

Chapter XXV

Frustration in Virtual Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

Many language teachers, students, and institutions of virtual learning environments are well acquainted with the feelings of loneliness and frustration that many students experience due to the fact that many virtual language courses base their methodology on simply uploading the material into the virtual classroom. Teachers should be aware of the learning process itself; that is, they shouldn't talk only about new learning technologies for second language acquisition but also of new methodologies. In this chapter, we present some methodological actions that should be avoided in the virtual language classroom and try to suggest ways to improve teachers' online practices. In order to collect data from some students enrolled in English language subjects in their degree course (English Philology and Mechanical Engineering at University Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona, Spain), a questionnaire was created. This chapter is part of the project PID08-PROFID, which receives financial support from the Institut de Ciències de l'Educació (URV).

INTRODUCTION

As is well known, e-learning or online instruction can be defined as learning using a computer that is connected to a network. According to students' opinions, online instruction can be a very exciting experience or an incredible nightmare. It all depends on the methodological aspects of the

course. This study concentrates on a particular sort of e-learning enabled by free Internet technology: the Open Source software package Moodle. It tries to identify and define some bad practices found in some virtual language courses that may be the cause of considerable frustration and stress to second-language students. To do so, this chapter has been organized into three main parts:

1. The first part introduces the topic and then briefly defines and describes what some authors believe to be the characteristics of a good virtual course.
2. The second part is divided into two sections.
 - 2.1. The first section describes the problems that students may find in a virtual language course.
 - 2.2. In the second section, a questionnaire is presented. This questionnaire was answered by two groups of university students who were enrolled in two different *English Language* subjects at University Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona. The purpose of this questionnaire was for the students to reflect on what they considered to be bad practices in their virtual language courses.
3. Finally, a section with the conclusion.

BACKGROUND

Moodle was designed on the basis of various pedagogical principles (“social constructionist pedagogy”) to help educators create effective online learning communities (<http://moodle.org>); it is a course management system, or learning management system, designed to help teachers create online courses. This new type of learning management has allowed many universities to implement e-learning in their PhD and master’s degree courses. It has also fostered lifelong learning for those students who, for personal reasons, are not able to study for a degree at a university. Many studies of these students (see www.uoc.edu) show that their main reason for not being able to study for a degree is lack of time. The use of e-learning in university (and other) environments provides students with a 24-hour learning system, seven days a week.

Nowadays, the number of distance courses is growing, and consequently, distance education

is being discussed at various educational levels (see the enormous number of discussion lists on e-learning on the Internet). Most of these debates coincide with the idea that distance education, generally speaking, seems to improve our learning experience. In the specific field of language acquisition, the virtual learning experience has broadened in many different ways, and has opened new fields of experimentation, research, and study. Nevertheless, as teachers and users of these technologies, we must accept that it is still in the first stages of development, implementation, and above all, use, so it still has great potential for transforming the teaching and learning methodology that we know nowadays. Nevertheless, because it is still in its early stages, it also has many negative points.

In his article *Bases pedagógicas de e-learning*, Cabero (2006) summarizes in Table 1 the main advantages and disadvantages of e-learning.

One of the most interesting facts about this table is that all its elements can be extrapolated to virtual language learning, and even new elements can be added in both sides. In virtual second language learning, two of the most acknowledged advantages are the unlimited use of writing in the target language as well as the large amount of “real” texts to improve the reading skill. Also, the most acknowledged disadvantage is the lack of oral practice and small listening (Galloway, 2007).

Nowadays, it seems that most researchers are focusing on establishing what is the best software for Web design and what is the friendliest e-learning environment. Very few are starting to question the teaching methodologies that a virtual teacher should use, or as Warschauer and Meskill (2000) define it, the “humanware” needed for a virtual language class:

The key to successful use of technology in language teaching lies not in hardware or software but in “humanware”: our human capacity as teachers to plan, design and implement effective educational

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Table 1. Cabero's (2006) advantages and disadvantages of e-learning

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>e-Learning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - facilitates information and contents updating. - makes a considerable volume of information available to the students. - makes the information more flexible, independent of the space and time in which the student and teacher are located. - decentralizes knowledge. - facilitates student autonomy. - favors a "just-in-time" and "just-for-me" education. - offers teachers and students various communication tools, synchronous and asynchronous. - favors multimedia training. - facilitates group and collaborative training. - fosters interaction with the information, with the teacher, and among the students. - helps with the use of materials and learning objects at various levels. - provides students with a record and follow-up of their activities. - saves money. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers need to invest more time than in face-to-face learning environments. - A minimum of technological competence is needed (by both teachers and students). - Students must be skilled in autonomous learning. - If the teacher-student ratio is not right, the teaching/learning quality can decrease. - It involves more work than conventional teaching.

activity. Language learning is an act of creativity, imagination, exploration, expression, construction and profound social and cultural collaboration. If we use computers to fully humanize and enhance this act, rather than try to automate it, we can help bring out the best that human and machine have to offer (Warschauer & Meskill, 2000).

Salinas (cited in Cabero, 2006) also reflects this idea of the necessity of "humanware" in the virtual language classroom. In his account of the historical development of e-learning, the author suggests three stages. The first stage is called the technological approach and is based on the idea that the sophistication of the environment will provide the longed-for quality of the teaching-learning process. The second historical stage bases the quality of the process on the content and on highly technological materials. It never takes into account the students' learning process. Finally, Salinas calls the third stage the methodological ap-

proach. This approach focuses more on the student as the center of the teaching process. It is based on pedagogical criteria and states that e-learning must be a perfect combination of the technology that has to be used, the pedagogical function of the environment, and the organizational aspects of the process in this virtual environment.

Both Salinas (in a general virtual context) and Warschauer (in a virtual language learning context) coincide in the idea that the pedagogical function of the environment must be taken into account, which leads them to consider methodological approaches to virtual learning; that is, the way teachers deal with the information they pass on to their students. Apart from their interest, it must be said that not many articles have been published on the need for methodological change in virtual language environments, as most of the literature has been technology driven. In 1999, Hara and Kling stated, "The literature about distance education is dominated by enthusiastic

studies and accounts. Once consensus is reached, it tends not to be disturbed by a dissonant idea.” These two authors go on to say that this is not a problem exclusive to the field of applied linguistics; similar patterns are found in other relatively young fields. This suggests, then, that this is basically a natural defense that the scientific world uses in order to move forward and make progress in a particular field. It also suggests that talking about the negative aspects of e-learning was a taboo, at least at first.

Nowadays, after many positive and negative e-learning experiences, some teacher-researchers have discussed these negative aspects in their articles. For Borges (2005), “the frustrations of online students ... have not been studied sufficiently to date.” In his article, he highlights the inadequate actions of the agents involved in e-learning, which led students to have serious problems carrying out their activities. The article also suggests how to prevent/diminish these problems and the frustration they bring on the part of the student. Basically, he believes that student frustration in an online learning environment can be due to three agents:

1. the student
2. the teacher
3. the institution

Borges believes that “in being the student’s central element, the teacher should be conscious of all the actions or lack of actions that the student performs.” For him, an online teacher:

1. Should have been an online student beforehand.
2. Should never give a late answer.
3. Should appear regularly in the virtual class.
4. Should make himself or herself clear in the instructions he or she gives.
5. Shouldn’t be excessively strict with the exercise deadlines.

6. Should show closeness to the student.
7. Should regulate the flow of information so the student is not weighed down with too much of it.
8. Should foster interaction and collaboration among students.

All these requirements of an online teacher can usefully be made of online language teachers if the students are to avoid feelings of isolation and frustration in their virtual classes.

In their research on feelings of isolation in a virtual classroom at the university level, Hara and Kling (1999) discovered that student isolation was not as big a problem as was frustration. They found two foci of frustration among the students. The first focus was technological problems. The second focus involved the course content and the “instructor’s practices in managing her communications with her students.” Once again, the focus should be set on these negative instructors’ practices. The article states the students’ complaints are typically concerned with:

- Not getting enough feedback from the teacher.
- The difficulty of finding information on the Internet (they talk about broken links).
- Difficulties regarding the e-mail instructions that the instructor sent each week.

For Prendergast (2003), it is most important that the teacher or tutor of an online course have proper training in order to run what he calls Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSLL). He believes that since many virtual teachers do not have any experience in virtual learning, they therefore draw upon their experience in traditional teaching when they feel there is a methodological problem in their virtual classroom.

This idea that many “new online practitioners are unaware of prior theory and research in either education in general or distance education in par-

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ticular” (Pendergast, 2003, p. 1) is also shared by Padavano and Gould (2004). Teachers believe we have lost the thread of how things have evolved, so they often cannot identify *why* a practice works, but tend to talk about *what worked for me*.

They adapt Chickering and Gamson’s (1991) Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, and add a practical activity so the principles can be implemented at a university level:

1. **Good practice encourages student-faculty contact.** Their proposal here is to create thread discussions as instructional tools, and to use chat sessions as virtual office hours.
2. **Good practice encourages cooperation among students.** An initial exercise for a team project could be the development of a charter. This charter becomes the binding agreement among team members.
3. **Good practice encourages active learning.** The basic theoretical approach for this principle is that learners must be active participants in order to construct, build, and devise concepts for learning. Therefore, the activities in our online courses should promote active learning.
4. **Good practices give prompt feedback.** The authors show that feedback comes in many forms, and that we should not think of feedback as graded assignments or corrected exercises. Sometimes just acknowledging students’ efforts can motivate them to do more. 5. They point out that what I think is an extremely important issue in a virtual environment; they believe that students feel deep frustration when, after sending in several assignments in a couple of weeks, they find out three weeks later that these assignments have been done incorrectly and that they are going to fail the course.
5. **Good practice emphasizes time on task.** Students often carry on several activities

(job, family, etc.), and the big challenge to faculty is to keep these students involved and motivated in their studies. One way to deal with this is to write a detailed syllabus with course objectives, deadlines, and so forth, so students can concentrate better on their work.

6. **Good practice communicates high expectations.** They propose grading rubrics to communicate expectations for assignments and assessments.
7. **Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning.** We should allow our students to talk about their experiences. For Padavano and Gould (2004), students learn from the experiences of others, which creates an interesting and rich learning environment.

All the aforementioned authors coincide in stating the general aspects of what a virtual teacher (and obviously, a virtual language teacher) should do in an online course.

In the second part of this chapter, two issues are presented:

- First, the most common bad practices in virtual environments will be described. In order to do that, some negative methodological practices often used by the virtual language teacher, as well as some practitioners’ particular attitudes, will be presented.
- Second, the results of a questionnaire that was given to some English language students at the University Rovira i Virgili will be analyzed.

BAD PRACTICES IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

It shouldn’t be forgotten that students are not passive receivers of knowledge as was perhaps once thought; they construct the scaffold from

which new knowledge is built. As Berge (2000) observes:

1. They participate more in activities that involve problem-solving than those that involve memorizing large amounts of data.
2. They are involved in activities in which they try to find questions as well as answers.
3. Nowadays, students prefer to be involved in team projects and collaborative tasks.
4. They are conscious of the multicultural background of many course students.
5. They are more autonomous and independent, and a considerable amount of research confirms they are more motivated by their learning process.
6. The main discussion topics in virtual courses are usually based on colleagues' tasks or dossiers with numerous articles or chapters from various books.
7. Students aim to acquire learning strategies. They do not aim to learn things "by heart" in order to pass an exam.
8. They have significantly greater access to learning resources (pp. 2–5).

Teachers have also changed their roles:

1. They not only transmit knowledge, but they are also like guides to the learning process and suppliers of resources.
2. They try to find more questions than answers.
3. They help students with their tasks and are an active part of the students' team.
4. The teacher-student hierarchy is broken.

On the basis of these new students' and teachers' roles, and taking into account virtual environments such as Moodle, the first question teachers should ask is, What are the main characteristics of a good virtual language course? Generally speaking, a good virtual language course is one that has:

1. A good design.
2. A well-scheduled and useful precourse student briefing.
3. A well-trained team of tutors/teachers.
4. Excellent technical support.

Although these are the characteristics of a serious, well-organized virtual language course, we should also take into account those traits that may not be so easily evaluable at first sight but can hamper online language learning or prevent students from continuing the course:

1. Many virtual language courses emphasize the content and do not take into account the learning process. Many of these courses are the "electronic version" of traditional courses; that is, teachers send the exercises in Word or pdf format to the virtual classroom. The students read them, complete the activities, and send their answers to the teacher's e-mail. Later on, students receive an e-mail with their marks (possibly with no comments or feedback) via their personal mailboxes, or maybe just read their marks from a list that suddenly appears on a common space in the virtual classroom.

In this type of course, there is no interaction between the students and the teacher. The students have the feeling of being left on their own, which can often lead to frustration. This happens especially because they only see their classmates' exercises as a pile of written exercises, handed in as they are in a face-to-face classroom. The students feel there is no connection between their work and the work carried out by their classmates. They do not know if they have performed well or badly in relation to the others in their group. In some courses, such minimal interaction is substituted by self-completion and self-correction exercises. In these cases, the only feedback that students receive, apart from the final mark, are the

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- comments that come from a user-friendly software. A simple e-mail from the teacher saying that the exercise has been received may help the student with his or her second language.
2. Many teachers send all the course documents in black and white. Others send documents in which extremely bright colors dominate the screen. Sometimes, the font is too small to read comfortably. All these characteristics would not be very important in a paper-format document, but many teachers tend to forget that reading “uncomfortable texts” from a screen can be tiring and sometimes even physically painful for the eyes. Moreover, students’ reading speeds are probably much lower in the target language than in their mother tongue, which increases the time spent in front of the screen. We should take into account that even though many students prefer to print out the electronic text, this should not be a condition of the course (or at least of all the tasks and texts the teacher sends to the classroom).
 3. Another typical problem occurs when links are broken or so old that when you click on them, a message appears explaining that the link has not been active since, for example, the year 2005!
The problem with links is not at all unusual. Probably the main reason for this is that many virtual environments make it possible to transport the materials (and even the design) from a former year’s subject into the current year’s Web pages/site. In such cases, the teacher clicks on the icon that appears in the empty new virtual subject, and all former years’ materials are automatically transported. But at this point, the teacher should check that the process has been carried out properly—all the links work, the documents are complete, and so forth.
 4. Not many people are used to writing short, concise messages with clear instructions for exercises. This fact is especially emphasized when both virtual teachers and students write in a language that is not their mother tongue. Excessively long messages written in a second language tend to be confusing. Hara and Kling (2003) state about ambiguous instructions:
Much of human communication is inherently ambiguous. But people can often adequately resolve key ambiguities when they are face to face. When the primary communication is written text, resolving ambiguities may be more difficult for many people (p. 16).
 5. Many virtual language courses, even those with initially interesting and attractive topics for the students, are rated as boring and dull. This is partly due to the courses being too rigid and formal. The lack of an “informal” space where students can send their questions, opinions, or even comments that are not directly related to the subject (e.g., congratulations for a birthday) makes the course atmosphere extremely formal and sometimes even stressful. Students will probably see the teacher as very distant, and some of them will even be afraid to send messages and activities to the virtual classroom because they will not feel confident or at ease. Moreover, this could be a unique opportunity for the students to try to express themselves in a colloquial or casual way. We should not forget that even in the most serious and strict face-to-face courses, there are moments (albeit brief ones) in which everybody relaxes and the atmosphere lightens.
 6. Sometimes there are dropouts, but the teacher doesn’t care. Some students just “disappear” during the course, but it seems that there is no specific reason. Nevertheless, the teacher will never send an e-mail to that student asking for the reason or offering help.

7. When the course has started, teachers are sometimes extremely busy trying to cope with all the information they have received on various technological aspects of the course. This is particularly the case if they are not skilled in computing or have no former experience in virtual learning. The same problem may arise if teachers have not prepared or planned the subject beforehand. We should not forget that in general terms, we can improvise a face-to-face class merely by getting some photocopies for the students. But in a virtual class, this is impossible: Teachers have to spend some time preparing the electronic materials, sending them to the class, and making sure they are ready to be used on the scheduled day.
8. Many students receive late answers (or no answers at all) to the messages sent to the virtual class or to the teacher's personal e-mail. We must remember that answers that take 49 hours or more to arrive exasperate and discourage the student.

METHODOLOGY

In March 2007, a general opinion questionnaire was created for two groups of students at the University Rovira i Virgili. The aim of this questionnaire was not only to discover negative teacher practices in virtual language courses but also to see if these students' appreciations coincided with some teachers' experiences in various virtual courses.

This questionnaire consisted of 10 general questions written in the students' mother tongue, Catalan, and was to be answered in the same. It was given to students in two degree courses: English Philology and Mechanical Engineering. Both groups were enrolled in an English language subject. The reason for choosing such different groups of students was that different types of feedback were needed, and my former experience

as an English teacher at the School of Engineering had taught me that these students would probably see virtual environments from a different perspective. Finally, a total of 63 questionnaires were received—32 from the science students and 31 from the arts students (see questionnaire in Appendix 1).

First, it should be said that none of these students was enrolled in a totally virtual course, but in blended courses; that is, they attended face-to-face classes at the university, but they used Moodle as a support tool. In this type of blended course, teachers ask the students in class to do the exercises that have been sent to Moodle, or tell them that the answers of the exercises are in Moodle, and so forth. By doing this, teachers are asking the students to participate in the virtual class. This is probably the reason 51 out of 63 students thought that “teachers promote participation in the virtual class.”

When the students were asked what they think should be done to promote student participation in class (question 1), the answers were varied, but they all coincided in the same methodological aspects. These were their most common answers: teachers should have a better knowledge of the virtual environment, take their virtual appointments more seriously (students can make appointments through a virtual calendar but often do not find the teachers in their offices), and teachers should always answer the e-mails they receive and correct the exercises they have asked students to do. These negative aspects make students “lose interest” in their virtual classrooms.

Students think they would feel motivated if teachers sent more materials to the class (answers to question 1), created a space of debate or discussion in class based on various topics (threaded debate), answered student queries, sent more feedback, and most important, respected their commitment to keep the virtual part of the subject updated.

A total of 44 out of the 63 students admitted receiving feedback from the teacher, but 19 did

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not receive any. Nevertheless, they did not specify whether the feedback was face-to-face or virtual. All the students who said they did not receive feedback admitted that they would have like to have received some.

In question 3 (*The design of the course or the exercises: is attractive for students? / is difficult/uncomfortable to read?*), 7 students admitted having difficulties reading the exercises. We can see that only a small percentage thought the format was negative, but what is interesting for our purpose is not the number of people who answered positively or negatively, but rather the reasons for their negative feelings. The students who felt the format was difficult or uncomfortable to read thought the reasons were:

- The type of font is too variable, signs cannot be read, too small.
- The colors do not allow the text to be read with ease.
- The page design makes the exercises incomprehensible or too slow to be downloaded (because the documents in it are “too large”).
- Some links are broken.
- There is no space between sentences.
- Monotonous colors and design.

From this list (which summarizes the students’ opinions), the most frequently cited negative aspects were the type of font, the lack of space between sentences, and the monotonous and dull design.

A total of 25.4% of students believe that teachers took a long time to respond, while 52.4% believed they did not. A further 20% of students said they had never sent any messages to the teacher; 54% of students believed that the maximum period of time that teachers should take to answer students was 24 hours. Thirty-eight percent of students believed that it is 48 hours (answers to question 4: *Do you think that the teacher takes a long time to send you an answer?*).

Many students had the feeling that the virtual courses in which they were enrolled were “too cold” (61%). When asked why, their answers can be summarized in one student’s opinion: “Since we don’t receive any answer from the teacher, we feel as if we are talking to the wall” (answers to question 5).

In question 9 (*Would you like to add anything else?*), students sent their opinions on what a virtual course should be like if it were to help the students’ learning processes (see answers in Appendix 2):

- Virtual classes should be updated frequently.
- Teachers should make the effort to learn the right methodologies to use the virtual environment.
- Virtual courses should have plenty of extra-activities.
- Teachers should establish a time table for chats (e.g., one hour a week).
- A discussion list or debate should be set up to help students with their doubts.
- The teachers should always send feedback to the students.
- If many corrections have to be made to the students’ exercises, maybe the teacher should revise the exercise instructions.
- The teacher should include instructions on how to send the exercises to the class (using Moodle) or at least on how each exercise should be sent.
- A document should be sent to Moodle with the notes on what has been explained in class. In this way, students would feel they can follow the subject easily.

Basically, students were asking teachers to work harder with Moodle, to have a better command of the virtual tool, to send more exercises, and again, to provide more feedback.

The questionnaires also showed that a large number of students had sometimes felt frustrated (12,7 %), alone (14.2 %), and stressed (46 %).

FUTURE TRENDS

Using the results of this pilot study, further analysis in this field is being planned. The outcomes of this study show that one of the reasons virtual language courses fail is that they are based on the posting of material instead of the learning/teaching process itself. That is to say, virtual language teachers should talk not only about new learning technologies, but also about new learning methodologies. Warschauer (2003) stated that “technology does not exist as an external variable to be injected from the outside to bring about certain results” (p. 47). With this, he implied that in a virtual classroom, a new methodology, specific and completely different from the traditional one, is needed.

It is necessary in the future to explore in depth and define effective virtual language teaching practices in order to develop closer understanding between the virtual teacher and the virtual student.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing the students’ opinions and suggestions, we can conclude:

1. A virtual language course is not a face-to-face class

- The way in which an exercise is prepared for a virtual course differs from that of a face-to-face course. On a virtual course, an electronic exercise should be sent to the specific location/address/section prepared for the exercises, or a section inside the corresponding unit of the course material, and so forth. Then, a message should be sent to all the students indicating that a new exercise has been posted. If at the beginning of the course we create a schedule with all the deadlines for the exercises, then we should

be strict (although we can accept some late answers in special cases).

- Virtual language teachers should be skilled in the use of the virtual environment before the course starts. It is absolutely necessary that most, if not all, of the activities are ready to be sent, and a schedule of the course prepared. In this way, teachers will feel more relaxed during the course and will have more time to answer the students’ comments and questions. Teachers shouldn’t forget that regular feedback in the target language is a powerful tool for language acquisition and even to prepare more activities or improve the ones they already have.

2. The exercises must be well-structured and clear

- Teachers shouldn’t forget that from the students’ points of view, instructions in a second language seem more difficult to understand. Exercises should have a clear and concise section with the instructions: It should indicate exactly what the student is supposed to do, the deadline of the exercise, and where (inside the virtual class space) that particular activity should be sent. If additional material is to be posted by the teacher (e.g., theory, texts, or a self-evaluating test), this should also be mentioned in the instructions. By doing this, students find on a single screen a type of exercise map of everything that has to be done, and all the materials that complement the exercise.
- If teachers want students to post the answers to an exercise in the virtual class, a clear deadline must be specified. If there is not a clear deadline, the exercises with their various topics will probably be sent at different times, and the students will probably find difficulties finding the right thread. These difficulties may lead to student distress.

3. The layout of the documents has to be comfortable to read

- The electronic texts sent to the class should be presented in a font that is easy for all the participants to read. Teachers should also take into account that not everybody has a big screen at home or at work, and although it is easy to alter the font size in a computer screen, students tend to read the documents in the original size (changing the font of all the documents we receive would be very time-consuming).
- Long black-and-white documents can be boring, while brightly colored documents may be difficult to read.
- Most of the messages written by the teachers should fit on one screen. Scrolling up and down a screen in order to read all the instructions of an exercise is not the best way to help students. If a long and complex exercise is sent, a previous document should be sent with the instructions (e.g., perhaps containing some help with difficult vocabulary) and a second one with the body of the exercise. The exercise can also be sent as an attachment. The topic of the message is probably the most important part of the whole message. It helps students classify and foresee what the new post is going to be about. Teachers should not forget that reading and organizing ideas in a second language is more difficult and time-consuming than in one's mother tongue. Therefore, it is much better to send several messages (with various topics) than a single message dealing with many topics.

4. Teachers should motivate students throughout the course

- From time to time, teachers should check the links on a virtual course (this can be done automatically). There is nothing more

disheartening than to find many broken links on a Web page.

- All virtual courses should have a “student room” where students can send comments that are not directly related to the subject. It could be a sort of “virtual playground” for adults. By doing this, we create a real virtual community and thus reduce feelings of loneliness, frustration, and stress.
- It is always a good idea at the beginning of the course to ask students to send their biodata (written in the target language) with a picture. Most virtual environments allow this to be done. If there is no space for a picture, they can always send a simple word document with the picture pasted on it.
- Teachers should be able to check students' attendance at the virtual classroom.
- Likewise, if language teachers want students to connect regularly to the virtual class, and if they want students to participate, teachers must show that they “are there” by sending messages every (maximum) 24 hours. These may simply say “thank you for your exercises,” or they may contain a comment on the activities, and so forth.

Finally, it should be pointed out that although being a virtual teacher often means that the teacher is not in direct (time-space) contact with the students, students should never feel that physical distance. In virtual environments, teachers can be very close to students by creating and keeping a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom. Teachers should never forget that they can motivate or demotivate their students, and they probably expect the virtual language classroom to be a dynamic and flexible space where they can find the right skills and strategies to acquire the knowledge they need.

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KEY TERMS

Blended Learning: The combination of multiple approaches to learning. Blended learning can be accomplished through the use of “blended” virtual and physical resources. A typical example of this would be a combination of technology-based materials and face-to-face sessions used together to deliver instruction. In the strictest sense, blended learning is anytime an instructor combines two methods of delivery of instruction.

Discussion List: A type of electronic mailing list. On a discussion list, a subscriber uses the mailing list to send messages to all the other subscribers, who may answer in a similar fashion. Thus, actual discussion and information exchanges can happen. Mailing lists of this type are usually topic-oriented (e.g., politics, scientific discussion, joke contests), and the topic can range from extremely narrow to “whatever you think might interest us.”

E-Learning: Can be defined in many ways. In its simplest form, it is individual or group use of electronic media that provide access to online

learning tools and resources. These dynamic media offer shared community spaces, support digital communication and collaboration, and link to information sources such as streamed video, podcasts, Webcasts, digital libraries, Web pages, and videoconferencing.

Learning Object: Any entity, digital or non-digital, that may be used for learning, education, or training.

Link: A logical connection between discrete units of data, or a hypertext connection between Web pages.

Moodle: A course management system (CMS); a free Open Source software package designed using sound pedagogical principles to help educators create effective online learning communities.

Virtual Learning Environment (VLE): A software system designed to facilitate teachers in the management of educational courses for their students, especially by helping teachers and learners with course administration.

APPENDIX 1

Questionnaire Answered by the Students

Are you enrolled in any course with a virtual component? (Moodle, e-mail, etc.)?

1. Do you think the teacher promotes student participation in the virtual class?
 - If you answered “no,” please state why you think the teacher does not promote student participation. What do you think should be done to promote it?
2. Do you receive any feedback from the exercises/activities that you hand in virtually?
 - If you answered “no,” would you like to receive some feedback?
3. Is the design of the course or the exercises:
 - attractive for students?
 - difficult/uncomfortable to read?
4. Do you think the teacher takes a long time to send you an answer?
 - What is the maximum period of time that the teacher should take to send the answer/feedback?

5. Do you feel the virtual course in which you are enrolled is “too cold” or “too distant” for the student?
 - Why?
6. In order to facilitate the students’ learning process, is there anything that you think should be included in the virtual subject?
7. Do you think that virtual courses
 - help the learning process?
 - hamper the learning process because the amount of content increases?
 - hamper the learning process because the number of exercises increases?
 - improve the teacher-student communication?
 - make the teacher-student communication worse?
 - improve the relationship among students?
 - make the relationship among students worse?

During the course,

 - have you felt frustration?
 - have you felt stress?
 - have you felt alone because nobody helped you with your doubts?
8. In general, do you think virtual learning helps you in your learning process?
 - Why?
9. Would you like to add anything else?

APPENDIX 2

The following table shows a summary of what the author considers to be the most significant answers given by the students in question 9 (“*In general, do you think that virtual learning helps you in your learning process? Why?*”) [author’s translation]:

Positive Answers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are extra activities that help you understand the topic taught in class. - I can hand in the exercises whenever I want. - Even though you cannot attend the class, you don’t miss the subject. - Teachers can help solve your doubts even though there is no class. - In some subjects, we can print the teacher’s notes, and this helps us a lot. - We can find many interesting links with lots of extra information. - Communication with the teacher improves. - The subject becomes a database that you can consult whenever you want. - I can work from home.
Negative Answers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Many teachers send documents that my computer cannot open. - Face-to-face teachers answer your questions in class. Virtual teachers take a long time to answer. - Sometimes the Internet does not work. We cannot open the Web page. - If we have a doubt, it is really difficult to solve. - The relationship with the teacher is very cold.