A Social Constructivist Approach to Foreign Language Writing in Online Environments

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Abstract

While communicative approaches promote collaboration in the classroom, linguistic and cultural content knowledge is often regarded as information to be transferred most effectively from teachers to learners. Applying sociocultural and socioconstructivist perspectives and taking critical pedagogy into consideration, this chapter discusses the implementation of curricular changes into two hybrid Spanish courses: an advanced writing course and a beginning-level Spanish course. The use of social tools such as wikis, chats, and discussion boards not only emphasized collaboration among participants but also generated and developed content and linguistic knowledge in what is called the architecture of participation. The pedagogical shift possible through the use of social tools reshaped the foreign language context setting by expanding the physical classroom into a larger e-classroom and creating writing communities that used a language of their own. Learners actively participated in a community of writers in which, through dialogue, they created knowledge and achieved common goals both through the integration of the group and through their own voice.

Introduction

A collaborative approach to foreign language and culture learning expands learners' experiences and puts them in touch with social contexts different from their own. Guiding learners toward and through these practices of collective and critical learning implies, therefore, a need to modify the foreign language curriculum. Despite communicative approaches that promote collaboration in the classroom, linguistic and cultural content knowledge is often regarded as information to be transferred most effectively from teachers to learners. From this educational context, learners emerge with an amalgam of experiences that they have internalized with the help of the instructor or, less frequently, of their peers. This approach to learning reflects the traditional Cartesian view of knowledge in which the teaching–learning focus rests on the individual as a cognitive entity—a view that has hitherto been dominant in classroom pedagogy. However, it does not fit with the most current view of learning as a social endeavor or with the development of new technologies that allow the expansion of the physical classroom into “virtual” spaces that encompass independent online components. Within the social learning paradigm—an approach that focuses on the individual “as a person-in-the-world, as a member of a sociocultural community” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 52)—learning is seen not

as the product of one individual's efforts but rather as deeply connected to their surroundings, tools, and the entire context in which the learning takes place.

In line with second-language acquisition and learning theories, the foreign language curriculum frequently includes collaborative endeavors in which learners can actively participate in the foreign language community. On the one hand, these efforts take the form primarily of oral interactions in which the goal is to practice grammatical structures or vocabulary (Harklau, 2002), and, on the other hand, these interactions give learners little opportunity to engage in a critical dialogue that makes them active agents of their own learning. Considering that foreign language courses do not always provide a learning environment that emphasizes meaningful interactions (Ortega, 2007), we recognized the need to test new methodological approaches to support learners with their foreign language writing. This led us to experiment with the integration of social tools to allow learners to engage in multiple dialogues that would go beyond the classroom walls.

Applying sociocultural and socioconstructivist perspectives and taking critical pedagogy into consideration, we implemented curricular changes into two hybrid Spanish courses: an advanced writing course and a beginning-level Spanish course. In both courses, the aim was to foster the development of writing conventions through the use of the target language and learners' cultural knowledge. The hybrid courses were taught online for at least 25 percent of the class time and integrated the use of social technologies (i.e., wikis and chats). Collaborative tasks were set to provide learners with an environment where knowledge could be constructed through "ongoing, dynamic processes of discussion and negotiation that take full advantage of a collaborative approach to learning" (Hirvela, 1999, p. 8).

The pedagogical shift proposed in this chapter has reshaped the foreign language classroom setting in several ways: (1) it expanded the physical classroom setting into a larger e-classroom, and (2) it created writing communities that used a language of their own. Recognizing that learning is mediated by language, interaction, and artifacts (Ohta, 2000), the introduction of collaborative assignments, whether peer reviewed or coauthored, allowed learners to practice with writing conventions and to discover features of genres as they were generating content knowledge.

Constructing Knowledge

In a constructivist view of learning, how learners construct knowledge depends on what they already know, which in turn rests on the types of experiences they have previously had and how they came to organize those experiences into existing knowledge structures. Thus, the learner actively engages in the learning process, which moves beyond pure cognitive skills. This contrasts with a teacher-centered paradigm in that the teacher is no longer the authoritative figure and sole distributor of knowledge but is perceived rather as a facilitator of learning, guiding and supporting learners in the process of knowledge construction. The principles

underlying constructivism are based on the following premises: (1) learning is not the result of development; learning is development; (2) disequilibrium facilitates learning; (3) reflective abstraction is the driving force of learning; (4) dialogue with a community engenders further thinking; and (5) learning proceeds toward the development of structures (Fosnot, 1996). In the socioconstructivist paradigm, founded primarily on the work of Vygotsky (1978, 1986), the learning process should not be seen as a solitary endeavor—on the contrary, it is highly collaborative. During their participation in collaborative activities, learners develop multiple perspectives and are exposed to disparate points of view, a process that in itself creates a rich bank of common knowledge.

Learning through Dialogue

Socioculturalism adds to social constructivism “by positing that reality is not only a matter of interpretative construction but that it is also radically collective and social, appropriated and transformed” (Ortega, 2009, p. 217). In this view, the individual participates and relates with others in an ongoing, social, and interactional process; that is, members interact, “do things together, negotiate new meanings, and learn from each other” in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, p. 102). From a social-cultural point of view, “learning as increasing participation in communities of practice concerns the whole person acting in the world” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 49). As van Lier (2000) suggests, from an ecological perspective, when observing learners’ interactions, it is essential to avoid narrow interpretation of language as words that are transmitted from sender to receiver and of learning as something that happens only “inside a person’s head” (p. 258). Cognitive processes need to be related to social processes; that is, language has to be contextualized into other semiotic systems and into the world as a whole (van Lier, 2000).

Because learning is mediated by language, interaction, and artifacts, there is a growing interest among second-language teachers and researchers in understanding how second-language development occurs through situated interactions in classrooms and other teaching–learning contexts (Ohta, 2000). The relevance of language or dialogue for learning has been widely discussed (Ohta, 2000; Swain, 2000; Wells, 1999, 2000). Wells (2000), citing Franklin (1996), states that “knowledge is created and re-created in the discourse between people doing things together” (p. 71). In the foreign language classroom, collaborative dialogue constructs both content and linguistic knowledge. As learners engage to complete a task, they are able to focus their attention on what they are saying and then produce alternative messages. As a result of this dialogue, “together [learners’] jointly constructed performance outstrips their individual competences” (Swain, 2000, p. 111). It has also been pointed out that the dialogue in question needs to be defined as both internal and external conversations that a learner has with a multitude of voices, not least of which is their own voice (Weisberg, 2008).

Adding a Critical Perspective

Critical pedagogy encourages learners to become active participants of their own learning, challenging existing social and political structures and understandings. In this view, educators themselves attempt to disrupt the classroom's traditional power relationships in search of a more equalitarian environment. The instructor is no longer seen as the only active agent of learning, the one who "deposits" knowledge in the learners, and the learners are not seen as the "depositories" of knowledge either (Freire, 1970), but the classroom per se is envisioned as a site where new knowledge, grounded in the experiences of learners and teacher alike, is produced through meaningful interactions.

Education in a second language is not understood just as the teaching and learning of an additional linguistic system; rather, it is about the social and cultural knowledge and, "perhaps even more, about helping students to develop critical approaches to examining and understanding such knowledge" (Reagan & Osborn, 2002, p. 30). As Brumfit, Myles, Mitchell, Johnston, and Ford (2005) suggest, foreign language programs, although expected to contribute to learners' ability to engage in the world as critical human beings, are primarily skill and knowledge based, especially in basic language courses. Yet Brumfit et al. note that programs that emphasize critical thinking include three traits: being able to use the language as a tool for critical reasoning, being able to provide critical reasoning within the language classroom, and being able to foster independent learning—all of which can be observed even from the early stages of language learning.

Dialogue in a Technology-Oriented World

In an era in which technology is "reconstituting how we communicate, making it possible to exchange information and to create new meaning collaboratively in new ways and at new rhythms" (Magnan, 2008, p. 1), the integration of constructivist and sociocultural perspectives with technology has proved to be a neat fit; it has led to pedagogical change and the transformation of learning environments. Technologies, particularly socially oriented technologies such as wikis (Web pages that anyone can edit from their own computer) and chats (voice or written synchronous computer-mediated communication), have had a profound impact "on the roles of teachers and learners by creating a more equal learning environment in which instructors and students collaborate in the construction of knowledge" (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2008, p. 193; see also Thorne & Payne, 2005), reconfiguring the traditional learner-instructor relationship. Socially oriented tools, then, not only emphasize collaboration among participants but also can generate and develop both content and knowledge in what is called the architecture of participation. Furthermore, the importance of communication tools such as wikis and chats in terms of their educational purposes stems from the *affordances*—actions that individuals can perform using a particular tool—of sharing, communicating, and information discovery (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007).

It is important to note here that while technology and social software tools offer potential enhancements to student learning, they do not automatically lead to positive learning results (Lindblom-Ylänne & Pihlajamäki, 2003). Therefore, in any educational context it is essential to consider the relationship between the properties of these technologies and how learners use them to acquire knowledge (Kirschner, 2002). Further, as McLoughlin and Lee (2007) suggest, there is a need to recognize that “technologies are intricately related to many other elements of the learning context” (p. 666), such as subject content, curriculum, communication, process, resources, scaffolding, and learning tasks. Thus, as classroom practitioners, it is crucial that we understand how the use of social tools supports the effective development of class content and how it enhances the role of each learner in their own learning.

Tools for Collaboration

In our approach, teachers can opt to work with diverse social tools to create more collaborative writing assignments. The first step is to choose an appropriate tool to suit the purpose of the planned activity. From the array of social tools available to educators, three tools—discussion boards, wikis, and chats—were chosen for consideration here.

Discussion Boards

Discussion boards are online forums that provide “a critical common space in which [to] share and verify hypotheses and points of view, to ask for help deciphering meanings of words and concepts, and to constantly negotiate meanings and interpretations” (Bauer, deBenedette, Furstenberg, Levet, & Waryn, 2006, p. 35). They have been instrumental in helping learners to elaborate course content (Weasenforth, Biesenbach-Lucas, & Meloni, 2002) and to promote cultural reflections (Bauer et al., 2006; Oskoz, 2009; Wildner-Bassett, 2005). We chose to use discussion boards because the time lag that occurs between reading and posting in an online discussion provides “time to recognize connections, understand other’s ideas, and develop a detailed response or posting” (Meyer, 2003, p. 60). It also gives learners the opportunity to bring in outside material and experiences (Kol & Schcolnik, 2008) and to link ideas and make relevant connections (Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Kol & Schcolnik, 2008; Newman, Johnson, Cochrane, & Webb, 1996) more effectively than can face-to-face interactions (Sengupta, 2001).

Wikis

Wikis are collaborative Web-based environments that anyone can edit. As modeled in the well-known Wikipedia, wikis support collaborative writing in educational settings by providing learners with the opportunity to coauthor a document (Farabaugh, 2007; Jones, 2007; McLoughlin & Lee, 2007; Parker & Chao, 2007; Trentin, 2008). Because this software operates flexibly to facilitate the shaping and sharing of knowledge when learners work collaboratively, wikis have attracted the attention of educators in many settings (Augar, Raitman & Zhou, 2004;

Byron, 2005; Farabaugh, 2007; Honegger, 2005; Oskoz & Elola, 2010; Trentin, 2008; Tsinakos, 2006). An important feature of wikis when used for educational purposes is that learners hold authorial rights to create, transform, and erase their work. At the same time, the wiki allows instructors to follow the writers' collaborative actions by tracking who is making changes, what changes are being made, how often, and when.

Chats

Online chats, or “written synchronous communication,” encourage learners to participate more in the class, create a sense of community among class members, and allow learners to think about and edit their messages before they send them (Beauvois, 1992). Chats allow learners to construct knowledge collaboratively by providing each other with implicit or explicit feedback (Lee, 2002, 2006; Morris, 2005; Pellettieri, 2000; Sotillo, 2005; Tudini, 2003). They also provide learners with a communicative setting that encourages exchanges of ideas and a focus on content (Beauvois, 1992; Chun, 1994; Kelm, 1992).

Implementing Social Learning in Foreign Language Writing

Our learners were attending a commuter university that has developed online components to compensate for reduced hours of face-to-face instruction. Learners at both beginning and advanced levels of Spanish participated in both computer-mediated communication and face-to-face interactions in the classroom. The integration of social tools allowed learners to engage in a coconstruction and meaning-making process in which they exchanged ideas on specific topics and created new knowledge collaboratively—either linguistic, cultural, or both. As suggested by McBride and Wildner-Bassett (2008), several ground rules were established for learners to allow their “sociability” to develop naturally. Outside the classroom, learners worked individually and collaboratively with the online tools according to the different requirements of each course. In the lower-level course, our emphasis was primarily on creating opportunities for developing writing with communicative purposes in mind, whereas in the advanced class, the main intent was to move beyond simple written communication linked to cultural topics to develop these students' skills in the genre of academic writing.

Advanced Writing Course

The advanced writing course is a regular course taught every other semester by the same instructor. There were 21 learners in this particular course. The main goal of the course is for learners to develop their second language, achieve academic writing skills in Spanish, and develop cultural knowledge by working on several writing activities that include the development of argumentative and expository texts. Based on previously mentioned sociocultural and socioconstructivist perspectives, collaborative writing assignments were introduced as an important component

of the course. The objective was to create meaning-oriented situations in which learners could engage in a dialogue with each other about the linguistic features, writing conventions, and cultural topic of the assignment. Given the social implications of the topics selected, the instructor encouraged writers to research, critically discuss, and question their findings for learners to become critical producers of meanings and texts (Kellner, 2000). In order to expand the physical classroom into a virtual space that learners could access from different sites (necessary because of learners' commuting schedules), discussion boards, wikis, and chats were introduced into the intensive writing course.

The Procedure

During class, learners worked face-to-face on grammar exercises and the organization and structure of different writing genres and held in-class discussions about the cultural topics of the writing assignments. The topics of the writing varied each time: the role of men and women in Latino America, globalization, an iconic person in Latino America (see Example 1), and immigration. The instructor selected the first three topics based on the content of the textbook; echoing Canagarajah's (2002) suggestions, the final theme, immigration, was selected because of learners' expressed interest in the topic.

Example 1 Discussion board prompt (translated into English)

The person as symbol

There are people who acquire a symbolic or mythical stature in the consciousness of a people or in the consciousness of humanity. Think of a person that has played a significant role, preferably in the Hispanic world in general or in a specific Hispanic country.

Group Leader: Think of a person who has or may have had a great impact due to his or her political, social, environmental, or artistic work. As a group leader, describe the person that you chose and analyze why and how they became a symbolic figure.

Group Members: Respond to the group leader and to another group member by supporting the group leader's suggestion, explaining your reasons, and also adding more information. If you do not agree with the person proposed by the group leader, propose another person whose social, political, or environmental work you consider to be more important. Describe the person, the work he or she has done, and its value in society.

After an initial class discussion, grounded in the experiences of learners and instructor alike, learners further discussed the topics online via the discussion boards and worked on their writing assignments in the wikis with the assistance of the written or oral chats. Because learners had to work with four writing assignments (two argumentative and two expository essays), they worked with each genre both individually and collaboratively. In this way, learners could establish both external and internal conversations with multiple voices, including their

own (Weisberg, 2008). The first time they encountered the new genre they worked collaboratively (essays 1 and 3), and the second time they worked individually (essays 2 and 4). To maintain the same approach to all the writing assignments, each of the four assignments followed the same instructional three-week-long schedule, which helped learners to organize themselves effectively. The first week, learners discussed the topic of the writing in the discussion boards. Following Arnold and Ducate's (2006) suggestions, each discussion board group had a leader, and this position rotated periodically. The leader was in charge of starting, maintaining, and wrapping up the content of the discussion, while the other three members answered the group members' postings. As Wanner (2008) also noticed, the strict thematic organization of the discussion boards encouraged an information-based style of communication in which learners provided snippets of information as well as discussing the pros and cons of a topic. The second week, after an initial discussion in class about content, structure, and form, learners completed the first draft of the writing in the wiki. When working on the assignments, learners were accessing the wikis from different locations, so they communicated via written or oral chats. Although learners were not obligated to communicate any specific number of times or to address any specific topics, they were encouraged to communicate with each other in Spanish. Learners used the chats to generate further ideas about the topic, discuss global issues such as structure and organization, and plan their work so each of them knew what they had to concentrate on while working separately. Then, in the following class (in week 3), the learners and the instructor commented on a few of the essays, reading for content, structure, and accuracy. Finally, learners had a week to complete their assignment in the wikis, using the chats when working collaboratively.

Learners' Use of Social Tools

Learners found that generating and sharing ideas with the group (in the discussion boards) allowed them to discuss multiple possible ideas and arguments for the essay. For example, when researching a person of mythical stature in the Hispanic world, one of the groups discussed the respective merits of Zapata, Pancho Villa, and Bolivar. In this discussion board, Lisa, who was acting as group leader, started the conversation by citing a political figure that she had researched: Emiliano Zapata. The group was composed of Lisa, Becky, Jennifer, and Rachel (pseudonyms). Lisa's initial posting led to the interactions that follow:

Excerpt 1:

Becky (Posted: October 26, 2007)

I agree with Lisa. Zapata was a very important person in Mexico, and he tried to do much for his own country. . . .

Becky (Posted: October 28, 2007)

Sorry for my additions [but] I have to add more. During and after his life Pancho Villa was a well-known revolutionary symbol for his fights during and in favor of the Mexican Revolution. But as a great symbol, Zapata, in my opinion and through my investigation seems to be a better symbol. When

I looked for information about Zapata I did not find anything bad as in the case of Pancho Villa. Villa made use of more violence. I found a lot of information on Zapata in relation to the true cause of the Revolution.

Jennifer (Posted: October 28, 2007)

. . . Because of these facts, I think that Bolivar is as important as Zapata. Yet, I think I agree more with Zapata's ideas. . . .

Lisa (Posted: October 29, 2007)

As mentioned by Jennifer and Becky, Pancho Villa was involved in one of the same movements in which Zapata participated. When I was reading about Zapata, it was interesting because some writers believed that Pancho Villa was more popular and that his image and photo were used more frequently. I don't know if that is true, but I think that Zapata's work is better known, and as Becky said, we can see his ideology more today in the fight of the called *zapatistas*.

Jennifer (Posted: October 30, 2007)

. . . Zapata was a man who influenced the history of Mexico, but Zapata did not make the same contribution as Bolivar. Bolivar liberated six nations in Latin America, and even today many countries honor him. However, I think it is important to mention both, because, in my opinion, Bolivar was not a role model because the wealth and the opportunity of getting an education did not help him to identify with other individuals around him . . .

(Translated by the authors as close to the Spanish version as possible)

Taking the postings by Jennifer as an example, she is voicing an internal dialogue in which she debates the relevance of Bolivar's role in Latin America. In her two different postings, Jennifer contributes information about Zapata. In her first posting, Jennifer tentatively introduces another choice of person, Bolivar. Although she is intrigued by Bolivar, who "liberated six nations in Latin America, and even today [is honored in] many countries," she then discards Bolivar and counts the merits of Zapata more highly. This reflects, as Weisberg (2008) noted, the importance of defining dialogue as both internal and external conversations. In Jennifer's case, it was this internal dialogue that helped her toward an understanding of the differences between the two men.

In this way, the discussion board became a forum in which learners, by listening to and debating each others' contributions, discussed the merits and weaknesses of their selected personas and finally achieved an understanding beyond their initial individual positions (Bauer et al., 2006). The internal and external conversations that took place in the discussion boards directed the group toward a possible consensus, confirming Hirvela's (1999) notion of knowledge construction through ongoing, dynamic processes of discussion and negotiation. When it was time for the essay writing, learners could draw on their new knowledge from the conversations, as Weisberg (2008) suggests, but they could also listen to their own voices and finally choose to write quite convincingly about the historical figures they believed were most significant or charismatic in the Spanish-speaking world—figures such as Zapata, Rigoberta Menchú, or Juanes, among others.

As noted in previous research (Beauvois, 1992; Chun, 1994; Kelm, 1992), chats can also be a useful tool to develop content, as they allow learners to challenge their coauthor's ideas, forcing each discussant to justify his or her ideas. Overall, the process of listening to each other and contributing additional ideas enabled learners to present stronger arguments in their essays.

Excerpt 2:

LAUREN: After thinking about it last night, I don't think it's possible to argue that sexism is caused by only one thing.

MONICA: But domestic violence isn't an argument, it's not a position/point of view . . . I don't want to argue about whether sexism exists at all.

LAUREN: This is my opinion: we can argue that sexism exists [by examining] its consequences, like abuse against women, or workplace inequality, or anything like that.

MONICA: But the problem . . . I have with that is this: if we select abuse, we only have one reason that demonstrates that sexism exists. We can only say that it exists because there is violence and there's nothing else to support the argument that sexism exists. I think that if we are going to argue that sexism exists we need a lot of facts to support our argument.

LAUREN: We'll have to make a list of reasons why we think it still exists; maybe that can help us select one topic, inequality in the workplace, the division of chores at home . . .

MONICA: OK, if you want to do domestic abuse we can add that sexism causes domestic abuse, because domestic abuse isn't enough to argue that sexism exists.

LAUREN: OK, I agree: domestic abuse is a consequence of sexism.

(Translated by the authors as close to the Spanish version as possible)

Echoing Wells (2000), this example shows how, in their attempt to achieve the common goal, Monica and Lauren directed their efforts to develop an appropriate argument for the basis of their essay. Through their collaborative dialogue, not only do Monica and Lauren complete the task, but, by the exchange of alternative theses, they also achieve a result beyond what they would have achieved by working on their own (Swain, 2000).

Beginning Course

Following the success of including wikis in the advanced writing course, a wiki component was added to a winter course (a three-week course) to observe if the new collaborative technology could also facilitate learners' writing in lower-level courses. Consistent with critical pedagogy tenets, the instructor attempted to create a learning environment in which learners would grow from being passive recipients of knowledge to active agents of their own learning. Whereas in the advanced

course learners worked collaboratively to create the same text, in the beginning course the collaborative work entailed only peer-review work that addressed both global issues (i.e., content) and local issues (i.e., vocabulary and grammar).

Applying a social learning approach to writing in a lower-level language course, while still possible, requires recognition of the lower language proficiency and possibly lower cognitive abilities of learners at this level. Previous research has reported the use of learners' first language as the medium of expression to allow learners to achieve higher levels of cultural reflection and understanding (Antón, DiCamilla, & Lantolf, 2003; Bauer et al., 2006; Belz, 2003; Chavez, 2003; Elola & Oskoz, 2008). As such, learners were allowed to provide feedback to each other using English, their first language. At the content level, while cultural issues were raised and discussed in the classroom and via the discussion board, the instructor suggested a less culturally specific writing activity and one closer to learners' immediate reality, that is, their need to find a roommate for the upcoming semester in a Spanish-speaking country. To keep things simple, the wikis were the only tool used in this introductory exercise. As in the advanced class, these learners were also trained in the technology and were briefed about how social tools could support their learning processes at the individual and collaborative levels.

The integration of wikis into the beginning language class brought with it two major pedagogical changes. First, instead of completing one or two writing assignments in the course, which had been the traditional approach in the past, learners were asked to complete only one three-week-long writing activity. Because these learners were going to spend one semester in Spain, living with a Spanish roommate, an obvious topic for a writing assignment was the composition of a letter to this person to gauge their mutual compatibility. In the wikis, learners composed drafts of the letter at different stages of the course; this highlighted for them that the more relevant Spanish vocabulary and grammar they learned to elaborate their content, the more sophisticated their letter would be. Learners were able in this way to keep revising the letter and adding new information, individually and with the help of their peers. Integrating the knowledge learned in class into the writing assignments, learners wrote almost daily to their potential roommate. The second major pedagogical change came with the provision of feedback on content and form, which followed a four-step process. In order to support the letter writing process, the instructor created a schedule that included both learners' writing and also feedback from learners to their partners.

The Procedure

In each lesson, learners participated in related communicative activities, such as introducing themselves to another person. After class and with reference to the class content, learners were asked to incorporate what they had learned in class into the draft letter they were composing. During the following lesson, the instructor and learners then discussed the wiki writing. Given the public nature of the wiki, learners felt that they had become an audience to which the letter was directed. This new identity, as recipients of the letter, allowed learners to provide appropriate feedback to their classmates not only pinpointing linguistic

inaccuracies but also by emphasizing content-related shortcomings. An example of this approach to content is seen in the way they want their partners to improve the meaning of the letter:

Excerpt 3

Two aspects for improvement: The small corrections to the eye and hair color descriptions as well as additional information, such as telephone number and maybe a short physical description. The physical description is not very important, but just to make sure your potential roommate isn't three feet tall and living in a house with 4 foot ceilings.

Excerpt 4

. . . but from what I can see you don't have what you and a friend like to do on a regular basis (probably to use *nosotros*) or what you do not like to do with them. I see classmate (*compañero*) but no friends and she is asking for what you like to do with friends.

As seen in these two extracts, the learners address, even humorously, content issues to help their classmates improve their letter. As readers *and* reviewers, they are looking at ways to develop a letter that might better meet their potential roommate's expectations.

Final Thoughts

Sociocultural and socioconstructivist approaches to learning attach importance to collaboration as a way for learners to construct and reconstruct their knowledge. Working within this framework, the use of social tools can enhance the act of collaboration between foreign language writers and allow them to transcend their individual competences (Swain, 2000). The use of social Web technology has led to an expansion of traditional classroom boundaries (Ortega, 2007), re-creating communities that engage creatively with material presented by the instructors. The instructors can also observe how their learners meet second-language writing challenges aided by innovative Web tools. Virtual collaboration between learners, associated with meaningful practices, is a method that Ortega (2007) suggests is a perfect vehicle for language development. As they worked on their collaborative second-language writing projects, learners found many ways to talk about the second-language cultural content and language system with a newfound degree of sophistication.

In this process, discussion boards, wikis, and chats became integral to the learning context—the curriculum and the learning tasks—and a community emerged in which knowledge was no longer transmitted primarily from instructor to student but was constructed collaboratively by all members of the class (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2008). As seen in previous studies (Donato, 1994; Swain, 2000; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002; Swain & Lapkin, 2002), the collaborative dialogue during the writing tasks built knowledge that did not previously exist in

the minds of the individual participants. It also offered learners the opportunity to become members of a particular community of writers where they could create knowledge and achieve common goals (Wells, 2000) through multiple and personal voices (Weisberg, 2008).

Despite our emphasis on a collaborative student-centered approach, we should not underestimate the role of the instructor in bringing together and guiding pedagogical choices that can build on learners' strengths and be targeted to their needs and abilities. Similar to Reagan (2005), we recognize that, while students have the ultimate responsibility for their learning, the instructor is pivotal to this model as the person responsible for deciding the instructional and learning objectives. The instructors in our studies shaped a learning context in which knowledge building took place at the individual as well as the collaborative level while at the same time introducing learners to the value of using social Web-based tools in an educational context. This approach enabled learners to transition from using such applications for strictly social purposes to using them as fully fledged learning tools, embedded in a collaborative, social context in which all class members collaborated in the construction of knowledge (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2008).

Adopting a collaborative and critical approach to the foreign language writing class entails a significant change in pedagogical thinking for both instructors and learners. After exploring curricular approaches in both courses, we decided to incorporate the use of Web-based social tools into the foreign language writing component of the courses; this project had the multiple goals of constructing knowledge, developing linguistic competences, and promoting collaborative learning as well as facilitating the use of new educational technologies. Below we list some considerations that have emerged from our study; these will be helpful for teachers or program directors who are considering the implementation of collaborative approaches to writing:

- The importance of social applications for educational purposes resides in their enhancement of sharing, communicating in a critical manner, and information discovery. Integrating social tools and collaborative work has an impact, as Van Deusen-Scholl (2008) suggests, on the roles of the teacher and learners because they create a more equal learning environment in which instructors and learners work together to construct knowledge, and they also create a particular community of practice (Wenger, 1998). In particular, instructors first need to accept that the use of these tools changes their role from an authority figure to one that guides learners in a discovery process. Second, they need to provide specific pedagogical guidelines for learners regarding the appropriate ways to use social technologies.
- Despite the focus of this chapter on the collaborative approach, instructors need to make learners aware of the value of the learners' own voice. By alternating both individual and collaborative work, instructors can guide learners toward self-confident expression in a social context and prepare them to become independent thinkers. Ultimately, these are

skills and competencies that will be highly valued when learners enter the world of work.

- Working collaboratively appears to ease learners' sense of frustration when working and writing with unfamiliar content. However, there is a danger that coconstruction of knowledge might produce a certain insecurity due to the dynamics of working in a group and having to depend on others to complete the task. To counteract this, the instructor should emphasize that participating in a developing dialogue within an established community of practice can foster critical thinking and help them reach their educational goals.

Working collaboratively with social tools, while supported by current research, requires a training period that allows learners to become comfortable with using the tools in a pedagogical context. In addition to providing specific guidelines—how, when, and why to use the tools—there needs to be a clear understanding of each tool's pedagogical purpose. The study reported here, while based on socio-constructivist and sociocultural approaches that emphasize critical dialogue for knowledge construction, does not propose that collaborative work is superior to individual work. As suggested by Weisberg (2008), there are multitudes of voices, the individual one being every bit as relevant as the communal one. Having said that, we do propose a new learning environment in which, through dialogue and reflection, learners create a unique community of practice that allows them to create and re-create knowledge that can often surpass what they can achieve individually. We would therefore like to encourage other foreign language instructors or those of other disciplines to design courses that give learners an opportunity to participate in their own learning: after all, these are critical skills for living and working in today's diverse communities.

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