

## Online interaction: more real than virtual

Paola Marmini and Nicoletta Zanardi

(University of Sydney)

### ABSTRACT

This paper belongs to the practice-based literature in e-learning and has a basically descriptive format. It is a report on a teaching and learning experience with third-year students of Italian in the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Sydney. Over the past two years, these students have had a compulsory online component added to their course. The online component entails doing meaning-focused and problem-based tasks online, engaging students both individually and in small groups.

The teaching approach tries to get the right mix between Second Language Acquisition theory and language teaching practice by taking advantage of Information and Communication Technologies in order to make more information available, enhance problem-based, collaborative learning, and provide variety and exposure to different educational modes to cater for a wide range of student needs and learning styles.

The paper aims to prove that the use of the Discussion Group to perform certain kinds of tasks does indeed elicit real interaction, particularly student-student interaction, which can only be beneficial for language acquisition. The second claim is that the kind of interaction, which this paper focuses on, is due to the medium.

### Introduction

There has been much debate about the meaning and a long history of study of the role of online 'interaction', which recognises its importance in supporting and fostering collaborative activities (for a review of the topic cfr. Anderson 2002; Muirhead and Juwah 2004).

Quoting from Muirhead and Juwah's conclusions "Interactions are critical for enhancing motivation, communication, a diverse range of skills and intellectual development in the educational process" (2004:16). Social cognitive-based learning theories are providing increased evidence of the importance of such intellectual development:

Inevitably, the student must assume greater responsibility to match the increased control that comes with online learning. This is

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compounded by the intellectual demands of the precision of written communication. In combining both the freedom and demands of online communication, participants must move from a relatively passive classroom experience into a more active online community of inquiry (Garrison *et al.* 2004:63).

The discussion is particularly lively in the academic world where access to online communication tools has become the norm and the rapid evolution of the technology has contributed to the creation of online-only courses or the integration of an online component to existing courses, the latter resulting in blended or mixed-mode learning.

As for the role of interaction in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), it has been fully recognised; without examining here the most widely accepted SLA theories, it seems safe to say that most linguists agree that interaction is one of the two elements – the other one being rich and varied linguistic and cultural input – which are fundamental to acquiring communicative competence in its broadest sense, entailing the integration of linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence.

There is still discussion about whether the various technological tools and the net-based communication system which we refer to by the term e-learning are used more as a means or as a mode of education.

Nichols (2003) in his ten hypotheses for e-learning states:

The choice of eLearning tool should reflect the pedagogy rather than determine the pedagogy of a course; *how* technology is used is more important than *which* technology is used. (Hypothesis 3, 2003:3-4)

and

Learning advances primarily through the successful implementation of pedagogical innovation. (Hypothesis 4, 2003:4)

which implies that it is the innovative educator who maximises e-learning. In Horton's words (Islam 2002:23), "e-learning does not change anything about how human beings learn". Technology – being in itself neutral – can implement various education models, educational philosophies or pedagogies, or even sound education practice. So it provides variety.

On the other hand, hypothesis 5: "eLearning can be used in two major ways: the presentation of education content, and the facilitation of education processes" stresses that e-learning, in addition to making information available, also plays a part in students' self construction of knowledge by providing access to both content and process.

Does e-learning improve teaching and learning? Possibly, if the appropriate implementation is achieved. We believe that the appropriate implementation can at least enhance opportunities for teaching and learning, playing a part in or assisting students' self-construction of knowledge. The challenging question is: "How can we get students involved?" or even, more precisely, "Which are the most effective strategies to develop online interaction?"

## Our Case and Our Solution

After reflecting upon these issues and taking into consideration our specific practical constraints, i.e. the limited face-to-face teaching time (two hours a week) which results in limited input and even more limited interaction, we chose to complement our existing course with a series of tasks to be done online by the students, divided in groups, using the Discussion Group, the asynchronous communication tool provided by WebCT, which is the platform used by our institution.

The advanced language course for students who started learning Italian at university was already successful and had always attracted students' praise. Students simply asked for more time, particularly to be devoted to active use of the language. Thus, our aim was not to *save* a course but to make it better and allow individuals to develop and progress beyond the scope of the Unit of Study. The choice of e-learning was sustained also by the awareness that learners who have studied a language for a longer time would feel more at ease in using the world wide web (Felix 2001:310).

The Discussion Group allows for the three most common types of interaction involving students and teachers to take place: student-content, student-teacher, and student-student. This is in itself a privileged situation offering a flexibility and multidirectionality of interaction/communication that the face-to-face class rarely allows. The tool provides the *opportunity*.

The Discussion Group entails asynchronous communication, which, while ensuring the communication flow and the flexibility required by students who are more and more engaged in extra-curricular activities or work, also allows some time for thinking about both content and form before posting, thus favouring "precision of written communication" (Garrison *et al.* 2004) or, in more linguistic terms, a certain focus on form. It also gives students – and teachers – the opportunity to look back, in a constructively critical way at what has been produced, thus offering another level of meaningful linguistic negotiation and/or reflection.

Moreover, according to Oliver (1999:243) the three critical design elements for effective online learning environments are content, learning supports and learning activities.

It is important to mention here the issue which is at the core of language teaching, that is the awareness that the final goal of such teaching is language itself. Language is both the means and the end of the instruction process, which makes interaction vital but colours the concept of 'content' in various nuances.

This led us to make sure that the content would be an extension of, or a complementary diversion to, the topic of the students' unit of work, so that they could have reassuring expectations and linguistic background while also being provided with new scope or breadth in practical, personal or cultural terms. Adult learners are developed individuals and bring into the language class their past knowledge, their personality and learning style, their likes and dislikes. The tool was meant to help cater for this variability, offering a range of areas and levels of engagement.

The 'learning supports' were provided: a) technically, by the excellent people of the WebCT helpdesk; b) subject-wise, by the teacher and the good, established class relationship between teacher and students and student and student. This paper will try to prove that another form of support came also c) socially, by the sense of belonging to an online community.

As for the third critical design element of online teaching and learning, the 'learning activities', we chose to build tasks that, according to Ellis's categorization (Ellis 2003), are "meaning-focused" and "unfocused", i.e. tasks aiming at negotiation

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and communication of meaning, not at the practice of a specific linguistic form or structure.

These tasks are in line with our teaching and learning philosophy and, borrowing the wording from Young's guidelines (Young 2003), aim at the following goals:

a) "Provide authentic experiences and contexts and allow for the development of pervasive knowledge", so that the student is given access to and is in direct contact with large sections of the Italian cultural and linguistic reality, in its multimedia version, which is part of our students' everyday experience in their L1;

b) "Create environments that include cognitive responsibility", where the student becomes an engaged protagonist and can choose in an autonomous and responsible way;

c) "Include social negotiation", where the individual work has to be communicated and negotiated with the other members of the group in order to reach the common goal in the best possible way; and, last but not least,

d) put the teacher in the less central position of helpful collaborator if and when requested, without imparting knowledge or imposing his/her traditional role, which – in spite of the evolution in teaching practices – is still expected and even welcomed by tertiary students.

These tasks are authentic and aim at fostering authentic interaction among students, they also activate various abilities and involve students in cognitive processes. Students have to evaluate, select and summarize information, they have to make connections in order to reach a goal, they have to reflect, analyse, criticise, etc., but they also must reach some result in terms of content.

A few words of background information about the teaching context of the tasks. At the very beginning of semester (and in the Unit of Study handout) the rationale and the teaching and learning aims of the online component of the course are clearly stated and explained. At least one task appears in each unit outline, a total of three, maximum four, in a semester. When relevant to the development of the unit topic, instructions are posted and agreement on a reasonable timeframe for completing the task is reached in class, usually a couple of weeks, including two weekends – as it is particularly during the weekend that the need to communicate via Discussion Group becomes the only option. No minimum number of postings is set and, even if there is no way of forbidding them to talk face-to-face, students are encouraged to work online as much as possible. The language of communication is not made compulsory but since a) Italian is normally used in class, b) students know that the teacher is part of the group and will intervene if requested, and c) they want to learn, Italian represents the natural choice for the vast majority.

As for the authenticity of the tasks, we believe that they are authentic since they focus on the cultural aspect under investigation of the target language speakers' society by using materials/websites which serve a practical purpose and are regularly updated. They provide students with information and data about Italy and even answers to questions they may have about aspects of Italian society (work and jobs available), bureaucracy (driving licences, Australians driving in Italy), or tourist information (motorways, itineraries), depending on the various set tasks.

The task we have chosen to present below, *Pubblicità Progresso*, is a good example of authenticity since it encourages the group to look critically at several socially oriented advertising campaigns that pinpoint the main Italian social issues over the years. The group has to choose one and present it in class to peers who have not seen the same campaign and make them understand the relevance of their choice discussing the impact of the issue on Italian, and possibly – by comparison – Australian society, as well as the way in which the goal is achieved by the publicists.

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Media students can contribute their technical expertise, History and Political Sciences students can approach the subject matter from their perspective. The second language performs an authentic function, as it is used to organize collaborative work in order to produce something that belongs to them and expresses what they want to say.

#### **Task: Pubblicità Progresso**

*Aprite il sito di Pubblicità Progresso, che contiene tutte le campagne pubblicitarie italiane (sono 31 in totale!) fatte con questo particolare tipo di pubblicità, e divertitevi ad esplorarlo.*

*<http://www.pubbliprogresso.it>*

*Ciascun gruppo si concentrerà su una particolare "Campagna".*

*Il gruppo guarderà bene le varie pubblicità, ne sceglierà UNA e preparerà una presentazione orale per la classe della pubblicità scelta, esprimendo anche i motivi per cui l'ha scelta preferendola alle altre.*

*La data della presentazione (massimo 10 minuti) sarà decisa in classe.*

*Andate ora nel vostro gruppo (Pubblicità 1A / Pubblicità 2A / ecc.) e troverete indicato il nome della campagna pubblicitaria che vi è toccata in sorte.*

[Students are instructed to go to the website which contains all Italian campaigns of this special kind of advertising. Each group of students is given one subject area (there are five): they have to look at the various campaigns in their area, choose one and prepare a presentation for the rest of the class of the relevant campaign, explaining the reasons for their choice and the strong points of the campaign (posters and TV ads; images and text, etc.)]

Ellis (2003:8), discussing the difference between 'aim' and 'outcome' of a task, says that "it is possible to achieve a successful outcome without achieving the aim of the task". Our students always achieve the practical *aim* of the task in terms of content, even if with different degrees of completeness or depth. It is not so easy, however, to understand or to foresee what kind of *outcome* they achieve, in terms of language acquisition and of the underlying cognitive process.

In assessing results, one should also take into consideration the various elements of the task, i.e. the kind and conditions of input, the modalities and procedures (written vs oral; in total vs subdivided) the instructions (individual vs group work; time given, etc.), the purpose of the task (finding information, debate, oral presentation, report, etc.). It is reasonable to assume that by changing one of the elements, results may vary as well.

### **Data and Discussion**

In this article, as a preliminary analysis of our data, with the ultimate aim to answer the question: "Does network-based language teaching lead to more or better learning?",

we focus on a macro aspect of learning, that is the *affective* element, as necessary support to learning.

There is no doubt that the affective element is of paramount importance in any learning context, but it becomes vital when learning on-line. Online 'presence' (Russo and Benson 2005) is a key factor to successful interaction: it permeates the attitudes students develop towards the task, the group, the course itself, it shapes the perception they have of themselves as learners, it keeps them on the task and pushes them to cooperate in order to perform successfully. There is a direct and mutual, interdependent relationship between *presence* and interaction, and success.

For our students tasks are a compulsory part of their course, they cannot simply lurk, as all of us often do when surfing the web, but we believe, and our data back this belief, that they are really present, they feel involved, interact and support each other's interactive communication. While, in class, presence can be perceived and expressed through gestures, looks or facial expressions, online presence can only manifest itself verbally in writing. We will show that our students use, online, a series of signals, of categories of interactions to underline presence, and make use of speech acts that are rarely encountered in class, even during a communicative task.

Analysing our data from a *quantitative* point of view, the total number of exchanged messages is rather high, particularly considering that students use their L2, Italian. The total number for semester is: 351 and 473, for two courses with 27 and 32 students enrolled respectively. The average is 13 and 16 messages per group (of 3 or 4 students each) and per task. There are, of course, more and less productive or interactive groups, ranging from a minimum of 8 to a maximum of 30 messages.

A more interesting, *qualitative* analysis suggests a first comment: it is upsetting for the group members not to know who else is part of the group. Our data show lots of deeply felt requests like the following, which express uneasiness or annoyance:

(1)

*Ciao! Sono (nome) qui. Sono un po' confusa. Chi siamo in nostro gruppo? Solo io e (altro nome)? ... non abbiamo molto tempo ... hmm*

[Hi! It's (name) here. I'm a bit confused. Who is in our group? Only myself and (other name)? ... we haven't got much time ... hmm]

(2)

*A. chi c'è nel nostro gruppo questa volta????*

[who is in our group this time?]

*B. Se clicchi su 'private' accanto al nome del gruppo sulla pagina 'discussions' vedrai tutti i membri del grupo.*

[If you click on 'private' you'll see all the members of the group.]

(3)

*Ciao a tutti. C'è qualcuno qui? Non voglio essere noiosa, ma possiamo organizzare qualcosa per questa valutazione una volta presto? Sarebbe di grande aiuto per conoscere chi è nel grupo.*

[Hi, everybody. Is anyone there? I don't want to be boring, but could we organize something for this assessment early for once? It would be very helpful to know who is in the group.]

These heartfelt requests show how deeply needed is the proof of *presence* online otherwise there is no interlocutor, no communicative exchange.

Other indicators of presence, which are also instances of real interaction, are the fact that they call each other by name, exchange greetings and apologies, ask for explanation or help, offer support but also criticism for lack of participation in the teamwork, organize their work, make comments on the task and the website(s) they are working on. We are dealing here with all those elements that are not an integral part of the task itself but which accompany and traverse it with the specific purpose of creating a sense of community, a social supportive working context.

As indicators of presence, we have identified a series of categories – some corresponding to traditional speech acts – which we believe are conversational devices linked to or activated not only by the task but by the tool. Communication via the Discussion Group in fact is closer to oral than written exchange, and triggers expectations of a dialogic kind, implying a succession of turns. These categories stood out for their quantity and frequency. It must be noted that the exchanges take place *within the group*, in that preparatory work which, according to previously agreed upon rules, is not going to be assessed by the teacher. This vouches also for real and truthful data. Another positive note is that most students use Italian rather than English even in this preparatory phase.

The identified categories are: 1. Greetings and Personal Remarks; 2. Apologies; 3. Requests and Offers of Help; 4. Congratulations, Thanks and Encouragement; 5. Work Organization (shared or not shared); 6. Comments, on the task and on the website(s). In class, even in group-work activities, these elements are very rare, and if present, they are expressed with very few words and generally in English. In online interaction, they become prominent and are usually present even in the most matter-of-fact, quick exchanges.

We are going to examine and comment upon a few examples, which are typical of the category they belong to.

In the first category “Greetings and Personal Remarks” we have identified and grouped those one way or two-ways interactions where the students, usually at the end of their posting, want to add something either social or personal. This is certainly in tune with normal social behaviour, also in a cultural sense. This is what students do at the end of a class, but they would normally use their L1 face to face, whilst they are using the target language online. Does this suggest that Italian is accepted as the language for communication online with their peers?

(4)

*Buon weekend, non bevete troppo!*

[Have a good weekend, don't drink too much!]

(5)

*Con i miei cari auguri di Pasqua. Spero che voi abbiate una vacanza meravigliosa (e che non abbiate troppo lavoro) Vi abbraccio e a presto.*

[With my warmest Easter wishes. I hope you have a wonderful holiday (and not too much work) Hugs, see you soon.]

(6)

A. ... *oh, una domanda che non entra niente - avete voi così tantissimi test, composizioni, ecc. adesso? Mia testa e piena di informazione, veramente questa situazione proprio non mi va!! ☺* A presto xx

B. ... (*anch'io ho tanti compiti – aaaaaaaaargh!*)

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[A. oh, I have a question which has nothing to do (with what we are doing) – have you got as many tests, compositions, etc. now? My head is full of information, I really do not like this situation!! See you soon

B. ... (I have a lot of homework as well – aaaaaaaargh!)]

In the very numerous category labelled “Apologies”, students recurrently apologise for and justify their lateness in posting, answering, participating. They are well aware of the interruption of communication flow caused by their *absence* and the resulting malfunctioning of the whole group; they realize that their lack of (inter)action creates a void, a monologue rather than dialogues. It is not socially acceptable when one makes an effort to start a conversation or to keep it alive and the counterpart does not respond (is (s)he listening or is (s)he there at all?). Thus, students formally apologise and usually somehow *promise* to do better in future:

(7)

*scusi tutti scusi sono in ritardo. Faco domanda x domani.*

[apologies everybody apologies I am late. I’m doing my question by tomorrow.]

(8)

*mi scusate per la risposta così tardi. Ho fatto le domande ma non sono sicuro che ho le soluzioni corrette. ... questo è tutto per ora ... scrivo un'altra messaggio domani.*

[Apologies for my late answer. I have answered the questions but I am not sure I’ve got the right solutions. ... this is all for now ... I’ll write another small message tomorrow.]

(9)

*Non ho avuto tempo di fare questo task, questo weekend. Ho troppo lavoro a fare. Cercarò di fare qualcosa sta notte. No penso che dorma.*

[I haven’t had time to do this task, this weekend. I have too much work to do. I’ll try and do something tonight. I don’t think I’ll sleep.]

They often apologise also for their language, but the social commitment is still stronger as shown in the following excerpt:

(10)

*Mi dispiace per l’italiano/inglese devo consultare un dizionario!!! Ma ho pensato sarebbe meglio dire che sarei fare ORA affinché (nome) could organizzare la sua parte prima la weekend?*

[I’m sorry about my Italian/English I must consult a dictionary!!!! But I thought it would be best to say NOW what I’ll be doing so (name) could organize her section before the weekend?]

In the third category “Requests and Offers of Help” are often found adjacent pairs, namely pairs of turns where a polite request (or offer) is followed by an answer (or acceptance), and at times also by some expression of *satisfaction* in the form of more thanking or a positive comment:

(11)

A. *Ho avuto difficoltà trovare i giochi della parte B potete aiutarmi a trovarle, se possibile? Grazie molto!*

[I've had difficulty in finding the games of Part B can you help me find them, if possible? Thanks a lot!]

B. *il gioco sta sulla pagina 'home' del sitio, e nella sezione intitolato 'Approfondimenti' e tutte due 'gioco' ci sono. spero che possa trovarlo.*

[the game is on the homepage of the website, and in the section entitled 'Approfondimenti' both games are there. Hope you can find it.]

A. *Grazie (nome) per la navigazione! Ho trovato i giochi.*

[Thanks (name) for the navigation! I found the games.]

Two self-explanatory examples from category four, "Congratulations, Thanks and Encouragement", follow:

(12)

*Buon lavoro (nome)! Mi piace molto quello che abbia scritto, brava!*

[Good work (name)! I like very much what you wrote, well done!]

(13)

*(nome) grazie mille per aver fatto numero 1 ... mi dispiace che facevi il lavoro alle 2 di mattina, sei molto dedicato. Grazie ancora una volta,☺*

[(name) thanks a lot for doing No.1 ... I'm sorry you were doing the task at 2.00 am, you are very dedicated. Thanks once more,☺]

Category five, "Work Organization", contains more specific and practical exchanges of information: students are planning their task and interaction becomes more complex. In the previous categories the exchange was usually social not requiring an answer, or binary where one group member would respond, while the others would tacitly agree. Here more than two members are often involved since all group members need to reach an acceptable agreement and to be fully aware of what it entails.

(14)

A. *ciao tutti; dividiamo il task o ciascuno fa tutto e poi incolliamo insieme?*

[Hi everybody; shall we divide the task or does everybody do everything and then we collate the lot?]

B. *Ciao tutti, A penso che sia una buon idea.*

[Hi everybody, A I think it's a good idea.]

C. *Ciao tutti, non è chiaro ... lo dividiamo ... o ciascuno fa tutto?? facciamo tutto.*

[Hi everybody, it is not clear ... do we divide it ... or everybody does everything?? Let's do everything.]

B. *Scusi A non lessi la prima parte della sua messaggio. Secondo me ciascuno fa tutto e poi incontriamo insieme.*

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[I apologise A, I did not read the first part of your message. In my opinion everybody does everything and afterwards we check together.]

In the previous example, after the usual exchange of greetings, student B supports but doesn't really answer student's A question, so student C asks for clarification and, at the same time, expresses her opinion. This triggers student B's reply which contains an apology directed to A and the resolution (shared by C). It is interesting to notice that in C's turn the use of punctuation helps in expressing very efficiently the pauses (...) meaning uncertainty, and the final doubt (??); even more interesting is the tactful decision of addressing *tutti* [everybody] rather than B individually pointing out the ambiguity of B's reply. These verbal behaviours presuppose the existence of a social group and aim at supporting both the common goal and the group itself by reassuring individual members about their status.

The excerpts that belong to the sixth category, "Comments, on the task and the website(s)", do not usually trigger an answer, but they mainly serve the purpose of reassuring the group about the 'doability' of the task at hand. Often one student takes the initiative at the beginning and produces comments like those contained in examples (15) or (16) below which clearly send a positive message to the others and invite them to start working because they will be able to succeed. This is a very important empathic support; in class it usually comes from the teacher, here from the students themselves.

(15)

*... ma semvra abbastanza facile (sembra che questo website sia per bambini perchè è pieno di pitture).*

[... it looks quite easy (this website seems to be directed to kids because it is full of pictures).]

(16)

*Questo sito è molto facile di navigare perche e ben organizzaata ed è logico. Ci sono tanti links che danno piu informazione.*

*Sull'ogni pagina c'e una pittura che esprimere il soggetto del articolo è utilissimo perche da un senso del articolo prima di leggerlo.*

[This site is very easy to navigate because it's well organized and it's logical. There are many links that give more information.

On every page there is a picture expressing the topic of the article it's extremely useful because it helps understand the meaning of the article before reading it.]

The fruitful relationship between the affective component and motivation – i.e. the force that initiates and justifies any new enterprise and is responsible for the length and the intensity of the effort put into it – is confirmed by the responses to a questionnaire administered at the end of the academic year, after 2 semesters of online tasks.

To summarize briefly the outcomes of the questionnaire, most students expressed positive views about tasks: some thought that tasks "offered a good opportunity to learn" (63%), or enjoyed them "I had fun with them" (59%) and, even more to the point, "I thought I was doing something with others" (40%), and no one considered tasks "too difficult, thus useless", or "a waste of time".

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The students' perception of the usefulness of the tasks identified the following areas: reading-comprehension skills (77.7%); cultural awareness (63%); lexicon/vocabulary (63%); writing skills (56%).

Called to rate online work against face-to-face, which they still prefer, 66.6% of our students said it was "A good addition to class work"; 40% "A way to individually expand one's linguistic and cultural knowledge", and 33.3% "Another opportunity for communication".

An interesting, but also disconcerting, result was the way they answered a specific question related to the validity of online group work as opposed to individual work. 50% of the students favoured group work as a better learning opportunity for the following reasons:

Feel part of a group, motivating; can compare postings; can correct, help each other, learn off others; less work, easier; communication skills heightened; a different skill to develop; it requires organization and interaction

50% favoured individual work because:

Work gets done; it is individual; difficult to work effectively in group, some are not willing to work; the whole work must be done by each student; it suits the subject matter, interaction belongs in class

We optimistically see in the second group's reluctance to engage in group work mainly a reaction to a less fortunate chemistry within the group they found themselves in.

To sum up and support our claim that the Discussion Group not only fosters interaction but enhances students' opportunities for learning, our data demonstrate the impact of the affective element in building and sustaining the teaching and learning experience. The six categories we identified embody the underpinning of the actual task, the necessary supporting social context on which to base the group work. It must be noted that even when a student sends a posting, which does not require an answer, the presence of the other students is still felt and acknowledged. Moreover, for some of the identified categories (e.g. category 1, 2, 4), the tokens are strikingly numerous in the online exchanges, whilst this is not the case in class, at least according to our long experience in language teaching at tertiary level with limited face-to-face exposure given our institutional constraints. Naturally, this comment is based on impression and stands to be proven by actual comparison of data.

Finally, the choice of the target language to express this vast amount of social support again points to the medium, as if the temporal and spatial gap created by the asynchronous communication tool needed to be filled with empathy and linguistic reassurance derived from sharing the same language in a reduced performance anxiety environment. The use of Italian serves the purpose of reminding the speaker/writer and ultimately the group that they *are present* online to interact in Italian and work on their linguistic skills; in other words, Italian becomes a common thread that reduces the physical distance and makes them closer and united in the pursuit of the task.

### Conclusion

By using the term 'real interaction' according to a cognitive science perspective on SLA, we believe that "language learning is stimulated by communicative pressure" (Gass 2003:224), and that "conversation is not only a medium of practice, but also a

means by which learning takes place” (Gass 2003:234). Likewise we are convinced that the role of conversation is an essential one in the development of any second language.

In our case interaction is not only between Native Speaker (teacher and website) and Non Native Speaker (student), but also between students (NNS and NNS). The preparatory work for the task entails that students ‘converse’ in writing, with low levels of anxiety but still under the pressure of making their voice heard and understood by peers. They naturally use interaction modifications – confirmation checks, clarification requests, recasts just to name some – which are typical of negotiated meaning. Interaction is ‘real’ in the sense that it derives from the will to communicate and is not just required by a language exercise or role-play.

Thus, our perception – as language teachers – of online tasks is positive: we have certainly seen our students involved and participating both in the practical and the socio-emotional aspects of interactive communication.

Going back to the question “How can we keep them (students) engaged in and make the most of online interaction?”, we believe that tasks are an answer and have a lot to offer. On the other hand, it is difficult to *measure* the beneficial outcomes of online work of this kind in terms of language acquisition, at least by the traditional process. To say that it is difficult to quantify the benefit of online tasks does not negate its existence, on the contrary, and we think that the amount and quality of affective interaction the students express with words online, when doing their tasks, is in itself a very “successful outcome” in Ellis’s terms.

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