PRAXIS
PEDAGÓGICA

Sebastián Concha Vargas
Corporación Universitaria
Minuto de Dios – UNIMINUTO
sconcha@uniminuto.edu
Colombia

Analysis of Strategic and Sociolinguistic Competences Elicited Through Online Chat Activities

Análisis de Las Competencias Estratégica Y Sociolingüística a Través de Actividades Usando El Chat En Línea

Análise de Competências Estratégicas e Sociolinguísticas Através de Atividades Usando o Chat Online

Summary

This article presents the results of an interpretive case study of a group of students in the English Basic V course from the Philology and Languages, English Bachelor's degree program at the Universidad Nacional. The study relates the analysis of students' sociolinguistic and strategic competences elicited through chat-based activities aimed at developing and practicing these two competences. It can be useful for teachers of English as a pedagogical resource to practice communicative skills with students in an innovative way and for researchers investigating the development of different English communicative competences in a ludic way using online chat.

Palabras clave: communicative competences, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, new technologies, online chat.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio de caso interpretativo de un grupo de estudiantes del curso de inglés básico V del programa de pregrado Filología e idiomas, inglés de la Universidad Nacional. El estudio narra el análisis de las

competencias sociolingüísticas y estratégicas, de los estudiantes, obtenidas a través de actividades basadas en el chat para desarrollar y practicar estas dos competencias. Este estudio puede ser útil para los profesores de inglés como un recurso pedagógico para practicar las habilidades comunicativas con los estudiantes de manera innovadora y para los investigadores que trabajan el desarrollo de diferentes competencias comunicativas en inglés de forma lúdica mediante el chat en línea.

Palabras clave: Competencias comunicativas, Competencia sociolingüística, competencia estratégica, nuevas tecnológicas, chat en línea.

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta os resultados de um estudo de caso interpretativo de um grupo de alunos do programa de graduação de Literatura e Língua Inglesa, na Universidade Nacional. O estudo narra a análise das competências sociolinguísticas e estratégicas dos alunos obtidas através de atividades baseadas em chat para desenvolver e praticar estas duas competências. Este estudo pode prover para professores de Inglês um recurso pedagógico para praticar habilidades comunicativas com os alunos de formas inovadoras e para pesquisadores que trabalham no desenvolvimento de diferentes habilidades comunicativas em Inglês de uma forma lúdica através de chat online.

Palabras clave: Habilidades de comunicação, habilidades sociolinguísticas, habilidades estratégicas, novas tecnologias, chat online.

Introduction

This article is the result of the research project, "Analysis of the Strategic and Sociolinguistic Competences of Students of English Elicited Through Online Chat Activities" implemented in the English Basic V course from the Philology and Languages English degree program at the Universidad Nacional.

In recent years, there have been new tendencies in the field of foreign language education. Usually, it has been thought that the teaching-learning process has to be carried out by the teacher who transmits new knowledge to students who must memorize it and later repeat it in evaluations. However, the new tendency is that the teacher should be a guide who helps students assimilate and practice the different topics of a subject so the teacher does not "teach" but rather facilitates and provides tools, elements, and strategies to students that may help them in their foreign language learning process. One innovative strategy is the pedagogic use of new technologies such as the computer, laptop, cell phone, or tablet. This research project proved how

adequate use of the online chat can make students of English improve their communicative competences in that language, specifically their strategic and sociolinguistic competences.

The first part of the article discusses the definition and significance of the communicative competences, especially the strategic and sociolinguistic competences. Later, advantages of using new technology tools such as online chat in the ESL classroom are related. After that, the methodology, using chat-based activities to elicit students' strategic and sociolinguistic competences, is described. Subsequently, the analysis of data collected during the implementation is briefly described. Finally, some conclusions summarize the results and implications of implementing chat-based activities to foster students' communicative competences.

Sociolinguistic and strategic competences in the English language learning process

Different English courses and Bachelor in English degree programs aim to educate students who, at the end of the course, have a command of a foreign language as close as possible to a native speaker. However, just mastering the four skills of a foreign language, speaking, listening, reading and writing, is not enough to the same proficiency level in a foreign language as a native speaker. For that reason, it has been necessary to work on a communicative basis or approach to the learning process of the foreign language. This fact implies stimulating students' abilities to communicate adequately depending on the given context, social patterns, and intentions. These abilities are part of the communicative competences that allow students to have an ability to carry out a broad range of communicative acts (CEF, 2001).

The last tendencies in the communicative approach to English as a foreign language pedagogy have been analyzed and applied in different English courses and research projects at universities and language institutes around the world to enrich students' communicative competences. Nonetheless, teachers generally focus on developing students' oral and written linguistic skills. Therefore, it is important for them to develop communicative competences, such as sociolinguistic and strategic competences, if the students want to acquire a proficiency of English close to a native speaker (CEF, 2001).

The communicative competences defined and restructured by CEF (2001), for instance, include three important elements:

language competence, sociolinguistic competence, and pragmatic competence. Language competence comprises knowledge about the language and the ability to use well-formed, properly structured sentences. The elements of sociolinguistic competence compromise the knowledge and skills to appropriately use language within a specific social context, considering conversational partners. Elements included in this competence are mainly the proper use of linguistics and extra-linguistic elements which mark social relationships and status. Rules about appropriate behavior and expressions of individuals' knowledge, differences in register and dialects, and stress are included. Finally, pragmatic competence compromises discourse and functional competence. Strategic competence is related to the way we use all the communicative competences effectively. In other words, it is related to the set of strategies used and applied to overcome a lack of knowledge in any specific part of language or communicative competence. Therefore, in this case, all communicative strategies are included. s (2007) also assures that using strategies can be related to applying metacognitive principals such as persuading, planning, achieving, controlling, and correcting produced in different language acts such as reception, interaction, production, and meditating.

Pedagogical uses of online chat for the English language learning process

In recent years, the opportunity to use new technologies, such as mobile phones, laptops, and tablets, among others, as pedagogic tools in schools and universities has been opened, studied, and analyzed to offer students more possibilities and ways to improve their foreign language learning processes. In that way, the English class has slowly changed with advances and increasing uses of these new technologies. Teachers now have many options for deciding what activities involving new technologies can be used. To maintain students' interest, teachers must design and apply activities that are appealing, varied, and contextualized.

The current generation of teenagers and adults have grown up using Internet tools such as chat programs, applications, and software to communicate with others. It has been a good idea to take advantage of students' current mode of communication by integrating it into the foreign language learning process. Technological activities involving email, forums, Skype, Snapchat, WhatsApp, or chat sessions make language learning and practice

meaningful and fun because they allow students to produce their meaningful language on their own (Collot & Belmore, 1996).

According to Colburn (2002), online chat has been considered a promising tool for second language learning because of its unique characteristics, colloquialism in written mode, and synchronized communication, among others. Some researchers have been using chat task-based activities in second language courses. Other research has focused on L2 fluency (Oliva & Pollastrini, 1995), while other more recent research has had interest in L2 grammar acquisition (Pelletieri, 2000). Using online chat, previous potentials to develop students' communicative competence can be increased, because learners report less anxiety during electronic communication than in face-to-face interaction Kern (1995). They also might develop the ability to develop some conversational, social, and cultural norms of the second or foreign language. Students may be able to learn and later apply these norms with the help of more advanced students or interacting with native speakers. Also, they may put into practice some linguistic strategies to achieve a specific goal in a more relaxing and familiar environment. Therefore, it could be relevant to develop and practice their sociolinguistic and strategic competences (Chun, 1994).

Methodologic Aspects

Considering that the main objective of this research project was to analyze students' sociolinguistic and strategic competences elicited through online chat exercises, it is important to consider that this was a case study. A case study can be defined as the study of an "instance in action." So, a case study selects an instance or a case from the class of objects and phenomena being investigated, for example, a second language classroom, and investigates the way this instance functions in context (Platt and Weber, 1985). In this case, language use, particularly the sociolinguistic and strategic competences developed and elicited through online chat exercises of a specific group, a Basic English V course, were analyzed, at a point in time. A methodology that used chat-based exercises was applied to elicit such competences. This methodology involved dynamic and motivating task-based activities such as role-play and problem-solving exercises.

For validity and trustworthiness, this case study investigation fulfilled three main criteria: credibility, transferability, and verification. This

research fulfilled these criteria primarily through the triangulation process. According to Denzin (1970), triangulation in a qualitative research project is the combination of two or more theories, data sources, or methodologies in the study of a singular phenomenon or case. In this research, within-methods triangulation was used. Within-methods triangulation can be defined as including two or more qualitative ways of collecting data, such as observation or surveys to give research findings validity. During the different stages of this investigation, different sources were used to collect data to give the results credibility.

First, a first poll was designed and implemented among all students in the English Basic V course to explore their current uses of Internet and online chat using different electronic devices in English in their daily lives. The results were analyzed and interpreted to identify and explore students' familiarity with this new technology tool or way of communicating and practicing English. It was later necessary to examine and interpret the results to give readers possible answers, circumstances, or causes of the results.

Second, two chat-based activities designed to elicit students' sociolinguistic and strategic competences were implemented in the course. The sessions were recorded and analyzed to give an account of the students' competences in this context. To elicit students' sociolinguistic competence, a *luxury dinner cruise* role-play exercise was selected; to elicit students' strategic competence, a role play about a *mother-daughter argument* was implemented. Information collected during the chat sessions was analyzed and interpreted from my criteria and beliefs in the sense that others may later have different opinions or interpretations based on their viewpoints, beliefs, and criteria. Finally, Colburn's (2002) analytical criteria for evaluating sociolinguistic and strategic competences was used as theory.

Finally, while students developed the online chat exercises, they were observed, and research notes were taken to analyze and interpret students' linguistic and extra-linguistic behaviors.

Participants

In the English V Course, there were 17 students from the Bachelor in Philology and Languages, English at Universidad Nacional whose level was B1, according to the CEFR, (Common European Framework of Reference for languages). There were

a total of three men and 14 women; they were working with the book "New Headway English Course Upper-Intermediate." In grammatical terms, they were reviewing relative clauses, participles, verb patterns (-ing and infinitive forms), modal auxiliary verbs, question forms, how to express habits (in the present and past), all conditionals, nouns, adjectives, and adverbial phrases. Because they had enough basis to carry out and maintain a fluent conversation and elaborate different kinds of texts, the classes consisted mainly of discussions about an interesting topic for them or a topic in the book including grammar, reading and listening exercises. That was one reason to carry out these discussion activities in the online chat environment.

Analysis and Interpretation of Results

The analysis and interpretation of results was divided into three sections: analysis of the results of the implemented poll to explore students' interest and uses of the Internet and online chat, analysis of the students' sociolinguistic competence, and analysis of the students' strategic competence elicited through chat-based role-play exercises.

Although all communicative competences are integrated and function simultaneously, every exercise was designed to elicit or develop a specific component of the students' communicative competence as defined by CEF (2001).

Category 1: Students' Interest in and Use of Internet and Online Chat

All students in the Basic English V course used Internet and online chat programs daily, which confirms that this tool, at least in this generation and generations to follow, has become a frequent, useful, and easy-to-use communication method that is open to everyone. Because present generations are accustomed to the Internet and use it almost every day, English teachers might have the opportunity and, at the same time, responsibility to use this technology for pedagogical purposes. In this case, it is necessary, and interesting, for them to include Internet sessions in their courses, providing useful and appealing web pages, off- and on-line exercises, e.g., online chat programs, and forums to introduce a new topic or to practice and reinforce what students have learned so far.

Most students manifested that they sometimes chatted in English with local or foreign friends to practice their language outside the classroom. In terms of common expressions, idioms, and slang, more than half of these students said they tried to use them. Also, they considered cultural norms and knew when and how to use formal and informal language. These characteristics can be categorized as part of their development of sociolinguistic competence (Broersma, 2004). Chatting with native people allows students to acquire sociolinguistic competence because they can observe sociolinguistic features such as slang or idioms expressed by native speakers which they may later imitate on their own. Nevertheless, interactions between learners or non-native English speakers can also produce sociolinguistic competence (Chun, 1994). Therefore, it was not relevant to know if students who stated that they practiced common expressions, idioms and slang did it with native speakers or other learners; in both cases, it is possible to gain sociolinguistic competence.

We observed that almost all students who chatted online in English stated that they improved their English by chatting. Their language level improved mainly because they could use or practice the language in a real context. They could learn from others who had a higher language level or were native speakers, and they used more informal English, so they knew how to express their ideas in other words, or, we can say, in another register in English.

Finally, students were asked if they were interested in using this tool in their English courses. As expected, all were interested in using chat-based activities during their classes. The majority wanted to chat online to practice the English topics they had already learned and to improve their English level and fluency. They possibly answered affirmatively either because they were attracted to doing something different and innovative or because they knew they had to do it.

Category 2: Sociolinguistic Competence

In this exercise, the students' sociolinguistic competence was reflected in the way a group of four students used English in the specific context of a luxury cruise dinner role play. Because they were acting as wealthy people who played specific roles in different fields such as art, health or literature, they also had to show their membership in that specific social group through their English language and behavior (Colburn, 2002).

Additionally, each had a purpose in mind, a reason they were on the cruise, for example, to sell paintings, find a husband, or relax, which was carried out in the most appropriate and suitable way. So, their manners, language, topics of discussion, behavior with others, and ways of expression, negotiation, and interpretation were observed to see if they fulfilled the expected cultural norms in the provided situation and context (Broersma, 2004).

Throughout the exercises, students' utterances were categorized and analyzed, taking into account Coburn's (2002) analytical criteria for evaluating sociolinguistic competence. The categories were proper register, observations of register shift within a scenario, adhering to the event's format, e.g., conversation or narration, social relevance of language used (e.g., requesting information, seeking approval or persuading), formulaic expressions, and attitudinal or emotive perspectives such as sarcasm, ridicule, defeat, frustration, doubt or praise, accomplishment, satisfaction, confidence and eulogy.

These criteria were complemented with concepts such as field of discourse, discourse domain, and illocutionary competence developed in Bachman's (1990) model of communicative competences. Also, Halliday's (1973, 1995) theory of language functions was used to analyze the different characters' speech acts; Halliday (ibid) classifies these language functions as part of our illocutionary competence.

First, the class was divided into groups of four; each member received a role to play during the "dinner." Group members had ten minutes to read carefully and prepare. Before starting, the students had to log in with their fictitious names. Finally, the students had 30 minutes to talk, and then everyone had to stop. It is important to note that the characters in the role play were meeting for the first time.

Characters

Melanie: a rich widow

Victoria and David: famous artists and art dealers

Geri: a mystery writer

In this chat exercise in which students played specific roles, wealthy people in a pre-determined context, dinner in an elegant restaurant, demonstrated their sociolinguistic competence in the following way:

Melanie, who played the role of a rich widow, was polite, according to the situation, and almost always used a formal register with all the elements and correct order of the question and affirmative forms, for example, "Where can I admire the art you are selling?" She also used appropriate vocabulary, for example, "I love to travel and see what the world has."

Melanie changed her register to a more informal one only twice. In the first instance, she affirmed that she hoped to find many men on the cruise, something not usually said by a refined widow. However, she immediately settled the situation adequately and returned to a formal register, affirming that she was very selective and preferred a certain kind of man. The other instance was when she questioned Victoria and David about their room when she said, "But room 123 is mine. What happen with you guys?" behaving like a teenager talking to her friends. Again, we must remember the relationship they had as classmates. In reality, Melanie is a girl in her twenties; these factors may have influenced her performance.

Regarding the discourse domain and field of discourse (Bachman, 1990), given the context and type of character, she could have played a more authentic character when introducing herself, making the others know more about her role and position in society. However, during the conversation, it was noticeable that she was concerned about showing off her status when necessary, talking about her trips and interest in Victoria and David's fine art, after learning that they only did business with VIPs. Melanie sometimes showed her high status explicitly, stating, for example, "I am a very rich woman. I want to be your customer." She did this to gain status and respect among her table companions.

Finally, using her ideational function of language (Halliday, 1995), she talked about her own experiences and perception of life, introducing common conversational topics by saying, for example, "Our society is so fast that nowadays, heart attacks are very common." In complaining about heart attacks, for example, she showed her solidarity with a person who belonged to her social class who had that problem. Using language to express solidarity with groups one belongs to or wants to belong to is an important aspect of a person's sociolinguistic competence (Broersma, 2004).

Finally, as part of her socio-cultural knowledge and socio-linguistic competence, Melanie might have been aware that in

that specific context, these kind of people may have tried to lower their companions' egos to show their superiority and the others' inferiority even more when the other person was trying to show off. In a humorous way, using her interactional function of language (Halliday,1995), she lowered Victoria and David's egos, affirming that they were not giving their real room number in first class, making the others see them as liars.

Victoria and David, who played the role of famous artists and fine art dealers, were almost always polite. They used formal ways to say something, for example "Our work is related to Picasso's art, and we are here because we would like to deal with somebody who knows about fine art," and an appropriate vocabulary, using words such as "customers," "aesthetic," and "elements of art." However, they had to be aware of not translating formal Spanish into English literal expressions, such as "You have all the reason," because it could cause us to infer that they did not know how to express the idea in a formal way in English. Also, when making a comment like, "Most people are stupid," referring to art-ignorant people, they should have known when to say it, and not in a moment when the others were talking about something different. Besides, when saying "Melanicita is the name of a baby" at the beginning of the conversation, even to break the ice, they should have predicted the other person's possible reaction, which may not always be favorable in that kind of context. Knowing when to be quiet, when to talk about something, when to make a certain comment, and what is right to say or do are part of a person's sociolinguistic competence (Broersma, 2004).

Regarding the discourse domain and field of discourse (Bachman, 1990), Victoria and David play authentically their characters well, talking about themselves, their world, feelings, favorite themes, and most important, status as important artists and fine art dealers. The exception was when they introduced themselves at the beginning; they could have provided a better introduction, not just saying, "We are Victoria and David." Also, it was noticeable that in part of the chatting, they controlled the conversation by talking about art, their lives and paintings, and persuading the others to buy them, as indicated in their role guide. It was interesting how they, using their ideational and heuristic function of language (Halliday,1995), showed off their status with comments about their expositions, knowledge of art, and their customers, for example, saying, "Yes, many

important people who know about art have bought our work. They are people who appreciate art" or, "We think that people should be concerned that art is an expression of our reality." However, it seemed that they were becoming too snobbish, and because of that, the others, Melanie and Geri, made fun of them, trying to lower their egos. So, it is important to avoid going to extremes when talking about one's qualities or defects, because people may react inappropriately. Also interesting were the strategies they used to persuade the others to buy their paintings, considering the kind of people they were talking to. They affirmed that only important people bought their work, and talked about their works' quality, style, and resemblance to famous artists' paintings.

The way Victoria and David faced mean Geri and Melanie's commentaries was smart and humorous. They provided arguments that supported their status and prestigious jobs. For example, when Geri said, "Have you got some money with that job?" They replied, "Yes, many important people who know about art have bought some of our work. They are people who appreciate art." Also, they made comments to return "the insult" and lower the other person's status. Here, they lowered Melanie's status in a humorous way when they told Melanie, "You are wrong, because we are in room 123, first class. Maybe you are in 123B in tourist class, not in the first class. Couldn't it be possible?"

Finally, Geri, who played the role of a mystery story writer, was always polite; she used proper vocabulary, formal expressions such as, "I am taking a rest," all the elements and proper order of the question and affirmative forms such as, "Why did you take this cruise?" The most interesting aspect of Geri's utterances was her use of British English features, for example, "Are you joking?" or "Do you make some money with that job?" She may have associated these with a formal style ideal in the context and for her character, who she may have associated with famous English characters such as Sherlock Holmes or mystery writers like Agatha Christie.

Regarding the discourse domain and field of discourse (Bachman, 1990), Geri carried out the instructions of her role guide as expected. She was supposed to find information about her companions to write her next book and not reveal information about herself. She did it well, leading the conversation and "breaking the ice" at the beginning, asking everyone about

themselves and why they were there. During the rest of the conversation, she was determined to ask about and understand her companions' lives and feelings with direct questions, always in a polite and friendly way. However, when she was asked about herself, she simply changed the topic and talked about other matters, something very rude of her.

As Melanie, Geri also used her interactional function of language (Halliday,1995) to lower Victoria and David's egos. Using different strategies, she made them seem as cheaters, doubting the authenticity of their paintings, and incompetent, reminding them of what they were supposed to do when they said, "Are you joking? Your hobby must be to convince people and not-so-wealthy people," doubting the amount of money they received for their art. Geri did this because, as Melanie, she may have known these type of people might behave in such a way, also because she could not stand Victoria and David's super egos.

Category 3: Strategic Competence

In this exercise, strategic competence was mainly reflected in the way students manipulated language to meet a communication goal. An eloquent speaker possesses and uses sophisticated strategic competence. For example, a salesperson utilizes certain strategies of communication to make a product seem irresistible. A teacher uses communication strategies to help students not only remember the material they teach but also to teach them to study (Colburn, 2002).

The scenario or conflict situation applied in this chat session was a mother and daughter argument. The daughter had to convince her mother to lend her the car; however, she knew it would be difficult, as it was a long trip with her friends. She was irresponsible, and she had had some misadventures with their car. The mother had to respond adequately to her daughter's request, considering the factors already mentioned. Here, the "mother" and "daughter" used different strategies to persuade each other to their advantage.

Characters

Valeria: the mother

Danna: the daughter

Danna, who played the role of daughter, used different strategies to convince her mother to lend her the car, despite her irresponsibility in the past. First, it was noticeable that Danna did not start by arguing with her mother; instead, she tried to talk and convince her in a friendly and kind way. This was reflected, for example, in the way she began the conversation asking about her mother's mood or health and calling her "Mom" in a friendly way. It was also reflected in the way she reacted to or confronted her mother's claims, trying to calm the situation and reminding Valeria of their relationship and "special" bond as mother and daughter. Danna might have known that if she confronted her mother in a "rude way," she would lose, because her mother had the power and the final decision.

Second, as a strategy, Danna made Valeria see her as the victim and her mother as unfair. She asked for piety and reminded her of how tough she was. Danna managed to calm Valeria and made her quietly listen to her arguments.

Another strategy Danna used was to talk about that specific moment where she had an accident with the car, reminding her mother she was not "completely" responsible for the damages, as an argument in her favor. However, her mother threw that argument aside easily, saying that she always gave the same excuse. At that moment, Danna recognized it was useless to keep talking about that specific moment and her partial responsibility for the event. So, to overcome that communicative impasse, she showed herself as a responsible and serious person in front of her mother, accepting her irresponsibility in her acts and making clear her intentions and potentials, because she had managed to obtain a job to pay for the damages to the car. In that way, Danna wanted Valeria to see her as a changed person she could trust and lend the car.

Although Danna did not propose solutions that would benefit both of them, she could accept her mother's two first solutions with logical arguments. First, she made her mother aware of how dangerous it could be to do hitchhiking, reminding Valeria of her role as the responsible mother. The other argument was to be forced to ask for a loan from her friends for the trip, and she made Valeria realize that her friends always helped her. So, among the three possibilities given by Valeria, Danna could choose the best option for her (her mother would drive and take her and her friends to their destination). However, she did not think she or her friends wanted to be alone at any time with an adult controlling

their behavior. It could have been because there was little time to reach a solution or because she considered they had a strong bond not only as mother and daughter but also as friends.

Valeria, who played the role of the mother, made use of different strategies to defend her position. Unlike Danna, Valeria went to the point of the conflict right at the beginning of the conversation, giving the reasons she was annoyed with her daughter. Valeria could have done it to make Danna conscious of her bad actions from the beginning and make it harder for her to find arguments to borrow the car.

When confronting Danna's arguments, Valeria did so creatively. She said that Danna always gave the same excuse, "it was not her fault" in any accident or incident with the car. With that statement, Valeria showed Danna as a liar she could not trust to lend her car to again. This was reinforced when Valeria asked Danna about the real reason for one of the accidents.

Another strategy Valeria used to her advantage was to focus the conversation on other, like asking Danna when she was going to start working or how she would pay for the damages. In that way, she expected Danna to stop asking about the car and focus on more important aspects.

It was noticeable that Valeria started to propose solutions that could benefit both of them. However, the first one was not appropriate, considering that she was Danna's mother, and a mother thinks of her children's safety and health more than anything else. She proposed asking for a lift on the road. This was not a well-thought-out solution probably because she might have been just joking around with "her friend" and not "her daughter." Also, she may have said it because there was little time to think of a solution. The second and third ideas were better and more logical because she was also thinking of her daughter's satisfaction and welfare. The second solution, asking for a loan, was easily aside by Danna. However, the last solution was that Valeria would take them to their destination, which she supported with positive arguments and conditions. However, she should have asked Danna the distance they had to drive, considering that it could have been a long way. So, Valeria could have ended up losing the situation because she may have committed herself to driving more than two hours just to drop her daughter and her friends, return, and then driving again to pick them up, an annoying and tiring task. Therefore, it would have been important that not only Valeria but Danna

had thought about a better solution before risking committing themselves to that solution, only to later regret it.

Conclusions

Initially, online chat has been employed mainly for cheap and easy entertainment and communication with people from all over the world. However, researchers and teachers have been investigating and creating new uses of this Internet tool for pedagogical purposes. In the context of learning and practicing a foreign language, investigations of how to improve students' language level have focused on different aspects of the second language (e.g., grammatical, extra-linguistic, strategic competence); the results have been published mainly in scholarly and scientific articles. These papers have proved the efficiency of this tool in improving different aspects of the language due to the advantages online chat may provide when implemented in the foreign language classroom, such as student-student interaction and less inhibition, among others. For that reason, it is important that professors teaching foreign language courses start proving and implementing this recent and innovative tool to achieve or develop course objectives in a different way and update the methodology they have used so far.

As regards chatting in English, almost all students of English who chat in Spanish also do so in English as a strategy to practice their English and improve their language level in a different and innovative way. Because online chat is used in these students' and other learners' free time, English teachers should promote the use of this strategy within the classroom with specific and well-designed Internet chat-aimed exercises to help them achieve some course objectives and improve their language level in general.

More than half of the students also practiced common expressions, idioms and slang. These two options can be categorized as the part of sociolinguistic competence that is crucial to have language proficiency. They could have chatted with native people, where they may have acquired sociolinguistic competence, because they could see sociolinguistic features of native speakers and reproduce them in their own utterances. Even so, if they chatted with other learners or their classmates, they could also acquire and produce sociolinguistic competence

because they usually put into practice the different registers, cultural and social norms they learned in their courses and daily life. So, when students chatted with a native speaker, classmate, or English learner, they could gain and practice their sociolinguistic competence (Chun, 1994).

In general terms, the students' performance in the different analyzed chat-based exercises was satisfactory. It was proved that when students faced this online environment, they increased their participation in the development of the exercises and elicited their sociolinguistic and strategic competence more than one expected at the beginning of the sessions. In the selected samples, all students took seriously what they had to do in every exercise, trying by all means to accomplish their respective tasks.

In terms of their sociolinguistic competence, students were aware of the context in which they were interacting and the kind of characters they were performing. As such, they used language properly almost all the time, in this case, a formal style since they were at an elegant dinner with strangers, and were polite when asking for and giving information. There were a few cases when some of them shifted to an informal register, but it may have been because of the kind of relationship they already had as classmates, and their real personalities might have influenced this role-play exercise.

In addition, they respected and followed the socio-cultural norms and conventions they inferred as governing the situation in the way they structured the conversation, expressed their ideas, interpreted the others' utterances, and negotiated meaning. During the conversation, they took time to exchange information about their fictitious roles and lives, usually following their role guides. It was interesting how they used the different language functions, fields of discourse, discourse domain, and illocutionary competence in a proper and creative way to make conversations interesting and appealing to form and change interpersonal relationships to their advantage, show their status, and gain respect and, sometimes, admiration among their companions.

In terms of the students' strategic competence, both mother and daughter utilized different logical and creative strategies used in a situation of daily life such as conflict between mother and daughter to persuade the other to their advantage. Generally, these strategies were expressed in English in a coherent and

logical way. Danna, as the daughter, for example, always had strong answers and arguments for her mother's responses to show that she had changed, was a responsible person, and she could trust her to borrow the car. Valeria, as the mother and adult, tried to find ways and ideas to support her position and make Danna forget the possibility of borrowing the car. We concluded that they reflected fairly good English strategic competence, at least in this specific context and conflict.

This chat-based exercise, implemented to elicit the students' strategic competence, could also be related to Valeria and Danna's sociolinguistic competence because both of them took control of their characters and acted as such. It was interesting how they behaved like a real mother and daughter in the way they expressed their ideas, confronted the other's arguments, and complained about the other's position. This behavior could have been an imitation of their real lives and daily contexts. However, this time, they managed to express it and act in English, which was the main purpose of the exercise.

Referencias

Bachman, L.F. (1990). Chapter 4: Communicative Language Ability. Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing (pp.81-109). Oxford: England. Oxford University Press.

Bagarić, V (2007). Defining Communicative Competence. *Metodika*. Vol. 8, br. 1, 2007, page 94-103.

Broersma, D. H. (2004). *What is Sociolinguistic Competence? Why is it Important? Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL 60187-5593*. Retrieved October 2005. From http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/icct/

CEF (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Language Policy Unit, Strasbourg.* Retrieved from ww.coe.int/lang-CEFR

Colburn, M. C. (2002). *Strategic Interaction Online: A Comparison of Instructional Techniques to Optimize the Use of Scenarios as a Distance Learning Exercise on the Internet.* Delaware: University of Delaware.

Collot, M., and Belmore, N. (1996). Electronic language: A new variety of English. In S.C. Herring (Ed.), *Computer-mediated communication: Linguistic, social and cross-cultural perspectives* (pp. 13-28). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Co.

Chun, D. M. (1994). Using computer networking in order to facilitate the acquisition of the interactive competence. *System, 22*(1). 17-31.

Denzin, N. (1989). *Strategies of Multiple Triangulations. The Research Act: A theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods.*

Foolen, A.P. (1997). The Expressive Function of Language: Towards A Cognitive Semantic Approach. In Niemeier, S.; Dirven, R. (ed.), *The Language of Emotions*, pp. 15-31. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1975). *Explorations in the Functions of Language. Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd.*, 25 Hill Street, London.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1995). A Recent View of 'Missteps' in Linguistic Theory. *Functions of Language* 2.2. Vol. 3 of The Collected Works, p. 236.

Kern, R. (1995). Restructuring classroom interaction with networked computers: Effects on quantity and characteristics of language production. *Modern Language Journal, 79*, 457-476. New York: Cambridge U Press.

Oliva, M. and Pollastrini, Y. (1995). Internet resources and second language acquisition: An evaluation of virtual immersion. *Foreign Language Annals Magazine, 28*(4), 551-563. New York: Cambridge.

Richards, J., J. Platt, and H. Weber. (1985). Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics. London: Longman.

Pelletieri, J. (2000). Negotiation in cyberspace: The role of chatting in the development of grammatical competence. Network-based Language Teaching: Concepts and Practice. Edited by Warschauer, M., & Kern, R. New York: Cambridge University Press.