

Self-Access Study and Cooperative Foreign Language Learning through Computers

(Estudo extra-classe na aprendizagem cooperativa de Línguas Estrangeiras através do computador)

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to show the importance of extra-class study and self instruction in Foreign Language Learning (FLL), especially with the use of computers. Learning is an individual act and the teachers know that the ideal language student is the one that is responsible for his/her self-learning. This research presents two experiences of learning with the computer. The first part deals with autonomous learning and the use of CD-Roms and other software. The second part points out the use of e-mail with the objective of developing comprehension, writing and the amplification of cultural exchange in a cooperative study paradigm. The study followed a qualitative methodology. Data were gathered using the following procedures: interviews with the students involved in the process, students' diaries, students' self evaluation sheets, dialogues and teachers' observation. Results indicate the relevance of the use of computer/internet as a way of improving FL teaching and learning.

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RESUMO: O objetivo desta pesquisa é mostrar a importância do estudo extraclasse e da auto-instrução na aprendizagem do ensino de Línguas Estrangeiras (LE), especialmente usando o computador. Aprender é um ato individual e os professores sabem que o aluno ideal é aquele que é responsável por sua própria aprendizagem. Este estudo apresenta duas experiências de aprendizagem usando o computador. A primeira trata-se da aprendizagem autônoma e o uso de CD-Rom e outros programas. A segunda apresenta o uso da correspondência eletrônica na aprendizagem cooperativa, com objetivos de desenvolvimento da escrita, da compreensão e de trocas culturais. O estudo está fundamentado na metodologia qualitativa de pesquisa. Os dados foram coletados da seguinte forma: entrevistas com os estudantes envolvidos no processo, diário de classe, formulários de auto-avaliação, gravação dos diálogos em disquetes e observação do professor. Resultados indicaram a relevância do uso do computador/internet como forma de desenvolver o ensino e aprendizagem em LE.

KEYWORDS: computer/internet, e-mail, self-access learning, cooperative study.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: computador/internet, correio eletrônico, auto-aprendizagem e aprendizagem cooperativa.

INTRODUCTION

As a professor of Methodology of Foreign Language Teaching, my main concerns are to help students develop their abilities to be fluent in the language they will be teaching and

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also to instruct them how to teach nowadays.

Due to the importance of outside class study in Foreign Language Learning and also believing that the student centered learning is crucial, I consider self-instruction very helpful. It should be included in the teaching program, especially using the computer. The use of the new communication technologies cannot be sub-utilized, especially the tools that constitute the WWW, e-mail and discussion lists dealing with autonomous learning. Its best use, therefore, would require looking at the Internet as a cooperative environment rather than as an instructional tool.

According to the constructivism, humanistic and communicative approaches students learn better when the pedagogic approach unchains a reflexive process in the student, where one lives experiences, feels and acts in real and meaningful contexts. Interaction, interest, needs, pleasures and up to date information directed to the area of the students' life project are factors that motivate learning. It is the teacher's role to provide this favorable environment for the student to construct his/her knowledge.

Teaching and learning should be shared among students, teachers, contents and technology by means of a new pedagogy.

When I affirm that teaching should be centered on the learner, I share the idea that the success of language learning depends on developing one's mental and intellectual capacity and comprehension ability, reflection and organization of knowledge, varied material, propitious environment, and resources that allow the students to be seen as unique people. This way, self-instruction becomes necessary and possible.

The act of learning is individual and the ideal language student is one that is responsible for his/her own learning,

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independence, and capacity to make decisions and assume responsibilities taken. Autonomy is a question of degree or levels. In this sense, several terms emerge to denominate self-instruction: study with autonomy, independent learning, reflexive study, self-directed learning, self-orientated learning, self-access learning, individualized instruction and many others.

In his book, *Self Instruction in Language Learning*, Dickinson (1987, p.11) explains and defines some of these terms:

1 - *Self-instruction*: generally refers to situations in which the learner works without the direct control of the teacher.

2 - *Self-direction*: this term means a specific attitude facing the learning assignment, in which the student accepts the responsibility in deciding about his/her learning but doesn't necessarily commit him/herself to the implementation of the decisions.

3 - *Autonomy*: this term refers to the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions made either in regards to his/her learning or the implementation of these decisions. In complete autonomy there is no teacher or instructor involvement. The student is free to choose his/her own material and work on it.

4 - *Semi-autonomy*: conveniently denominates the stage in which the students are preparing for autonomy.

5 - *Self-access learning*: means self-instruction through the use of varied materials. The term is neutral in relation to self-direction or teacher monitored study.

6 - *Individualized instruction*: the term is neutral in regard to the learning responsibility. Chaix and O'Neal (1978, apud Dickinson, 1987) defines this type of instruction as: "*where a learning process in relation to objectives, content,*

methodology and rhythm is adapted to a specific individual, taking one's characteristics into consideration”.

Within this point of view, the communicative approach in Foreign Language (FL) teaching collaborates with the concept in emphasizing the change in teaching that was teacher-centered to student-centered. *Teaching centered on the learner assumes that not everything that the student needs can be taught in the classroom* (Nunan, 1988, p.3).

Effective FL learning depends on the capacity of the learner to take on the responsibility to learn independently from the teacher. The students should recognize their difficulties and fulfill their needs.

For this to happen, it is necessary that the teacher promote opportunities to develop the capacity of the student to think independently, self-manage his/her own activities and make choices in regard to his/her learning processes.

The Complete Autonomy model also demands that the student know how to decide what is best for him/her, establish objectives, plan a study program, identify and select the didactic and linguistic content to achieve proposed objectives, administrate the assignments and study time, identify his/her negative points and qualities, evaluate his/her learning and redimension his/her actions.

It is also desirable that he/she take the initiative on the more appropriate resources to his/her way of learning. To obtain this degree of autonomy, the student must be prepared by the teacher. It is important that this teacher make the student aware of the importance of self-instruction. It is also his duty to help the learner to develop his/her critical spirit in relation to the learning process, enable him/her so that he/she may adjust his/her study rhythm to the progression of his/her learning and motivate him/her to overcome discouragement.

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Of course, the teacher has to create an appropriate environment for that.

Miller, Rogerson and Revell (in Jones, 1995) suggest a “self-access supermarket”, or in other words, an organized center where its users could easily obtain material that is catalogued and organized on accessible shelves.

I would like to call attention to Barnett’s affirmation (1991) when he said that “*working alone is not the complete meaning of autonomous study. Autonomy implies in the intention and acceptance of a set of responsibilities and, if this is not present, the student will continue dependent*”.

The ideal student should possess the following characteristics:

- good students discover their own style of learning;
- organize the information they receive about a language;
- are creative and use what they learn in new situations;
- seek occasions to use the language inside and outside the classroom;
- apply strategies that permit them to achieve a certain degree of comprehension of the language, even though they don’t know all of the words;
- use mnemotechniques (rhythm, word association etc.);
- analyze the mistakes made so as not to repeat them;
- use previous linguistic knowledge (native language, other known languages) in learning the new language;
- use the context (their knowledge of the world, extra-linguistic elements) in oral comprehension;
- know how to use deduction and imagination in learning;
- know how to use oral production techniques (for example, ask to repeat what was said);

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- know different oral and written expression styles and how to use them in different situations, according to the degree of formality demanded (adapted from D. Nunan, 1991, *Language Teaching Methodology*).

On the other hand, the teacher should specialize more and more, should be an innovator and have orientation abilities for the reflexive practices and should be attentive to the development of the competence that the present society demands of a professional.

The study of self-access runs into some obstacles, among them, coming in first place, the cultural problems. In many countries, the independence of the student goes against the tradition and convention of education and, in this case, the study of self-access becomes conflicting.

At most schools in Brazil, especially in the FL teaching at the elementary and intermediate level, the student is still quite dependent on the teacher. Discussions are rarely stimulated and quite often the student is afraid to challenge. The student waits for the orders of the teacher who transmits the information. Due to this context the teachers and the students should be prepared for a change of habits, which may be difficult, requiring a hard and lengthy work in raising awareness and adaptation.

For this reason each self-access study center should know its users, their cultural traditions, their educational antecedents and their study tradition so as to plan the facilities and services in proportion to its students.

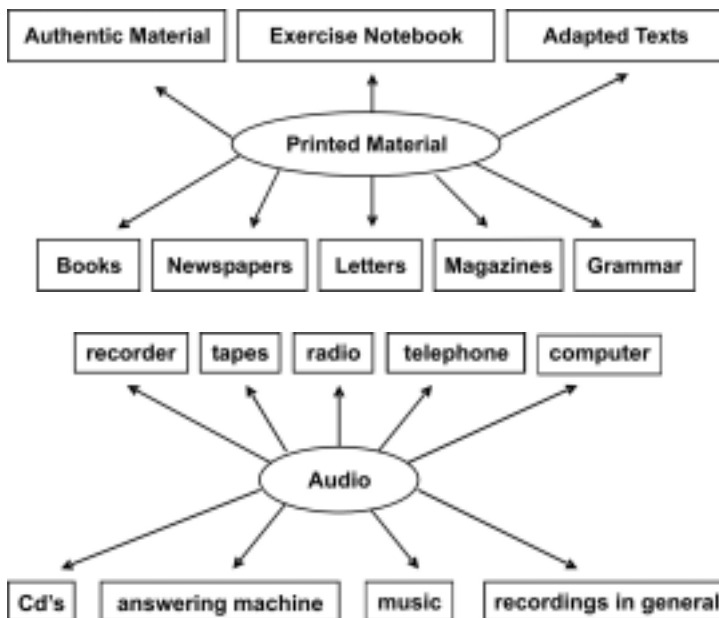
The demand for the self-instruction system has increased for several reasons, some that stand out among them are the lack of opportunity for the students to attend specialized language courses, the difficulty to adapt to the course time schedule and personal commitments. Individual differences

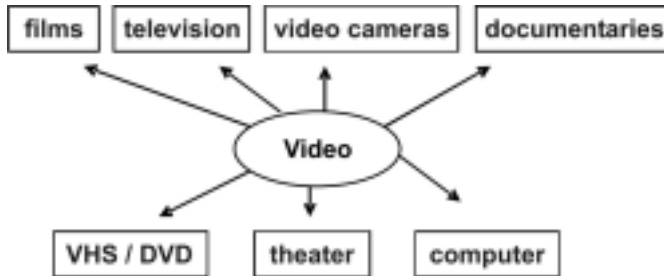
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still count much: attitudes, individual rhythm, different cognitive or learning strategies and styles, different needs of the students, availability, besides the technological resources that are at one's disposal at the moment.

Today, the student must be more than a simple receiver of information, he/she must be able to reflect about his/her own learning, know how to select material, be an autonomous student and at the same time learn cooperatively participating in discussion lists, corresponding with electronic friends, taking advantage not only of conventional material but also new *on line* environment learning.

Types of Material for FL Self-Learning in EAD and Conventional classes





WHAT CAN THE COMPUTER OFFER AS SUPPORT TO SELF-LEARNING?

There are several tools offered by the computer and the experience integrating presence and distance learning has shown that they are great allies in teaching and learning.

The applications that help the most in the teaching and learning process, among others, are: “Word” – text processor; power point; games (from the simple to the RPG – Role Playing Games); CD ROMs; Faxmail; DVDs and the unquestionable educational potential of the Internet.

The Internet provides us with the World Wide Web – WWW – which is a great warehouse of every type of information in the world. It is a supplier of passive contents, rich in information available on the net to be incorporated in any course program. It provides sounds (radios, CDs); static images (photos, charts, graphs, maps, etc.); moving images (films, videos, TV etc.); the ease of contacting people anywhere in the world (electronic mail, chat channels, discussion lists, etc.); environments rich in learning possibilities and distance learning (Course Info, Web CT, Learning Space, Class net, TelEduc etc.); video conferences where specialists of different areas generate knowledge for groups or thousands of people

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simultaneously, among other things that can also be used by the teacher depending on creativity.

Telematics, with its synchronous and asynchronous resources, has given a new impulse to communication, to a social, cultural and economic change in the world.

Scholars as Porter (1997), Brooks (1997), Warschauer (1996), among others, have been defending its use, placing it as a collaborator of a propitious environment to the construction of learning, since it serves as a vehicle of meaningful, cultural contents and gives support to individualized and cooperative learning, contributing, in this way, to a more humanized teaching.

The internet based learning brought a revolution in a very fundamental way in the nature of pedagogical actions. The Distance Learning and E.Learning provide support materials that once were difficult to deliver. It brings a high quality to the teaching and learning process. In this perspective Valente (2000) writes about a new teachers' educational approach that focus on the "virtual tutoring" which means that the role of the teacher is to guide the students, creating a meaningful, significant learning environment.

In 2002 we conducted two experiments using the computer in the classroom and its extensions as autonomous study. The first, in teaching four abilities (reading, writing, comprehension and oral production) of the English language and the other, the students entered the virtual environment by means of the electronic mail. Both were conducted in the language course at the FCL of the Universidade Estadual Paulista, at the campus in the city of Assis, São Paulo, and through them it can be verified that the computer offers a propitious environment for learning, and since it provides interactive activities, co-operatives are the source of motivation. The following describes these experiments.

METHOD

During two months of three-hour weekly classes, I have prepared 18 students that were attending the second year English language students for a volunteer experiment of self-learning with the aid of the computer. It's important to say that they had a basic English level.

In the first step I showed all of the programs available on diskettes as well as on CDs, explaining the different activities provided and how they worked. We talked about the importance of outside class study, of being responsible and of the need to develop their own strategies to construct their knowledge.

After this stage, I proposed that the students make all of the decisions and define their own objectives. They were free to choose to study reading, emphasize oral comprehension, oral production or writing. Among the programs that I made available, they could choose between working with the "coursewares" (ready made courses) or games or encyclopedias.

This experiment did not occur with satisfaction. After three meetings in our monitored classes (once a week), I noticed that they were completely disorientated, not knowing where to begin. They did not know which ability to emphasize, if the four or just one and they were not able to plan a content sequence. They were only enthusiastic with the games and motivated by the research in the encyclopedias. However, they were not able to systemize these activities with the objective to acquire the foreign language.

Using the qualitative survey (the instruments of collecting data selected for this survey were daily registers of personal reflections of the participants, questionnaires, interviews and self-evaluation forms) I concluded that I had put many decisions

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to be made into the hands of these students, a total autonomy and they were not prepared or even desired to assume all of this responsibility. I suspended this experiment, however, it was not totally negative since during this period they could improve encyclopedia exploration and develop the technical part of using the computer.

I then decided to change the procedures of the study and in the second fortnight of the month of October, I suggested the semi-autonomous study, or meaning some decisions would be made by me and others by the students or together, since it was clear that the role of the teacher here is to accompany and assist the student with presence or virtually.

I proposed a study contract where it was stipulated an experiment of self-learning of twenty hours that would have to be completed in the period of the second fortnight of October to December 7th, 2002. Although this experiment was conducted during a short period of time, it was quite advantageous. Perhaps this occurred due to the fact that they felt more secure with more circumscribed and defined goals and duties in which we decided to give priority to comprehension and oral production, therefore assuming a part of their decisions.

The procedures used to study would be decided by the students. They would choose the program among those available and self-evaluate themselves. Some programs contained evaluation of the units, which could help them.

The control forms (below), which were filled out after each study session, helped them to direct their development and better organize their plan of action.

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I found these forms really useful. It was a support in the development of the experiment and it was a way to help these students reflect about the type of exercise that made the apprehension of the knowledge easier.

Analyzing these data we can verify a positive result, as we exemplify with the following quotes:

Studying in this way I am not embarrassed to make a mistake in my oral production nor practice out loud because it's just the computer and I in the room. It corrects me without laughing at my errors and this make me feel comfortable. You know, this has given me even more security...

When I presented this teaching contract of twenty hours, I had simple objectives in mind, because the time frame was very restricted. My intention was to investigate if the learning process of students with semi-autonomy was an efficient form and if it stirred in these students the responsibility to study FL in outside class work, verifying, of course, the contribution of the computer in acquiring the English language in this context.

Another positive point that I verified was that these students learned how to select the material compatible to their level of FL, to choose the activities and the programs that pleased them. In this sense, each student practiced determined types of exercises, using different programs. I can exemplify with the following passages from final reports:

... the Monster is great, Encarta is very good, makes you feel like spending the whole day reading, but the champion CD is English Plus. With this you practice everything. I learned a lot with it and my grades in English have improved. Just the fact that you can record your voice and have the opportunity to hear it and from there correct the mistakes, it is great... That CD that has English and Spanish is very

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boring...

In another final report we read:

I liked the ELLIS program because it has many exercises and phonetic and phonology classes. I like to speak correctly. The sounds are very important to me. The dialogues are also varied and we can interfere in the answers and direct the conversations. The games were really cool; we learn new words at each stage of the game. I just wasn't able to play RPG, it is very difficult for me since I don't know anything about the computer...

Another verification in this experiment was the new way that the students started to see the evaluation; which before was considered almost as punishment, is now seen as something important. I noticed that they changed their attitude since now they saw it as an instrument capable of verifying their knowledge and giving a step forward in acquiring the goal language.

The rhythm they worked at was also different. Some students finished the twenty hours proposed in the middle of November, others at the end and others in the beginning of December. However, all of them continued studying until the day that had been stipulated to finish the course.

It was clear that the programs for multimedia, as for example, the *Grolier*, *Encarta* encyclopedias, programs of American and British Literature, History and Geography collaborated in integrating other disciplines to FL education and, this way, contributing to the communicative use of the goal language. Programs of this type contribute to an intellectual enrichment of the learner by offering options in the various areas of human knowledge.

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Within the context that we conducted this experiment, I consider that we obtained good results and the computer/multimedia, without a doubt, should be explored more and more in outside class assignments.

To make the best use of this resource, I suggest, if possible, that the computers equipped with multimedia be placed in Language Learning Centers, equipped with books, magazines, TV so that the student can integrate it in his/her assignments of acquiring FL.

The second experiment proposed the objective to help the students (the same 18 volunteers from second grade of Languages Course) act in digital contexts *on line* and with the objective of developing comprehension, writing, the amplification of cultural exchange and breaking the linguistic isolation of Brazilian students caused by the geographic barrier, I proposed to the same volunteer students from the language course at Unesp/Assis a co-operative learning activity using the electronic mail, where they would trade messages with native speakers.

For this new project: “*Learning by Correspondence*” we outlined the following objectives:

- 1 - Supply a real context to develop writing: express clear and objective ideas (special attention to the language structure, acquire vocabulary, idiomatic expressions and slang);
- 2 - Favor the revision and re-write process;
- 3 - Amplify the knowledge of culture from different countries;
- 4 - Supply a co-operative environment of study;
- 5 - Motivate the less interested students through the development of learning activities in authentic contexts;
- 6 - Use the computer as an instrument of communication and the effective use of telecommunication in education;

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7 - Focus on descriptive, narrative and comparative writing.

Procedures used

Each student opened his electronic address to contact his/her 'virtual friend' in the different countries where English is the official language. After instructing on how to use the electronic mail we provided addresses where they could make the contacts.

All of the messages sent and received would have to be recorded onto diskettes so that we could study and analyze the writing development of the students. We could also print them and exchange them among the students in class to read, study the language and later evaluate the experience.

Each student should maintain regular correspondence – at least one 'e-mail' a week – and should write about several topics. In order to help them, we suggested the following topics, but they were free to write whatever they want.

1 - Write an e-mail introducing yourself, specifying name, nationality, education level and special interests.

2 - Describe school life.

3 - Information about family life, free time and other interests.

4 - Information about your city, state and country.

5 - Narration of famous places, tourist points of interest and customs.

6 - Compare the customs of the countries.

7 - Information about special dates and celebrations in the country.

8 - Discussion about a special interest topic to the correspondents, such as cinema, literature, stories, soccer, among others.

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As to the process of writing development, we instructed that they should express their ideas clearly, use the dictionary to use a variety of correct vocabulary and also to pay attention to the written form by the natives, expressions, slang and abbreviations of the language.

We placed the following addresses available so that the students could find their correspondent friends:

<http://www.assis.unesp.br/~mnorte> (I elaborated this *site* to help foreign language students and teachers).

Computer Pals Across the World

<http://reach.ucf.edu/~cpaw>

Pitsco's launch to Keypals

<http://www.pitsco.inter.net/p/keypals.html>

Kidlink

<http://www.kidlink.org/english/kidcafe.html>

Keypals for Language Fluency

www.kyoto-su.ac.jp/~trobb/keypals.html

Evaluation

Following the ethnographic methodology of research we used the following instruments to analyze the data: observation, diskettes with registration of the dialogues and printed messages.

The benefits of this project were many. The students used the online communications for the exchange of information between people of different background. It provided a vehicle to assist students in meaningful conversations, improving their language acquisition skills through a real life context.

During the course we noted that some students had never used the Internet and electronic mail. They were anxious due

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to the lack of ability with the computers and total lack of knowledge of 'e-mails'. With the help of colleagues, they opened their electronic addresses and learned how to navigate on the World Wide Web.

They considered this opportunity to work with the computer very positive for their personal life as well as professional. Almost all students liked working in groups.

The motivation to write in a very careful and comprehensive form was a high point. Receiving the messages and reading the correspondence created a sense of expectations and a healthy competition (for instance: who receives more e-mails) among the students. Everyone knew when a colleague received a message; everyone was interested in reading them and to know all of the virtual friends in the class.

There was a lot of interaction, the students commented about cities, tourist sites, religion and the themes discussed by them. This sharing, this collaboration among them is also a very positive point. According to Littlewood (1981) "*The development of communicative skills can only take place if learners have motivation and opportunity to express their own identity and to relate with the people around them. It therefore requires a learning atmosphere which gives them a sense of security and value as individuals*".

The following dialogues are example of this cooperation:

1a - How are you? I am XXX, from Brazil and I study English 'at' Unesp. I always have problem with prepositions, I never know if I use in, on or at. I would like to know you, your country, and if you can, please, teach the prepositions. May you write to me?

Best regards,

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1b - Hi

I'll give some examples: In - They are in New York. (place)
(in the expressions) in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening BUT at night
(before month of the year, years, century, and Seasons) My boyfriend will probably arrive in two month's time....

2 - ...I am writing for you and Please, correct my mistakes...thank you in advance...

We also found that through this project the students became more interested in learning foreign cultures than before. The students not just acquire knowledge but also produce it sharing information among them. This relation between learners and native speakers, allowed each student to choose her/his issues according to their priorities and interests. As you can see:

1 - I read about the apartheid in South Africa, could you please, teach me about this topic?...

The students' linguistic repertoire improved spontaneously at each message sent. They made rough drafts, asked each other about vocabulary and re-wrote before sending them to their native friends. They wanted to be understood and wanted to understand.

1 - Hello

I am here again and I would like to ask a question:
How do Americans perceive Brazil?...

They commented about new words and expressions, for example, how many and which are the phrases to initiate a

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conversation and close in an electronic correspondence? For example they wrote:

1 - Hi,
I'm XXX and I'm learning English and I would like to write to you.
Write me back, please.

2 - How are you?
I am XXX, I am a student from Brazil...

3 - I am very happy that I am on this e.mail project...
...I am waiting for your answer,
very best regards...

There were some difficulties as well. Some students complained that they didn't receive messages back from their key pals, consequently, some students gave up and never wrote a message after the initial experience.

Although this experiment was for a short period of time, it was very rich in terms of learning. I was very happy to see the results and the capability of students who accomplished so much in such a short time.

All of the messages were recorded, printed, discussed, interpreted and analyzed together with the students.

I emphasize that self-learning does not mean solitude, isolation; the students can access the net and learn cooperatively with natives or not. The focus of learning in the human interaction, be it presence or virtual.

This environment, as Almeida Filho (1993, p.12) affirms, that is constructed by the teaching approach of the teacher, learning approach of the student, affective filter of the teacher and student and teaching material approach, directly interferes

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in the teaching and learning process. And the computer is a didactic means that can be of much value within this environment. However, it serves no purpose if not well used. It is not simply the fact that the computer emits sounds that determines that the student uses the audio information, or the fact that it exhibits images, that the student will have visual profit, we have to have in mind that this is of no use if the teacher does not know how to take advantage of these resources and integrate them within a methodology centered on learning.

The teacher, with his/her training, beliefs, methodology, planning of objectives and content, has a fundamental role and shares with the students the responsibility to learn.

According to Azevedo (2000),

Não se trata apenas de ensinar o professor a “mexer com o computador”, navegar na web ou usar o e.mail. Assim como aprender a usar quadro-negro e giz não faz de ninguém um professor convencional, aprender a usar o computador, periférico e software não faz de ninguém um professor online. Professor online precisa ser antes de mais nada convertido a uma nova pedagogia. Não é apenas mais um novo meio no qual ele tem que aprender a se movimentar, mas é uma nova proposta pedagógica que ele tem que ajudar a criar com sua prática educacional. Assumir o papel de companheiro, liderança animador comunitário é algo bem diferente do que tem sido sua atividade na educação convencional...

...Ser um aluno online é mais do que aprender a surfar na Internet ou usar o correio eletrônico. É ser capaz de atender às demandas dos novos ambientes online de aprendizagem, é ser capaz de se perceber como parte de uma comunidade virtual de aprendizagem colaborativa e desempenhar o novo papel a ele reservado nesta comunidade.

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I want to yet emphasize that any teacher can become researcher and discover new possibilities to teach and at the same time contribute to his/her own training. I invite them to adventure out in new searches, using the computer as a derivative source of means to teach and learn FL. In Brazil, it would be very important that other studies with other objectives and contexts, evaluate the efficiency of computer technology as a didactic resource, since, without a doubt, it would enrich the daily life of the teacher and student, besides the pleasure of new discoveries and the insertion of a more informed daily life, of course, always reinforcing the idea that this new methodological perspective is centered in the students' needs and wants.

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