

EFL Students' Social Identity Construction in an Online Learning Environment

EFL Students' Social Identity Construction through Literacy Activities in an Online
Learning Environment

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School of Science and Education

M.A. in Applied Linguistics to the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language

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NOTE OF ACCEPTANCE

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Acuerdo 19 de 1988 del Consejo Superior Universitario.

Artículo 177: “La Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas no será responsable por las ideas expuestas en esta tesis”.

Dedication

Thanks God to for giving me the strength I need to achieve my goals.

Thanks to Adriana Contreras who has always been my support.

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I would like to thank Dr. Amparo Clavijo Olarte who believed in this study and supported me to make this achievement possible.

Thanks to my students who encourage me through the challenging profession of teaching and forming people and whose support allows me to recognize new possibilities of teaching and learning.

Thanks to my mother, whose advocacy motivates each project in my life.

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Abstract

This descriptive and interpretative qualitative research study was carried out in public school in Bogotá. It explores the way in which EFL ninth grade students construct their social identity in an online learning environment through literacy activities and describes EFL students' participation in it. Following grounded theory procedures for data collection and analysis, data were collected from students' artifacts, semi-structured interviews and teacher field notes from the online learning environment. The findings reveal multiliteracies as a paramount channel in students' social identity construction and students' writing and reading EFL skills enhanced through students' portrayal of themselves in their blog profile and in the interactions with their classmates. Students used multimedia applications such as avatars, images, pictures, comics and videos to depict themselves. They captured notable meaning making representations of the surrounding world within the online group through the participation in the forums.

Keywords: social identity, multiliteracies, online learning environment, interactions, self.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Our identities are not just determined by the place and societies where we were born but by the whole life experience and influences we accumulate during our lives.

(Khatib, & Ghamari, 2011)

Students' experiences take an important part in the construction of social identities. At the same time, school plays a significant role in the formation of those experiences because it is in the school where students establish their early social relationships. Learners see themselves as individuals and as members of a community in which they construct their social identities while having opportunities for language learning. Social identity is formed by individual's backgrounds, relationships, interpretations, ideas thoughts but specially the use of language (Breen, 2001).

This study aims at describing and interpreting how EFL ninth graders at a public school in Bogota construct their social identity in an online learning environment through literacy activities. The concept of social identity is addressed from a typology defined by Deaux (2001) in which "Many forms of social identity exist, reflecting the many ways in which people connect to other groups and social categories." (p. 2). In this particular case, I intend to focus on the type of social identity as "personal relationships" (Deaux, 2001, p.2) that emerge from the students' interactions within virtual settings. Personal relationship identity has some singular features which imply sharing particular aspects of different experiences with other people who belong to a same social group (Deaux, 2001). At the same time, relationship identity also implies a specific role with another person, a

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relationship that is unique and grounded in one's own personal experience with that other person.

Regarding identity, McCool (2009) asserts that 'everyone is faced with developing a sense of self, a process that begins in adolescence' (p. 6). Thus, this study documents the construction of social identity of a group of ninth graders through their social interactions when expressing their ideas, feelings, expectations and life experiences in an online learning environment. In their social interactions, students used English language as a means of communication and self-expression.

Nowadays, virtual communities play a fundamental role in students' social identity. According to Li (2004) "virtual communities focus on relationship development in real life where people do not have definite reasons to remain in them. Virtual communities are spontaneously shaped by people with similar interest." (p. 2708). They also have opened multiple spaces that provide meaningful learning experiences and encourage language acquisition (Li, 2004).

The influence of communication technologies (CT) in the day-to-day adolescents' life has brought about different ways of communication through new online tools as platforms, web pages, mobile applications that are available to students. Research studies (Rojas, 2012; Jiménez, 2012; Chen, 2013; Hattem, 2014) have shown that if CT tools are used in teaching for authentic communication purposes, they could support learning. Manuela Beltrán public school in Bogotá stated in the Institution Educational Project (PEI) 2014, the need to implement the use of ICT to improve EFL literacy process. This study aims at responding to the needs of students to use ICT in the English classroom to further enhance their literacy in EFL.

Statement of the Problem

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Although the Institution Educational Project (PEI), modified in 2014, aims at increasing the use of ICT to improve students learning in all the content areas, the English class is still organized based on the content of a textbook from sixth to 11th grades. Similarly, the other content area teachers at school do not use ICT tools to promote students' interaction in their classes. Thus, the school requires that teachers implement innovative pedagogies that create opportunities for learners to develop literacy competences and CT skills.

This project intends to respond to the need that ninth graders have to interact and to communicate with others using ICTs. Therefore, my purpose as a ninth grade EFL teacher is to propose literacy activities in an online learning environment in order to use English and ICT as a means of interaction and self-expression among learners.

Purpose	Research Question	Research Objectives
To propose literacy activities in an online learning environment in order to use English and ICT as a means of interaction and self-expression among learners.	How do EFL ninth grade students at a public school in Bogotá construct their social identity in an online learning environment through literacy activities?	---To explore the way in which ninth grade students construct their social identity in an online learning environment through literacy activities in EFL. ---To describe EFL students' participation in an online learning environment through literacy activities.

Furthermore, a survey on computer abilities was designed to identify students' insights about the use of ICT in learning environments. According to the results, most of students showed themselves highly interested in interacting with their classmates in virtual spaces. Such interactions can become an opportunity to observe how students construct their identity when interacting with peers in the online environment created to support EFL learning. Furthermore, students manifested that it would be motivating to optimize the use of social networks and online groups concerning the academic setting, "it would be great

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that one could have some virtual classes and that some teachers uploaded homework and stuff on the web.” (e.g. Interview 4/ August 28 /2013 -needs analysis-)

Additionally, a semi-structured interview was applied to gather students' insights about the purpose and the motivation they have to learn English. As a result, the EFL learners expressed that they would like to use the language as a means of self-expression. This research study is framed by three basic components: literacy activities as a tool to develop EFL, CT skills, social identity construction in the interaction with peers within an online group.

Having described and supported the problem, I posed the following research question:

Research Question

How do EFL ninth grade students at a public school in Bogotá construct their social identity in an online learning environment through literacy activities?

Research Objectives

- To explore the way in which ninth grade students construct their social identity in an online learning environment through literacy activities in EFL.
- To describe EFL students' participation in an online learning environment through literacy activities that are mediated by technology.

Justification

This research study intends to respond the new teaching and learning challenges that education faces currently. Integrating literacy and online tools is a response for students' needs in my educational context in which adolescents are particularly connected with technology, social networks and the World Wide Web to establish relationships and to

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construct their knowledge. Furthermore, working in an online learning environment supports the process of English language learning (Chapelle, 2001) in my educational setting promoting literacy around interesting and meaningful topics by using the language as a self-expression. At the same time, it could be a good reason for students to be engaged in sharing experiences, about their lives and showing themselves and recognising the others as unique individuals who have diverse points of view. In this sense, students' interactions could promote values such as tolerance and respect about the differences connected to their reality and context.

In conclusion, this research study promotes learners' self-expression and the literacy activities that describe the construction of their social identity. The means to achieve this goal is to use multiliteracies in order to engage them in learning the language. Finally, it has to bring about pedagogical implications that allow them to participate in an online learning environment.

Chapter II

Literature Review

As a language teacher, I have realized that the learning and teaching process is more effective when teachers recognize students' needs and implement new pedagogical practices to enhance students' investment in learning settings. To this concern, social identity, the use of technology for the development of EFL literacy practices and online learning environments for language learning are significant pedagogical tools in order to provide learners with opportunities for language development. In this chapter, I discuss the theoretical considerations and studies that endorse this research. The chapter is presented as follows: the first section is a theoretical discussion on social identity; the second section outlines theory and research on literacy and multiliteracies, focusing on the use of technology in EFL and the third section is based on online learning environments to support the process of English language learning.

Social Identity

For many years, social identity theory has been the concern of several studies of the self and identity. This theory was first introduced by the British social psychologist Henry Tajfel who defined it as "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership" (Tajfel, 1972:31). Since that time, many studies have emerged, and social identity concept has been broadened. For instance, Brewer (1991) defines social identity as "categorizations of the self into more inclusive social units that depersonalize the self-

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concept, where I becomes we” (Brewer, 1991:476). Therefore, individuals define themselves in relation to their social group affiliations and relationships and then “enact roles as part of their acceptance of the normative expectations of in-group members” (Turner et al., 1994: 460). In addition, Deaux (2001) highlights that there are multiple forms of social identity, replicating the many forms in which people attach to other groups and social categories. She identifies three different aspects in which the social identity is labelled; they follow as cognitive beliefs, emotional associations and behavioural consequences.

In contrast, Ito et al. (2008) point out that the formation of social identity often involves a process of stereotyping or “cognitive simplification” that allows people to distinguish easily between self and other, and to define themselves and their group, but in most of the cases reject or discriminate those who are not recognized by other members of the group. In the same sense, Jenkins (2008) asserts that social identity should be seen not as much as a fixed possession, but a social process, in which the individual and the social are inextricably related.

The concepts mentioned above are relevant to this study since the interest of this research is to describe how EFL students construct their social identities, shaping their positions and perceptions about themselves and others. In this way, Norton & Toohey (2001) highlight personality as an important aspect in language learning and identity construction. It involves not only the person’s cognitive tools; a particular learning style; an intelligence that allows students to learn faster in one way than another (visually or kinesthetically among others); but also, the socio-cultural relationships in which students are involved. These aspects have to do with their cultural context and how learners negotiate or resist diverse positions when they are in the classroom; for this study, it is

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relevant to highlight the students' social identity not only as an isolated entity but also as a related concern within language learning that emerges in the daily interactions.

In addition, Norton (1995) suggests her own social identity theory in which the language learners, the language learning context and social interaction are implicated in the construction of a learner's social identity. Norton focuses "the role of the language as constitutive of and constituted by a language learner's social identity.

In other's words, "the conception of the language learner as having a complex social identity must be understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction" (Peirce, 1996:13). In this way, it is important for this study to highlight the connections between the sociocultural context and the communicative situations in order to understand their lived experiences, and how these experiences can affect my students learning processes.

Also, Heller (2009) states that language allows language learner's social identity to negotiate a sense of self through diverse sites and at different moments within social networks. Thus, language gives learners the opportunity to gain access to or deny access to these networks and consequently to speak.

Moreover, Rex and Schiller (2009) explain social identity as the way in which individuals place themselves as members of particular groups. The authors also highlight the importance of an individual's expression as legitimized by the discursive practices of the social groups to which each individual belongs.

Following Hall (2012), a sociocultural perspective on social identity and language use emerges. He defines language users as social actors whose identities may change in everyday lived experiences and in every communicative encounter. In these encounters, individuals associate both their own and their interlocutors' social identity, and then they

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“make sense of each other’s involvement in their encounters” (Hall, 2012:32). Here it is relevant to reflect upon the positions my students adopt depending on the communicative acts practiced in their daily life experiences, and how throughout those positions they perceive their classmates how they are perceived by them as part of the same group.

Despite the fact that most of the social identities and language learning studies are focused on the concern that language is used as a form of self-representation, which is highly related to one’s social identities and values (Miller, 2003 cited in Yoshizawa, 2010:35), Fought (2006) stresses that language must provide ways of reflecting on identities to understand human communication.

According to Jimenez (2012) social identity is the way EFL students display themselves as real individuals of a social group through interactions. Students reproduce themselves throughout pictures, posts, and comments in the learning community. Their social representations are assessed, recognized, or deprived of by the other members in the group. In addition, Zhang, Jiang & Carroll (2010) found that identity is a more dynamic conception of constructing self-presentations in social context since the context of online social interaction.

To this regard, Lewis & Fabos’ (2005) highlight that participants commonly manipulate tone, voice, word choice, and subject matter of their messages to fit their communication needs, negotiating multiple narratives in the process. In contrast, Chen (2013) asserts that construction of identities implicates linguistic codes and the symbolic resources, offered to multilingual learners to discover who they are and their relationship to the world.

To sum up, this theory of social identity involves understandings of the complexity of the construction of students’ identities as language learners and the relationship between

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them and the social context. In my educational setting, social identity and language learning ought to bring about pedagogical implications that allow EFL ninth grade students that are rejected because of gender, ethnicity or even language background to participate in the classroom (Norton & Toohey 2001). It may construct a positive view of themselves based on their ability to use the foreign language to express their ideas and to become aware of social issues, which allow them to participate as agents of change in their context and to reflect upon their role as members of social groups. Moreover, as an English teacher, social identity issues may contribute to broad my own vision of education and to improve my pedagogical practices to embrace diversity in the classroom and to be aware of my students' necessities.

The complexity of the construction of students' identities as language learners and the relationship between them and the social context demand a different approach regarding the EFL teaching practices. Therefore, one of the main constructs that nurtures the study has to do with literacy and multiliteracies. In the following section some theories and researches based on literacy and multiliteracies are presented. It also includes studies on the use of technology in EFL because of its relevance as a tool in multiliteracies.

Literacy and Multiliteracies

One of the most relevant theorizers regarding literacy is Freire (1987) who defines literacy practices as reading the word and the world. It refers to raising learners' awareness of their history and their social reality to act upon it and intend to change it. In this way, reading the word and the world includes previous experiences of the readers, and their relationship with society. His theory has been the pillar of different approaches concerning Literacy, as for example Critical Literacy and Multiliteracies.

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Drawing in others' words, Medina, Ramírez and Clavijo recognize critical literacy as a pre-requisite to transform society. For the authors, "It embeds situated learning and interaction among individuals, words and contexts and a variety of specific literacies and skills to live in community, become aware of reality and play an active role to change it"(Medina, Ramírez and Clavijo, 2015:4).

Moreover, Giroux (1987) and Luke (2012) define critical literacy (CL) as a cultural and linguistic practice that involves an understanding of how texts and discourses can be manipulated to represent and change the world regarding relations of power, peoples' social relations and geopolitical and economic relations. In contrast, Coffey (2008) recognizes critical literacy as a means of communication among individuals by using the codes and conventions of society. By means of CL students should be engaged in critical discussions that allow them to be respectful with others' view (Dozier, Johnston & Rogers, 2006). As literacy practices provide the opportunity to understand self and others, it can be a resource of courage, dignity, and empowerment (Ada & Campoy, 1999) for learners. By means of these literacy practices, students can express feelings and emotions based on real life experiences related to similarity or opposition to the text. As a result, learners got involved in critical reflection that permit them to create and transform their surrounding world. Regarding Literacy and Critical Literacy conception, multiliteracies comprises a critical approach because it focuses on social reality and is intended to understand how humans may transform the world by the word thanks to different multimodal practices.

Crafton, Silvers & Brennan (2009) propose that multiliteracies are needed for this new era because it permits us to enlarge the definition of literacy from traditional print views to digital ones and to endorse broader insights of the arts as semiotic systems integral to meaning making. Regarding this definition, Bomer and Bomer state that a multiliteracies

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classroom integrates “community and social practices, on multimodal means of representing and constructing meaning, and taking a critical social justice stance leading to change and identity transformation.” (Bomer and Bomer, 2001 as cited in Crafton, Silvers & Brennan 2009:35). From another view, the New London Group (1997) highlights that teachers need to handle multiliteracies to support learners to acquire the literacy resources to understand social issues and empower them to change others’ lives. Art, music, technology, and language, can make students address issues that worry them and their world (Dyson, 1993 as cited in Crafton, Silvers & Brennan 2009).

According to New London Group (1996) multiliteracies is a pedagogy that considers that literacies are multiple. Consequently, they demand different modes, which are regularized sets of resources for meaning making. These resources include a visual, a sound, a word, a movement, animation, spatial dimensions that achieve an effect in texts and also changed ways of reconstructing and renegotiating our identities. The use of visual, digital, and embodied texts to revitalise critical literacies and multiliteracies is known as multimodality. Combining different types of materials such as books, audiotapes, photographs, plays, or a website for variety purposes engage identities and the imagination in diverse ways through textual resources.

Otherwise, Lankshear and Knobel (2012) claims that new literacies established social structures and relationships to improve social conditions. In this way, multiliteracies are more inclusive, more egalitarian, and more receptive to human necessities, interests and gratifications. Additionally, Cope and Kalantzis (2000) refer to multiliteracies as “the big picture; the changing world and the new demands being placed upon people as makers of meaning in changing workplaces, as citizens in changing public spaces and in the changing dimensions of our community lives – our lifeworlds” (p. 4).

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Drawing on Perry's (2012) view, multiliteracies encompass the real-world in which people practice literacy. The author emphasises on the role of power relationships in shaping literacy and literacy learning.

Other studies agree that multiliteracies describe the varying rules of reading and writing taking into account the new kind of texts that comprise other types of media such as image, voice and movement (Gee, 2009; Kress, 2003). Medina, Ramírez and Clavijo (2015) suggest that multiliteracies and digital tools are appropriate for rewriting or changing ourselves and our community's realities. The authors highlight the necessity to develop awareness about the nature of literacy as social, situated, multimodal and transformative. They also assert that "multiliteracies are a suitable pedagogical approach for critical literacy development in digital environments" (2012: 46).

In the context of the study, I understand the pedagogy of multiliteracies as a valuable instrument that offers multiple modes to go beyond the basic literacy, increasing the possibilities to address my students' necessities and abilities. Also, I recognize that multiliteracies encompass a critical approach that allow the students to think critically and recognize and value their peers.

The pedagogy of multiliteracies was crucial to carry out this study and to achieve the main objectives. Multimodal literacy practices were designed to allow the participation of all members of this online learning community. Videos, Postings, avatars, comics, songs, forums in which they commented, shared experiences and views were the main multimodal practices that engaged students in the development of the study and gave them the opportunity of working together and to co-construct their social identity while improving their EFL skills.

Digital Literacy

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As the research was carried out mainly with digital tools and the group conformed an online learning community, it is also relevant to present the views to digital literacy that support the development of this study.

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have increasingly become a significant part of social life. Online technologies have produced new ways of communication. Life seems to be easier with the use of these technologies (Garrett, 2009). Nowadays, technology has become an important part in people's lives. For example, the use of social networking sites in which individuals can interact with others synchronously and asynchronously by chatting, posting, sharing photos, using video-chats and many more, have changed day-to-day activities such as including meetings, shopping and even booking (Jimenez, 2012). Interactions can be established instantly no matter the distance, culture or any kind of boundaries.

These changes that influence every aspect of life and the social world, have been associated with new forms of learning and teaching a language. Viatonu & Kayode (2012) argue that the present views of digital learning tools have brought about methods of language learning online, expanding access and improving the quality of teaching and learning by enhancing language competence and learners' interaction and verbalization; all of this by incorporating multimedia applications that can be used to motivate and provide EFL students with exciting new ways to learn. Computer applications in EFL have been the core of many issues such as the effective use of software in language teaching, values and limitations of computer-assisted testing, and the study of second and foreign language development with interactive computer programs. Chapelle (2001) focuses on evaluating issues through perspectives from applied linguistics, and identifying specific areas that need research and development. The author also contributes in this field with concepts about the

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use of computers in SLA/EFL to develop language learning online to benefit students as active participants.

The students I teach come from a particular setting in which many relationships are established in the digital world. These students have the facility to be connected for long periods with others and communication takes many forms. Therefore, I think that the role of digital literacies for teenagers is crucial when interacting, sharing information and posting comments. Thus in their “communicative acts are essential to the online world, and the online world is constantly being written by them.” (Barton & Lee, 2013:p.3).

Communities of Practice and Learning Online Communities

As I mentioned before, the purpose of this study is to explore the way in which ninth grade students construct their social identity in an online learning environment through literacy activities in EFL. Therefore, in this section I present the concepts and research studies on the subject of community of practice and online learning community.

Wenger (1999), a prominent researcher who is interested in communities of practice, states that the worth of education depends on social participation and that education should be led in terms of the identities of the participants that belong to the a community of practice. Wenger (1999) defines communities of practice as groups of people that are involved in a process of collective learning and share interest in a specific area. Members of a community of practice do something and perfect it by interacting with other members frequently. The author highlights that learning can be the aim of the group or it can emerge because of the members' interaction. Wenger states three characteristics: 1. The domain of interest that is shared by the members within the community who ought to show a commitment to the domain, and a competence that differentiates members from other people. The domain is not essentially “expertise” for other people. 2. The community

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pursue their interest in their domain and engage in combined activities and discussions, support each other, and share information. 3. The practice is continuous by members of a community of practice who are practitioners. They share experiences, stories, tools and ways of addressing recurring problems. This practice is time consuming and needs sustained interaction.

In the particular setting of my research, I understand community as a group of people who share two specific interests: learning EFL to reflect upon their lived experiences and to develop a sense of membership in which participants interact with other members of the group by chatting, posting, and commenting about common interests and expectations. The concept of community involves an active process of social identity construction.

As students had the motivation of sharing experiences by interacting in a virtual space, an online learning community was created. Thus, it is essential to define the concept of online learning community in this study.

Many studies concerning the importance of community in an online course and in online teaching have been carried out in the last few years (Wenger, 1999). Other studies have inquired into the concept of social presence, defined as the ability to represent oneself as a “real” person in the online setting (Richardson and Swan, 2003; Rovai and Barnum, 2003). The outcomes of these researches have reinforced the opinion that the main aspect to succeed in online learning is the creation of an effective learning community as a means of learning generator online.

Palloff & Pratt (1999) define learning community as the means through which learning occurs online. It means that members help each other to attain the learning outcomes; an online course is carried out if the learning community support and participate

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within it. The authors also number the desired outcomes that indicate that an online community is already formed. They are as follows:

Active interaction that involves both course content and personal communication; collaborative learning demonstrated by comments especially from learner to learner rather than learner to teacher; other outcomes are: socially constructed meaning established by agreement or questioning of the members; achieving agreement on issues of meaning; sharing of resources among students; expressions of support and encouragement exchanged among learners and willingness to critically evaluate the work of others.

Palloff and Pratt (1999) also suggest some basic steps to build a virtual community. They are: defining clearly the purpose of the group; creating a distinctive meeting place for the group; promoting effective leadership from within; defining norms and a clear code of conduct; allowing for a range of member roles; allowing for and facilitate subgroups; and allowing members to solve their own disputes

Moreover, the authors state key elements to the creation of a learning community such as honesty, responsiveness, relevance, respect, openness, and empowerment (Palloff and Pratt, 1999). With these elements members can feel safe in expressing themselves without fear of how they are perceived, allowing for active, rich discussion. Other specific strategies for building a learning community include: posting introductions and learning expectations, beginning to know each other and encouraging comment on introductions. This practice enable students to open up to each other and to begin creating a safe space in which they can interact. Promoting human interaction allows students to begin forming the relationships that are the basis for collaborative learning. Discussion allows participants to take responsibility for the way they engage with the course and come to shared agreement about the ways they interact with each other (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

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Adams and Sperling (2003) notice that the community constructing process rooted in online courses has facilitated the transformation of teaching and learning in higher education. It is due to some changes that include more availability and accessibility in getting information, use of different learning styles, and increasing responsibility for teaching and learning. The changes include greater accessibility to and availability of information but also incorporate the development of new skill sets for teaching and the necessity to reconsider pedagogy, redefine learning aims, reevaluate assessment, and redefine work roles and culture.

Additionally, Shea, Swan, and Pickett (2004) assert that online community definitions include numerous common elements or themes like mutual trust building, a connection of the spirit, a sense of belonging, a sense of membership, a sense of support, and an ability to share in the educational setting.

Bearing in mind the context of my research, I understand learning community online as a way to engage students in reflecting upon and sharing ideas that generated learning and brought about the ability to represent oneself as a “real” person in the online community while constructing social identity.

Finally, I would like to highlight the significance of the main constructs in order to endorse my research study. First, social identity was defined; second literacy and multiliteracies concept were explained and third, learning online community was outlined. This process helped me address the research question and achieve the research objectives.

Chapter III

Research Design

This chapter provides a detailed description of the methodological framework that aims to answer the following research question: How do EFL ninth graders at a public school in Bogota construct their social identity in an online learning environment through literacy activities? Additionally, I present the type of the study, the context and participants as well as the instruments. Finally, the role of the researcher and ethical issues are addressed.

Type of Study

This qualitative research study explores EFL ninth grade students' social identity construction in an online group through literacy activities at a public school in Bogotá. It focuses on “understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 2009, p.13). By following qualitative research methodology a large amount of data was collected, providing highly descriptive information about personal experiences, life stories, interviews, observations, interactions and visual text which are significant moments in peoples' lives in the form of words and pictures rather than the numbers produced by other types of research (Merriam, 2009).

Concerning the research methodology, this study focuses on a netnography which according to Kozinets (2010) refers to an online ethnography method adapted from an ethnographic perspective to study the communities created through computer-mediated social interaction. It offers information on the insights, representations and meanings perceived by online community members. “Online communities form or manifest cultures,

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the learned beliefs, values and customs that serve to order, guide and direct the behaviour of a particular society or group” (p. 12). Moreover, in netnography the data can take three forms: (a) data the researcher directly collects, (b) data generated through the capture and recording of online community events and interactions; and (c) data the researcher outlines as field notes. “Data collection includes direct copy from the computer-mediated communications of online community participants and observations of the community and its members, interactions and meanings”. (Kozinets, 2010: 65).

Context

This research was developed in two different environments: face-to-face classes at school and asynchronous online group. Therefore, the following text describes both learning settings. Initially, the school environment is characterized then; the online learning space in an English platform called “Schoology” is addressed. Manuela Beltrán IED is a public school located in Bogotá founded in 1914. This institution has provided learners with educational services in three shifts: morning, afternoon and night (adults), since 1997. The School’s IEP establishes that students must be prepared throughout an educational, dynamic, significant, motivating and innovating environment that provides them with opportunities for their intellectual, social and personal development in the society. The philosophy of the school is based on Teaching for Understanding approach, whose fundamental pedagogical purpose is to develop individuals capable to think by themselves, to analyse what they learn, using their knowledge to solve problems they have to deal with in everyday life experiences, acting responsibly and making meaning of what they have learned (PEI, 2014). Additionally, the school vision is to contribute to the society providing students with skills that allow them to be successful in the labour field. Thus, since 1996 the institution has maintained an agreement with SENA to implement a new

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program. This program is basically focused on technology and seeks to improve students' abilities in technology as a means to recognize students' learning potential, to increase their skills and to obtain different possibilities for developing competences to succeed in the global world; also to promote the development and the progress of the whole school community in all the subjects.

Thus, in 2009 the school was established by the National Ministry of Education (MEN), as a technical and commercial institution with emphasis in technology (resolución 13-0031 Del 12 de marzo de 2009). The English classes are scheduled three hours per week. The classes focus on language skill development according to the Basic Standards of Foreign Language Competence proposed by the National Ministry of Education in Colombia (MEN).

The online space selected to provide students with opportunities for EFL learning and to engage them in different language learning experiences in an English platform called Schoology. It is an innovative learning management system and a social network that makes it easy to share academic content. Schoology allows teachers and students to create a meaningful virtual classroom and to extend learning outside the physical classroom. This virtual environment allows participants to log on to the class discussions, activities, chats, and post their own comments and points of view at any time.

Participants

The participants in this research were selected according to Creswell's (2012) convenience sampling since they were available and willing to participate in the project. Additionally, their parents signed a consent form and the principal provided the teacher researcher permission to carry out the project (See Appendix 1).

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Thus, the study was carried out with a ninth grade group of 31 students divided into 22 girls and 11 boys, aged 13 to 17. The students belong to low and middle socioeconomic strata. The English classes were scheduled twice a week, one session is 110 minutes long and the other one is 55 minutes long. The classes focus on language skill development according to the Basic Standards of Foreign Language Competence proposed by the National Ministry of Education in Colombia (MEN). The English textbook "Look up" (by Oxford University Press) proposes to study all the four skills in the foreign language.

Instruments

A series of instruments were designed for two different purposes: to inquire students' needs in EFL and to gather data that evidence students' insights through literacy activities in an online learning environment and in face-to-face English classes.

Students' artifacts

Students' artifacts can illustrate participants' insights when expressing their ideas through online hypertexts in visual and written form (interactive comic stories, logs and forum participation), as well as, their interactions in the group. According to Burns (2005), this instrument allows the teacher researcher "to have a clear picture of students' reactions, perceptions, reflections and thoughts" (p. 152). Those artifacts can motivate students and generate a discussion about life experiences, "providing an easy way of obtaining other people's perceptions" (Hopkins, 2002:145), therefore gathering students' views on how they perceive the others and how they perceive themselves (see Appendix4).

Field notes

Taking into account the research methodology of this study based on a netnography, Kozinets (2010) highlights the importance of contextualizing the data gathered from the participants' interactions in online spaces by using file notes (see Appendix 2). "The

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strength of “netnography” is its particularistic ties to specific online ... groups and the revelatory depth of their online communications” (Kozinets, 2010:66). In online interaction, the information can include participants’ language behaviours and attitudes through posting comments. Students can report their self-representation as social members in the online learning environment and they provide authentic, and confidential data that can possibly answer the questions that originated this study.

Semi-structured Interview

The use of semi-structured interviews as data collection instrument is relevant in this research since they can provide the opportunity to explore participants’ social identities and develop ideas about how they are perceived by the members of the online group and how they perceive their classmates. Through interviews the researcher can also confirm the information gathered with the students’ artifacts. This type of interview is more comfortable and rewarding for the researcher and the interviewee because it is open-ended and thus more flexible (Burns, 2005). That is, there were a set of questions guided by the teacher-researcher, as well as, some other questions addressed to follow the conversation. The EFL students also felt more comfortable to talk about their own pieces of work, the others’ work, their thoughts and conceptions about them and the other members in this study. Appendix 5

Researcher’s Role

The role of the teacher researcher in this study was that of participant observer, that is, the teacher researcher’s attention was focused on the EFL teenage social identity in a learning community where students had an active participation. As a researcher, I participated in the activities proposed and also I observed and recorded information for the study. Furthermore, the participant observer learns about a situation, observes experiences

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from a closer view “As a participant, you assume the role of an “inside” observer who actually engages in activities at the study site” (Creswell, 2012:214). Moreover, I promoted a friendly social learning environment in which students respect each other as members of this online learning environment.

Ethical issues

Since this study requires social presence (Palloff and Pratt 2005) in an online learning environment, it is important to consider Kozinets (2010) ethical recommendations: a) the researcher must reveal his or her attendance, associations, and purposes to online community members; (b) the researcher must guarantee confidentiality and anonymity of participants; and (c) the researcher must pursue and include feedback from members of the online community being researched. He also suggests that the researcher should take a cautious position on the issue of whether the online environment is a private or public medium. In this case, Schoology was a suitable site for ninth graders since the platform offers privacy and closed membership. Students are allowed to sign up in the group by an access code provided by the teacher.

Another ethical issue to keep in mind is that the researcher must contact community members and obtain their permission (consent form Appendix 1) to use any specific postings that are to be directly quoted in the research. Likewise, the researcher should employ member checking by presenting some or all of the final research report's findings to the participants in order to solicit their comments.

Chapter IV

Instructional Design

This chapter provides an account of the instructional activities carried out during five months with a group of 31 students from ninth grade at a public school in Bogotá. The pedagogical intervention examined EFL students' social identity construction through literacy activities in an online learning environment. The chapter explains the context, participants, the pedagogical activities implemented and the curricular platform that embraces the visions of language, learning, curriculum and classroom. Lastly, I describe in detail the goals and stages of the curricular unit.

The pedagogical innovation emerged from students' decision to develop literacy competences to interact with peers through blogs in the EFL class. This decision is aligned with the school vision to implement a new program, focused on helping students' become users of ICT. It seeks to improve students' abilities in technology as a means to recognize students' learning potential, to increase their language skills and to obtain different possibilities for developing competences to succeed in the global world.

Curricular Platform

This curricular platform follows a pedagogy of multiliteracies that brings into the classroom multimodal representations of language through digital media. Multiliteracies teaching does not focus on the rules of standard forms of the language, it requires that students decode differences in patterns of meaning from one context to another including gender, culture and life experiences (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). In this pedagogy, multimodal representations of "written-linguistic modes of oral, visual, audio, gestural, tactile and spatial patterns" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009:3) are central in the meaning construction and transforming the social world.

Vision of Language

In this study, language is defined as a social act that is developed through interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). In language as a social act, students are natural social beings and learning comes about through interaction with their peers and through interactions they give meaning to the world. Language is also viewed as self-expression and defined as a “medium by which learners construct personal relationships, express their emotions and aspirations, and explore their interests.” (Tudor, 2001:65). Within this perspective, Lewis (1993) asserts that through language, individuals are able to understand who they are and by using language individuals may define themselves. Language is developed through social interaction. Language learning is based on constructivist learning theory. Knowledge is acquired as children interact with others.

In this pedagogical innovation, language is view as a tool for communication among ninth grader students who use the English language in an online learning environment to express their opinions, present their own point of view, create videos-clips and comics, post and exchange ideas related to their family, sports experiences, free-time activities, musical preferences.

Vision of Learning

The vision of learning that best complements the aim of this instructional design is experiential learning, which is based on the idea that “learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984: 41). In experiential learning, learners are immersed in an experience that encourage them to reflect upon this experience thus to “develop new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of thinking, learners play a critical role in assessing their own learning” (Wurdinger, 2005:69). It links with EFL students' immediate experiences by designing and implementing activities such

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as the creation of videos, digital stories, interactive comics, etc. In doing so, the students went beyond the classroom experiences. They were able to display their own daily life experiences and to involve themselves in the materials they built and shared in the blog. In other words, students ponder upon “their own experiences, interests, viewpoints, familiar forms of expression and ways of representing the world in one’s own understanding” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009:17). This type of participation is defined by Kalantzis & Cope et al (2005) as ‘belonging’, and by this sense of belonging students shape identity

Vision of Curriculum

Bearing in mind that this pedagogical intervention is based on the pedagogy of multiliteracies in which teaching goes beyond the merely forms of grammar functions, the vision of curriculum in this study is seen “as dynamic processes of transformation rather than processes of reproduction” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009:10) in which students are agents in their own learning processes. Similarly, since the curriculum is focused on the classroom context, the learners are the centre of the whole process, the lesson and activities planned in the pedagogical intervention were developed as an opportunity for students to interact and to communicate their ideas, feelings and views, providing facilities for reading and writing to be combined with images, music, sound, pictures and videos and producing multimodal and digital text.

This curricular approach helps students interpret cultural changes where technology is the pillar to construct society in the globalised world. Transformative curriculum caused changes in the way EFL ninth graders learn English by keeping students’ motivation and engagement in learning as well as continuous the participation in the blog. The online learning environment changed the way students presented themselves and the way relationships were developed.

Vision of the learning online classroom

The learning online classroom is a virtual space where individuals can interact with others synchronously and asynchronously by chatting, posting, sharing photos, using video-chats, among others. Learners share thoughts, beliefs, lived experiences and expectations. It constitutes itself a space of real communication. According to Palloff and Pratt (2007) the learning online “allows for mutual exploration of ideas, a safe place to reflect on and develop those ideas, and a collaborative, supportive approach to academic work” (2007: 26). In this research study, the online learning classroom provides the learners a space to conform a community of practice defined by Wenger (1999) as groups of people that are involved in a process of collective learning and share interests in a specific area by interacting to other members in a virtual space.

The components mentioned above constitute the curricular platform of the pedagogical intervention that was implemented to achieve the aims of this research study. The pedagogical implementation that I described below, refers to six stages students develop to talk about their lived experiences in the online learning environment. They were as follows: sharing my musical preferences, reflecting about myself through a comic short story, enjoy reading my classmates' comics, making my personal video, commenting my classmates' life stories

Pedagogical Intervention

Using the pedagogy of multiliteracies approach this instructional unit presents the pedagogical goals and the stages of the intervention as follows:

Pedagogical goals

- To provide students with spaces to express themselves and interact with peers respectfully

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- To construct meaning around students' experiences.
- To foster students' interactions through online discussion forums about their real context.
- To improve students' ICT skills development by using different digital resources.
- To generate students' sense of belonging to online learning communities as part of the digital world they live in.

This pedagogical intervention was carried out in Schoology which is a platform that helps teachers and students connect systems and content they use on a single platform. Everything is easily accessible and they can work together as a learning community. This is also a social networking site that provides opportunities for learners to interact, share their experiences and express themselves by participating in forums and creating their digital stories. To achieve these goals six stages were carried out during five months. (See appendix 3 Timetable of the Pedagogical Intervention. July to November 2015).

Stages of the Online Learning Environment

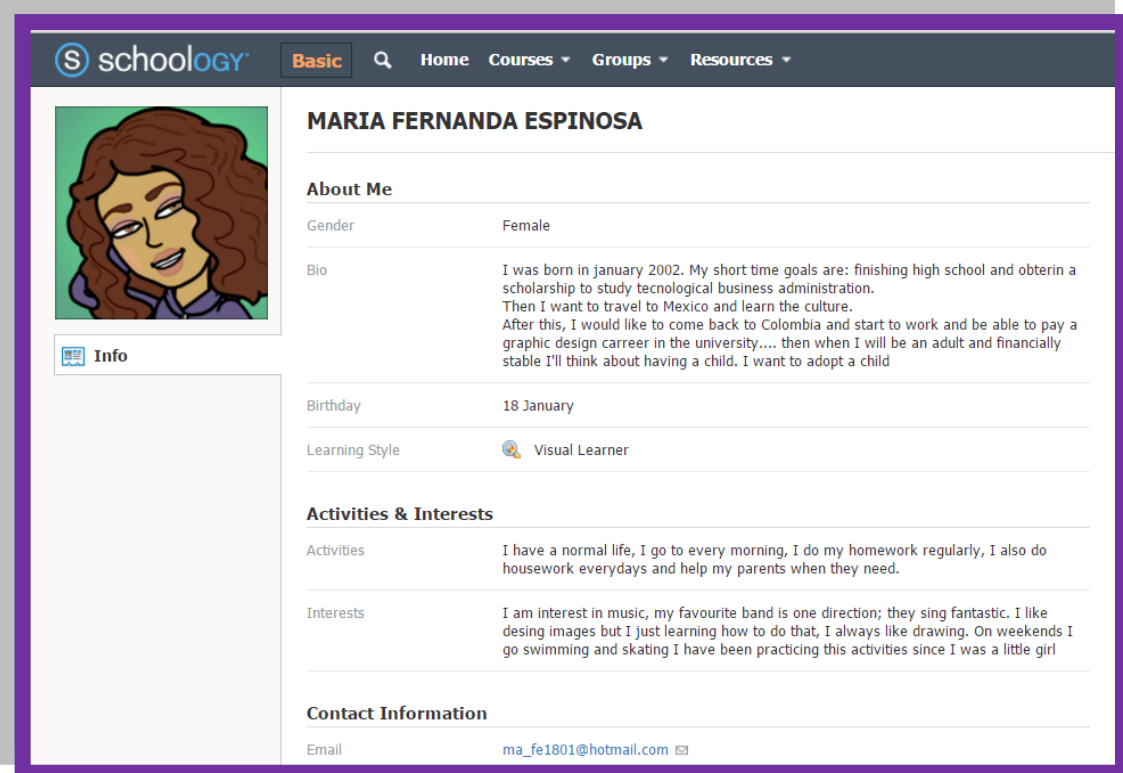
Building an online community

In this first stage, students joined an online learning community in Schoology creating and customising their personal profile by uploading an image or avatar, introducing themselves and describing their likes and dislikes. This activity allowed them to present themselves to their peers as they want to be identified. English language was used as a means of communication among the members of the online community.

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Additionally, they invited their friends to visit their profile and discussed about their commonalities and differences in a forum.

To scaffold the English learning process of students, the teacher explicitly taught the language forms required to describe themselves such as adjectives, uses of verb to be and simple present to express likes and dislikes. This focus on learning about language supported their use of language to interact with peers. An example of student's profile is illustrated below:



The image shows a screenshot of a student profile on the Schoology platform. The profile is for Maria Fernanda Espinosa. It includes a profile picture of a young woman with long brown hair, a bio, birthday, learning style, activities, interests, and contact information.

Profile Information:

- Name:** MARIA FERNANDA ESPINOSA
- Gender:** Female
- Bio:** I was born in January 2002. My short time goals are: finishing high school and obtaining a scholarship to study technological business administration. Then I want to travel to Mexico and learn the culture. After this, I would like to come back to Colombia and start to work and be able to pay a graphic design career in the university.... then when I will be an adult and financially stable I'll think about having a child. I want to adopt a child
- Birthday:** 18 January
- Learning Style:** Visual Learner
- Activities:** I have a normal life, I go to every morning, I do my homework regularly, I also do housework everydays and help my parents when they need.
- Interests:** I am interested in music, my favourite band is One Direction; they sing fantastic. I like designing images but I just learning how to do that, I always like drawing. On weekends I go swimming and skating I have been practicing these activities since I was a little girl
- Contact Information:** Email: ma_fe1801@hotmail.com

Figure 1.

After creating their personal profile, they reflected individually about things in common they found in the profiles of their friends in a forum. They realized they like the same music, they shared interest in sports and dreams about future professional goals. The following graphs are examples of students' comments.

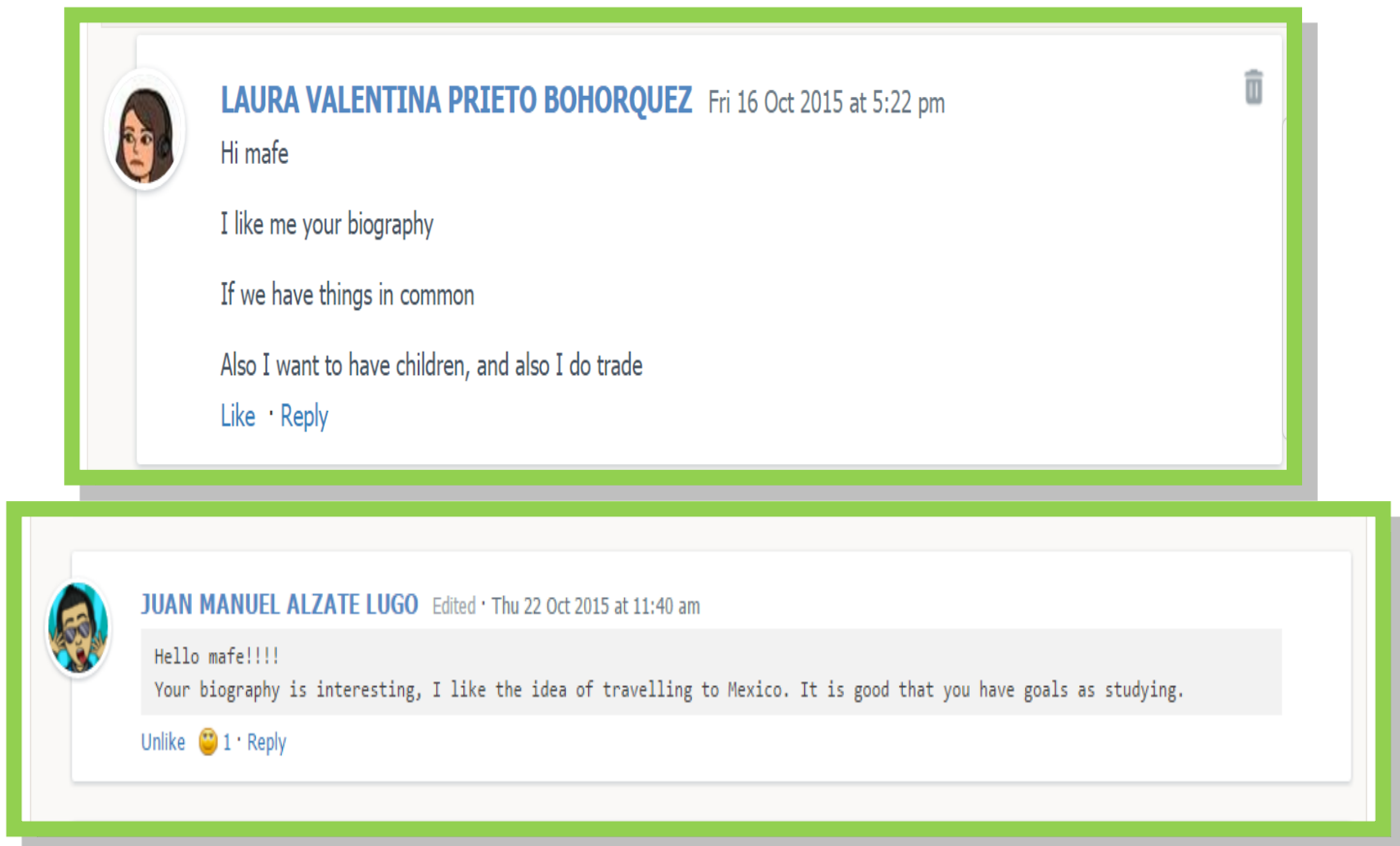


Figure 2.

Sharing my musical preferences

In this stage, students decided to upload a video of a song from “YouTube” that identify themselves. Learners wrote about why they chose this song. This stage allowed students to start getting to know their classmates’ musical preferences and feelings. They also continued participating in a forum discussion freely, commenting their classmates’ songs and establishing commonalities and differences in music styles. I provided an example of student musical preferences as follows:

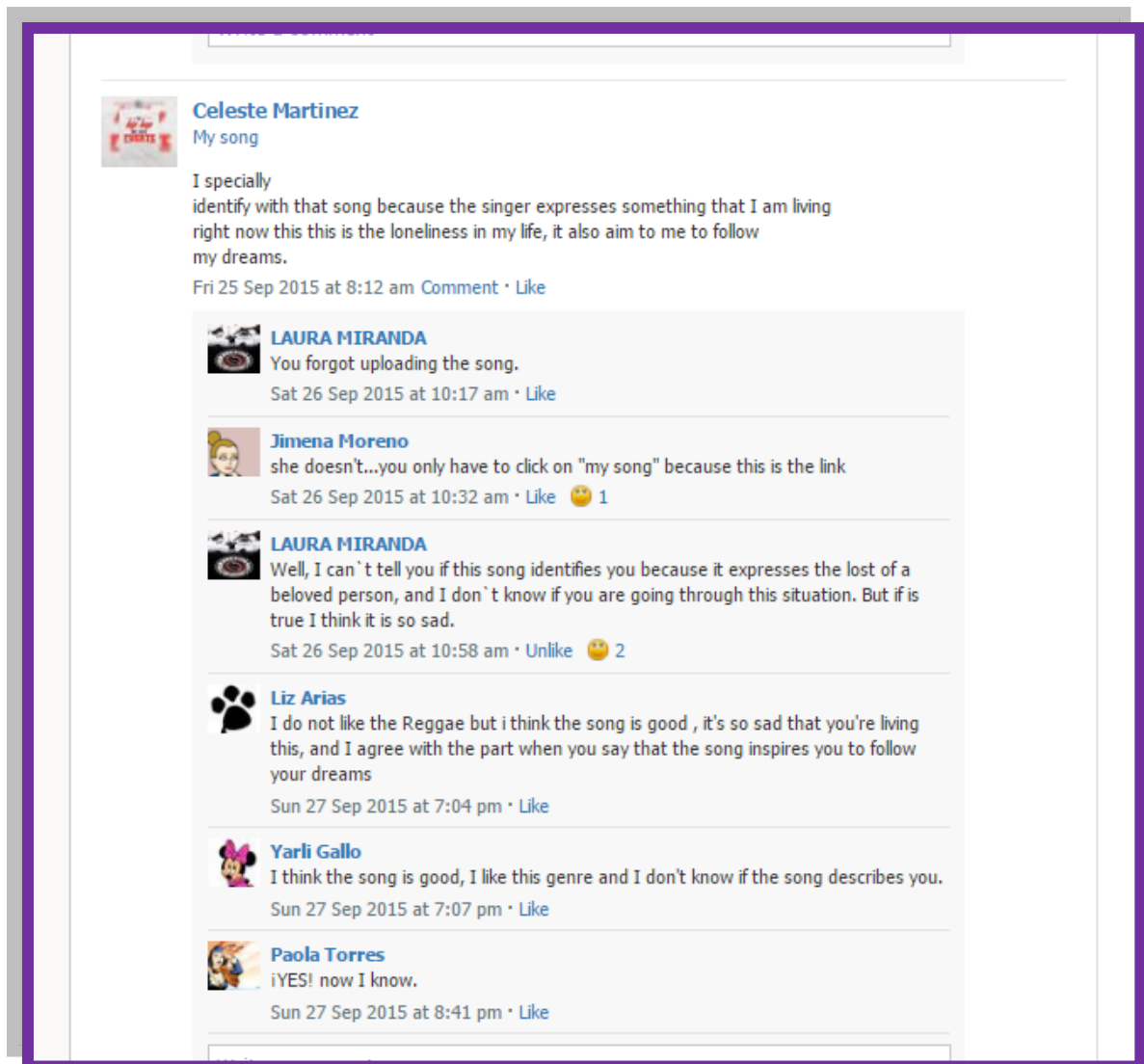


Figure 3.

Reflecting about myself in a comic short story

The third stage consisted of the creation of students' comics about situations they consider relevant or they like the most. In this activity learners used a free application named "Bitstrips" that are instant comics starring student him/herself and their friends. This application allowed them to express and portray themselves and their friends in a fun and visual way to communicate by creating their own avatars. Students uploaded their comics in Schoology to be read for their peers.

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Creating individual stories implied using simple present and simple past. Additionally, the teacher taught a lesson about coherence and cohesion patterns for students to consider when writing their text about personal facts and experiences from childhood that were performed using Bitstrips (see Appendix 4). The individual stories were first read by the teacher to provide feedback to form and content and then they were uploaded in Schoology for everybody to read and comment. To illustrate the activity a graph is presented:

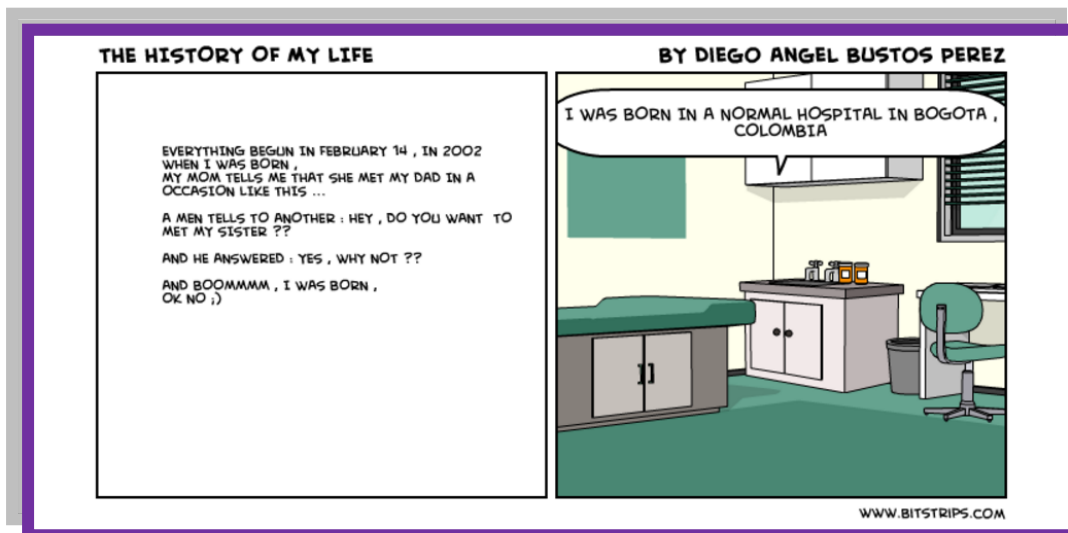


Figure 4.

Enjoy reading my classmates' comics

In the fourth stage students had the opportunity to read the information posted in English from their peers' comics. This activity allowed students to get familiar with situations their classmates experienced and to write down their opinions in the online learning environment. Moreover, the comments peers made to students' comics evidence that they enjoyed reading them and that they comprehended the stories. Below I show some examples of peers' comments.

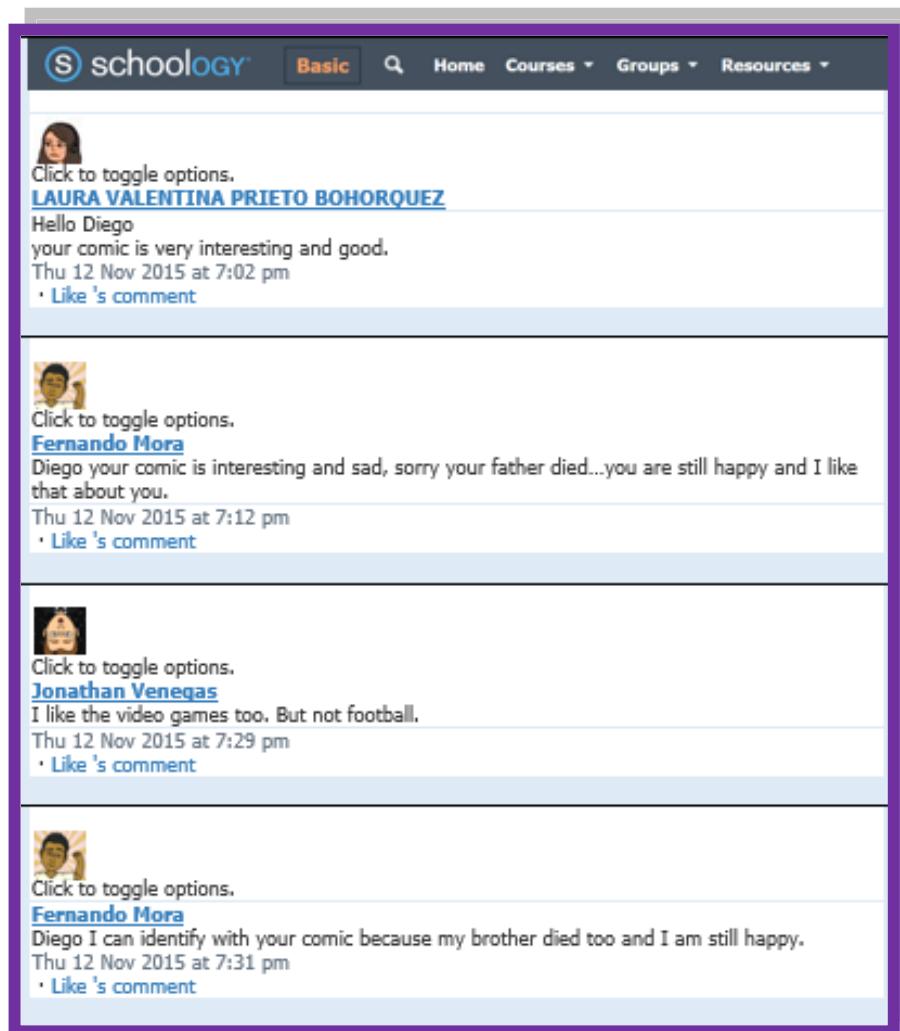


Figure 5.

Making my personal video

In the fifth stage, students put into practice their creativity by making a short video, showing a personal situation they wanted to share. In this opportunity learners were free to decide if they wanted to work with their classmates or if they preferred to work alone. In this process, students prepared a script of a story and they decided the format in which the story was told. Some videos were presented by selecting pictures and images that illustrate a situation. Students recorded their voices by using audacity that is a software to record voice, and put the pictures and the voice recorded together in the movie maker windows

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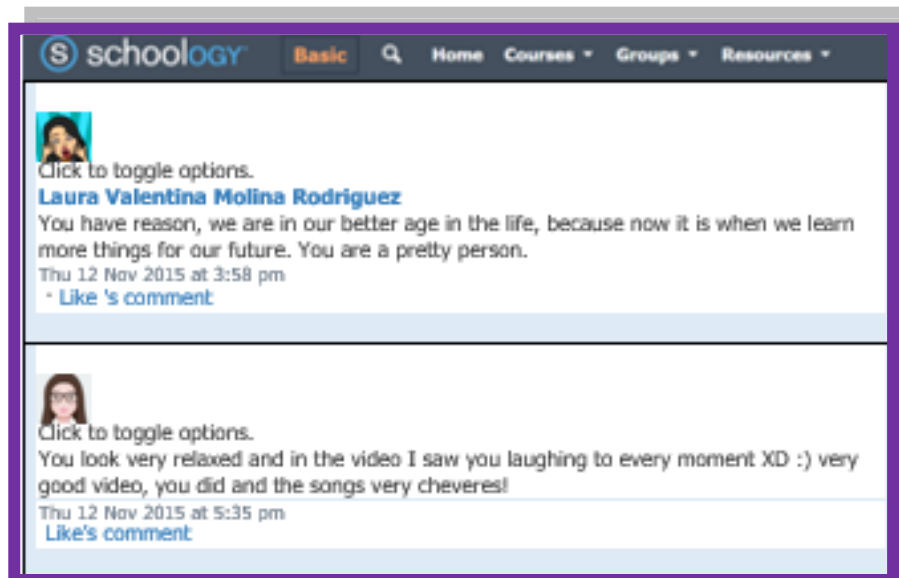
program. Then, they edited it and finally published the video in Schoology. Some students wanted to appear in the video, showing themselves and presenting their own stories.

Students were provided with feedback while writing the scripts, the teacher also supported them to focus on fluency and accuracy. (An example is available at

<https://app.schoology.com/group/360707743>).

Commenting my classmates' life stories

In the last stage students visited the platform to watch their classmates' videos and comment on them freely. The students also had the opportunity to practice English skills by listening to the videos, writing and reading comments and posting their insights in English. This activity allowed learners to know something else about their classmates' life experiences and insights and wrote down their own opinions on those experiences in the online learning environment as follows in the illustration:



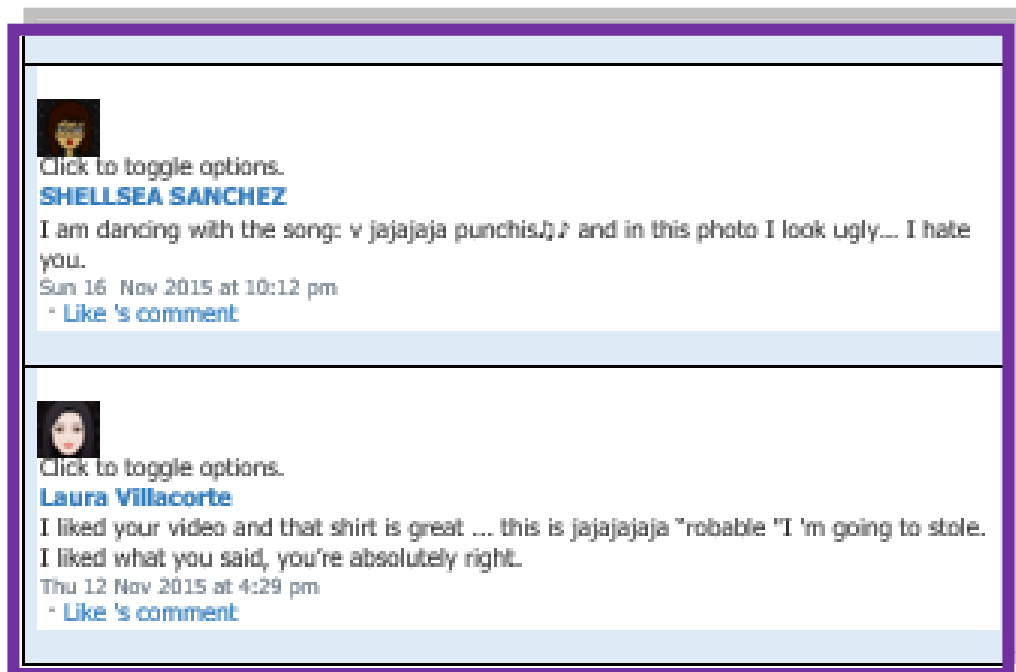


Figure 6.

In conclusion, the implementation of this instructional design provided the data necessary to achieve the objectives of the research topic presented in this study. The activities carried out through six stages in the online learning environment helped develop students' competences by creating their own profile, sharing their musical preferences, making a comic by using avatars and stories and participating in forums expressing and portraying themselves through literacy activities. Developing this implementation students had the opportunity to practice language skills by making sense of their reality, reading their classmates' world and connected it to English language while they were involved in different activities. The following chapter presents the process of data organization and management and the results of data analysis.

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Session	Stage	Activity	Final Products
Weeks 1 and 2	Building an online learning community	Activity 1: students create a profile and customize it uploading an image or avatar.	Sharing a short biography, daily activities and interests Forum discussion about commonalities and differences.
Weeks 3 and 4	Sharing my musical preferences	Activity 2: students upload a song that identify themselves and comment it.	Forum discussion
Weeks 5 and 6	Reflecting about myself through a comic short story	Activity 3: students create comic about common situations they live in their daily lives.	Students' Comics
Weeks 7 and 8	Enjoy reading my classmates' comics	Activity 4: students read their classmates' comics and write comments about their perceptions about them.	Forum discussion
Weeks 9 and 10	Making my personal video	Activity 5: students create a short video expressing personal interests and life experiences.	Students' video stories
Weeks 11 and 12	Commenting my classmates' life stories	Activity 6: students watch their classmates' video stories and write comments sharing insights and perception get from this videos in a forum.	Forum discussion

Each stage was applied during a period of two weeks and the whole implementation was carried out for five months.

Chapter V

Data Analysis and Findings

Data analysis is a way of “seeing and then seeing again.” It is the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the data to discover what is underneath the surface of the classroom. (Hubbard & Miller, 1993)

This study has been an extensive process in which I would say that understanding educational context is the most difficult labour teachers do. However, doing data analysis have provided me a broader view about my students' perceptions, thoughts, lives and context. I define data analysis as the enlightening process that allowed me to see beyond the events occurred in my educational setting.

In previous chapters I presented the theoretical support, methodological framework and the curricular platform that attempts to answer the following research question: How do EFL ninth grade students construct their social identity in a virtual community when they are involved in literacy activities?

The following chapter illustrates the processes I followed to order, structure, and assign meaning to the data (Hubbard and Miller, 1993) to answer the question above. After presenting the data management and the data analysis procedures, I attempt to describe the categories that emerged from this analysis.

Data Organization and Management

Data gathering in this study comes from the students' online artifacts and excerpts (Kozinets 2010), semi-structured interviews, and teacher's field notes. The data were collected from learners' activities developed in each stage, during five months of implementation. The activities included customizing a profile, forums participation, YouTube musical videos display, making instant comics starring student him/herself and

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their friends, students' videos about life experiences; and the comments they wrote on Schoology after doing each activity. Kozinets (2010) asserts that visual and audiovisual data as the picture profile, instant comics, students' videos regarding this study, are formats that often take rich information and emotional content. The instruments (artifacts, semi-structured interviews and field notes) were analysed to triangulate, validate and verify the gathered information. Microsoft Word program was used to organize, analyse and write the memos from the information I collected; the program allowed me to edit the screenshots from the students' online artifacts and excerpts and add annotations when doing coding.

Data Analysis Framework

In this qualitative study, data were analysed under the premise of Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory approach that consists of organised and flexible procedures for gathering and analysing qualitative data to construct theories based in the data themselves. I consider Charmaz's model more appropriate to make sense to the stories I found. I conducted this analysis through initial coding, focused coding and axial coding phases.

The initial coding process was the first step of my analysis. According to Charmaz (2006), initial coding suggests taking specific fragments, interpreting and naming them; it means doing initial coding is "seeing and then seeing again" (Hubbard & Miller, 1993), exploring deeply in what data is telling you. Even though it could be an exhaustive process, the more you dig into data, the more detailed meanings you provide in your analysis. I had to go back many times line by line to make connections among the different fragments of my data.

The second step of my analysis was focused coding, in which the large amount of data collected were classified, synthesized and ready to be grouped. I came back to the strong codes I found in the initial coding, established connections among those codes and

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organized them taking into account patterns Charmaz (2006). When doing focused coding, literature review helped me to identify or clarify the connections I established when grouping them.

The last stage of my coding process was axial coding that according to Charmaz (2006) link together categories to subcategories identifying special features and pieces of a category. In axial coding the researcher also gather together again the broken data during the initial coding and gives it “coherence to the emerging analysis” (Charmaz, 2006: 60). At this point, the relations between initial categories I had were considered to restructure and establish connexions to set all the emerging features in a coherent way. Theory was fundamental during the process of shaping the preliminary categories and subcategories that emerged during the analysis. Consequently, they are presented in detail in the table below.

RESEARCH QUESTION	CATEGORIES
How do ninth grade students construct their social identity in an online learning environment through literacy activities in EFL?	Multiliteracies as ways of expressing Identity.
	Membership developed through collaborative work

Chart 1 research questions and categories

Categories

In this section, I present the two main categories and the subcategories that emerged from data analysis taking into account Charmaz's (2006) framework. The categories also describe students' participation in an online learning environment. Some excerpts, from the

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semi-structured interview and screenshots from Schoology exemplify the evidences collected during the research process in the light of the research question posed in my study.

Multiliteracies as ways of Expressing Social Identity

The first category “*Multiliteracies as ways of Expressing Social Identity*” explains the way students portrayed social identities from visual, printed and media literacy. In this category, multiliteracies played an important role in the construction and co-construction of social identities since learners used multiple channels to portray themselves and their classmates in the virtual group. As Cope & Kalantzis (2000) assert, multiliteracies offer wider forms of representation that go beyond mere language, it allows the students to overcome boundaries to express themselves by using the unlimited possibilities.

In order to describe the category and according to the analysis, two main features emerged “*reflecting a concept about myself*” and *Others' concept about me*. Bearing in mind, the students' participation in the online learning environment, the results illustrated that the participants construct their social identities showing their own beliefs and emotions that are reflected in the images and comments they display in the group. Furthermore, identity defined by Hall (2012) is “the social positioning of the self and the others” (p. 86), in this sense, the other members of the online group established their own concepts about their peers, visiting their profiles and commenting on their walls about the work they did in the whole process.

Going through the first activity, students became members of an online group called “Manuela” in Schoology platform. Learners established membership by creating an account to join the online learning space as a members of the group. Additionally, they had the opportunity to upload a picture, an avatar they made up or an image, which they identified with. Huffaker, 2004 asserts that avatars are graphical drawings that represent an individual online identity in real virtual settings, they also have an effect on the others perceptions of the individual. See the following example (figure 7, activity 1, screenshot7).

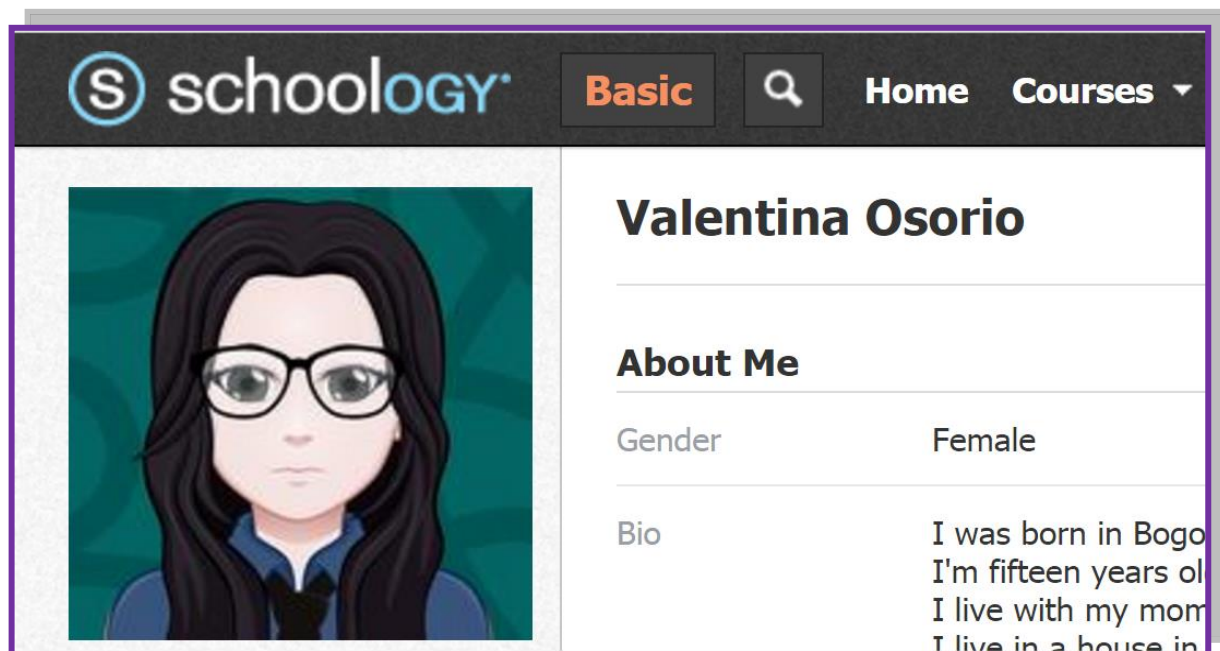


Figure 7.

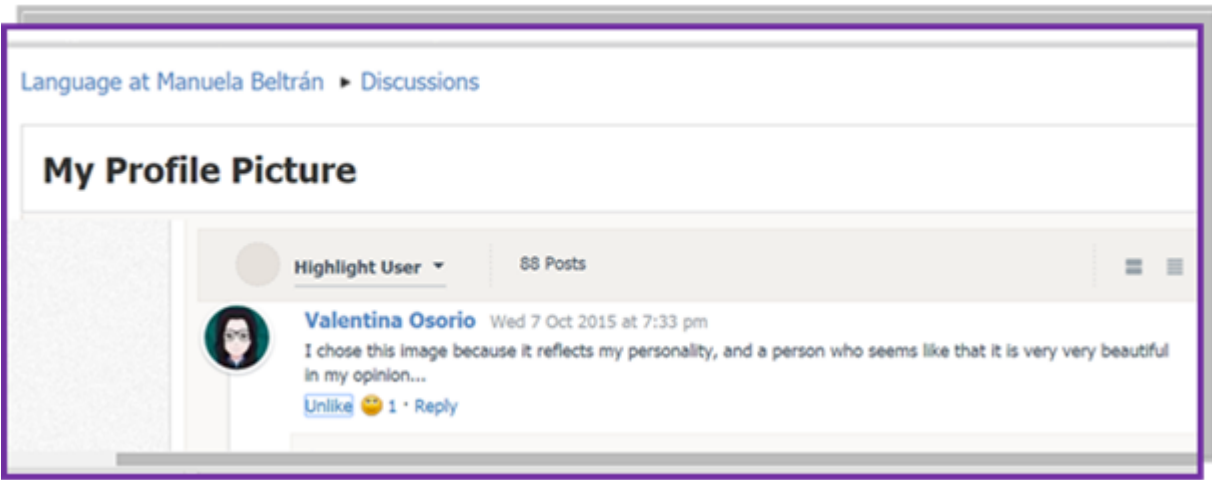
In activity 1, I observed how important was to use an image to be represented for each member of the group, to *reflect their own concept of self*, portraying these visual displays to talk about themselves. Deaux (2001) states that social identity is a way of defining the self and supporting self-esteem, “making the person feel better about the self”

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(Deaux, 2001: 5). Through pictures and comments using the foreign language, students represented their feelings, ideas and perceptions on how they see themselves.

The following screenshot exemplifies how they see themselves and their own concept of self they want to reflect inside the group. (Figure 8, activity 1, screenshot8)

Figure 8.



In the excerpt above, Valentina, like most all the girls in the group, expressed that she selected her avatar because it reflects her personality, she wants her classmates to see her as a beautiful girl showing a positive image of herself that reveals the highest self-esteem she possesses in her group. Additionally, she constructed her social identity by defining herself in a set of physical and psychological characteristics that provide an illustration of her own sense of the self and by taking into account peer approval about the image she posted. "Women work harder on picture profiles to impress others, especially in terms of physical beauty". (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008: 453)

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In contrast, most of the boys preferred to display pictures related to sports, music bands or football teams instead of creating an avatar like most girls did. Below there is an example of a boy's profile picture. (Figure 9. activity 1, screenshot 9).



Figure 9.

Boys were not interested in spotlighting their physical appearance as female students whose avatars were focused on their attributes such as long hair, eye shape, as so on. In fact, creating an avatar allowed them to be represented as they wanted to.

However, in the case of boys, it is interesting to observe that in the pictures they place, they seem to be proud of showing qualities that highlight their masculinities. “men are less concerned about what others think about them and put less effort into their profiles” (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008: 453).

Gender stereotypes are evident in students' representations of the self. Buckingham (2008) states that the construction of identity entails a process of stereotyping that allows individuals to differentiate the self from the other, and to describe themselves and their

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group. As for example, using male singers' images that represent a typical way of being a man, or football teams that represent power and force. (Figure 10.activity 1, screenshot10)

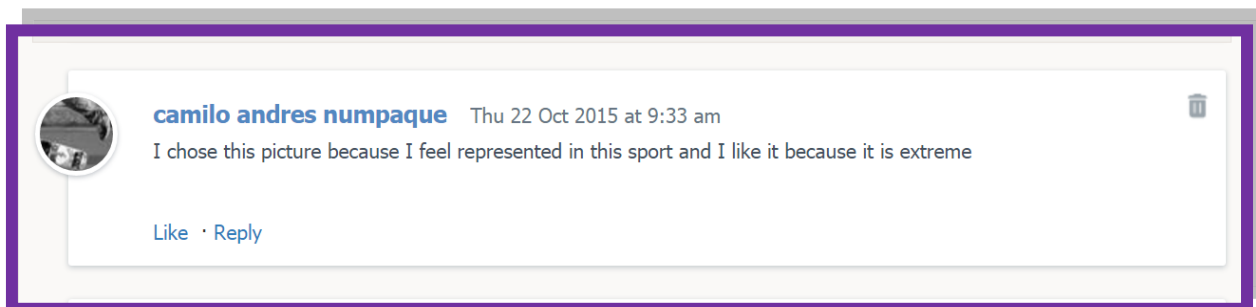


Figure10.

In figure 15. In the following fragment there is an example of how students construct their identity as English users portraying themselves as people who are good at other language.

Esteban Moreno: "Hello Laura your comic is a good. Is very interesting what you wrote. I understood English".

The student saw himself as a person who was able to read and write in English language. He perceived himself as a user of EFL and felt proud of his achievement because he belonged to a community where every single member had the same goal of learning EFL. The concept of the self is I am able to understand and communicate my thoughts, feelings and emotions in EFL. In this case, he is constructing his identify as a language learner. At the same time he is co-constructing Laura's English learner identity with his supporting comment.

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The first feature “*Reflecting a concept about myself*” in the category of Multiliteracies as ways of Expressing Social Identity, establishes that within the online learning environment students construct their social identity by analysing who they are, it implies a self-recognition of the individual in the social word, then, they portray meaningful representations that illustrated them exactly how they want to be seen by other members in the same community. At the same time this self- recognition allow them to ponder up about their lives and expectations and read of their contemporary situation and be more critical about the realities surrounded them. (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

The second feature in the first category is labelled “*Others' concept about me*”. It deals with the way others perceive and position their peers within the group. Social identity is developed and defined inside a social setting, by means of interactions that allow the community members to share one's values, providing personal information that is received by other members and at the same time, creating their own concepts and images of each member of the group according to the meanings and the concept of the self they want to communicate (Deaux 2001). The next excerpt illustrates students' perceptions and their own concepts about their classmates (Figure 11. activity 1, screenshot 11).

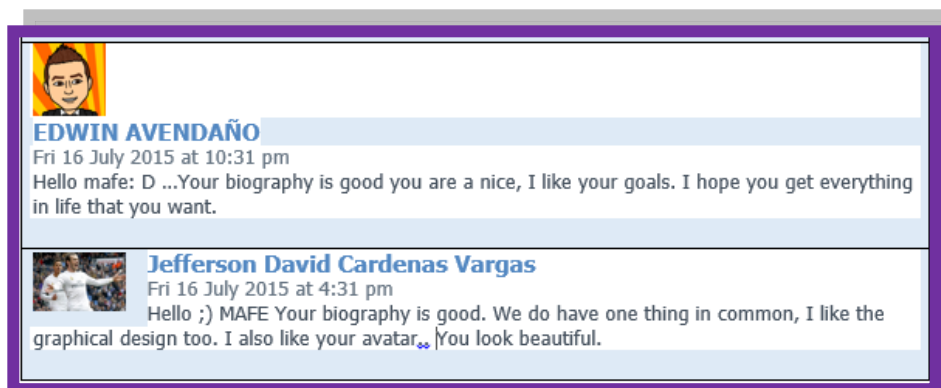
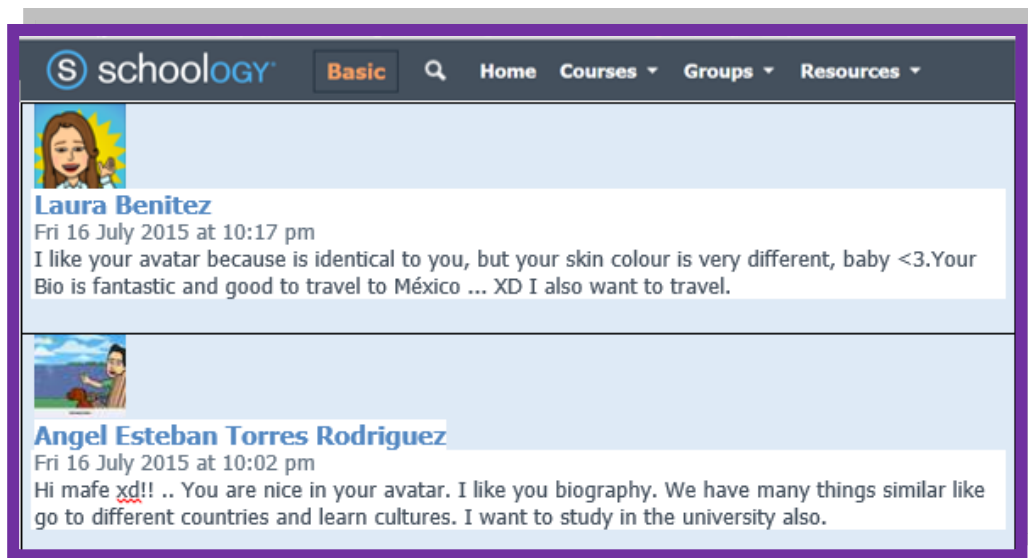


Figure 11.



The interactions among students evidenced that they perceived Mafe as part of the group by giving approval of her own representation of the self “you look beautiful”, “I like your avatar because is identical to you” and “You are nice in your avatar” illustrate Mafe is positioned and defined as a good looking girl within the group. In addition, Mafe’s peers identify themselves with her life expectations “I like your goals”, “We do have one thing in common, I like the graphical design too”, “Your Bio is fantastic and good to travel to México ... XD I also want to travel”. In this sense, students display themselves as real individuals of a social group sharing interests, features and views. Therefore, their social representations are assessed, perceived, or denied by the other members in the group (Jimenez, 2012).

The next screenshot represents an activity in which students were invited to view their classmates’ videos that were related to students’ interests or personal experiences they wanted to show to the group.

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Additionally, all members of the group were expected to write comments and perceptions about their classmates' work. Figure 1.6 and 1.7 display Shelsea's video and her peers' comments (Figure 12. & 13. Activity 5 & 6, Screenshot 12 & 13).

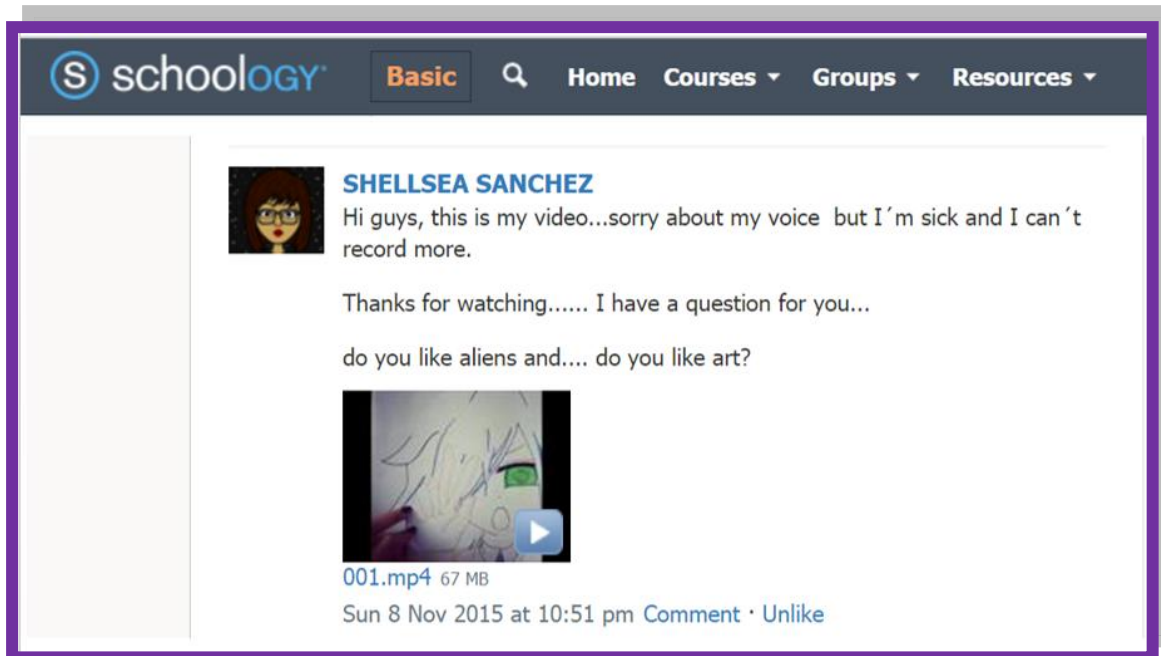
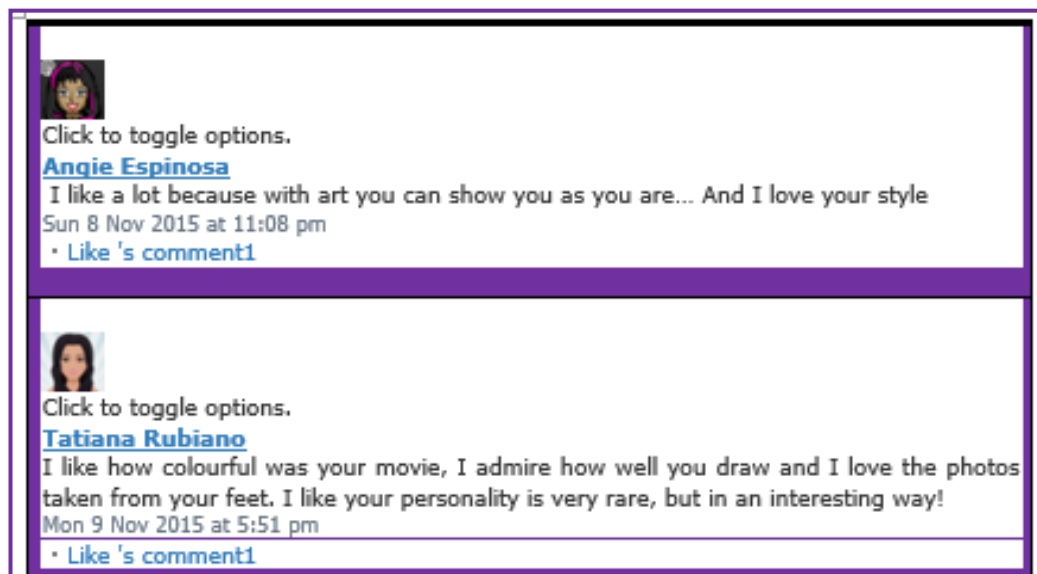


Figure 12.



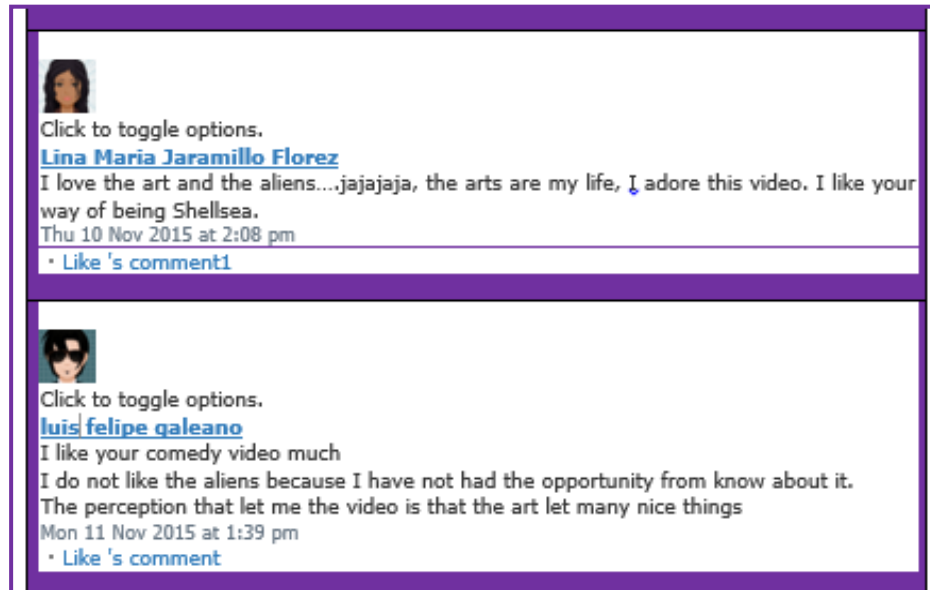


Figure 13. Activity 6, Screenshot 13 exemplifies group's reactions about Shellsea's video.

Students' interactions in this activity reveal that by expressing opinions, emotions, agreements or disagreements about the experiences they shared, learners were able to identify their peers from a different perspective. For example, Angie characterised Shellsea as a person who is defined by art “with art you can show you as you are”. Zhang, Jiang & Carroll (2010) states that “understanding other's roles and classifications helps people understanding the world, and sets a basis for further interactions.” (p, 68).

The concept students had about the others was shaped or reshaped through the participation in the online learning group. According to students' comments, it is evident that sharing experiences and interests about their lives was relevant to understand others as individuals whose motivations and values are common among all the members of the group “shared social identities endue social groups' coherence that is critical for the validity and prosperity of the group” (Zhang, Jiang & Carroll, 2010: 68).

Membership Developed Through Collaborative Work

The second category “Membership developed through collaborative work” describes the way students work collaboratively in the online learning environment contributing to their personal growth and the group strengthening as a learning community. The participants exchanged meanings of their surrounding world modelling their social identities and portraying themselves. To do so, they worked together effectively in each activity, supporting each other, providing mutual feedback, promoting reflection among all the members. All of these features brought about a sense of well-being and students’ engagement (Palloff and Pratt 2005). Thus, it is important to explain the characteristics that were essential in the development of the project.

Students were able to support each other with different comments that valued each individual or team’s work. Likewise, they became a big team in which the main concern was to do with literacy activities and uploaded them in the online learning environment to participate and interact with their peers. Moreover, it was a great activity for some students to change their minds regarding their perceptions about the others, as they reflected, many times, on their peers’ interests and life expectations.

Consequently, they showed genuine interest in their peers’ stories. For instance, in Lina and Angie’s comments it is observable the support towards their classmates’ work. Julieth also disclosed her admiration about the positive image she gained of her classmates that change her concept of them from shy to extrovert people. In Laura’s comment concerning her peer’s dancing, she exposed her positive concept of them that also change her preconception. Figure 14 illustrates students’ comments (figure 14, activity 6, Screenshot 14).



Figure 14

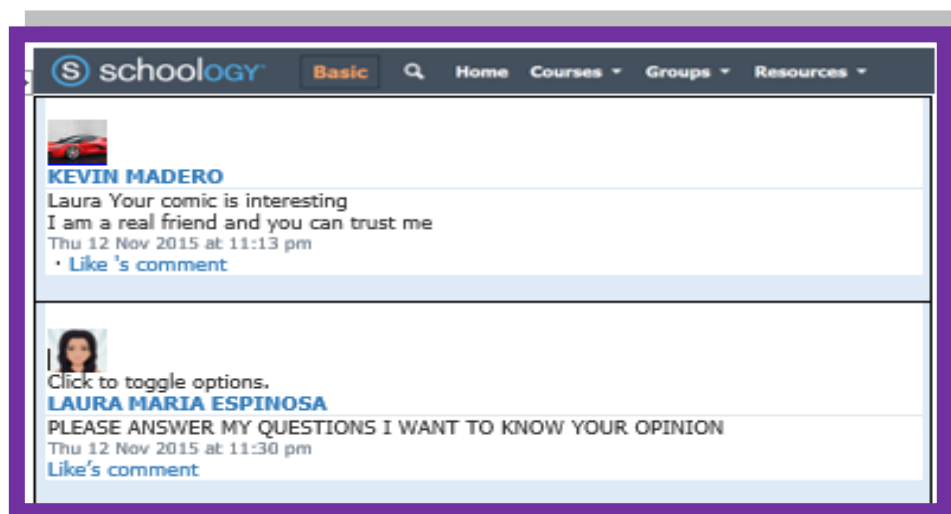
On the other hand, within the girls' posts, I can realized that they expressed positive comments as the boys did, but the style differed from boys' style. For instance, girls' use of adjectives like "charmed" and "beautiful" tended to describe more their feelings towards their female peers' work. It means that they were keen on the appreciation of the aesthetic part of the work, the beauty. While boys were interested in the content, understanding their peer's message, and the use of the language.

In this example, the sense of membership was presented by collaborative work patterns valuing other's work and appreciating what they did, too.

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In addition, the participants had the responsibility to provide feedback (Liu & Carless 2006). Following processes like critical reflection, listening to and acting on feedback, sensitively assessing and providing feedback on the work of others.

Accordingly, students could learn from the peer feedback and through meta-processes such as reflecting on and justifying what they did. Therefore, this activity was challenging for them because they needed to verify that their peers had written coherent texts. They had extra work to do check peer-editing and monitoring and reviewing each time English grammar and vocabulary to write appropriate observations in the postings. This feature allowed students to review constantly the English topics developed in our face-to-face sessions. There is an example of students' feedback next. (Figure 15. activity 4, screenshot 15).



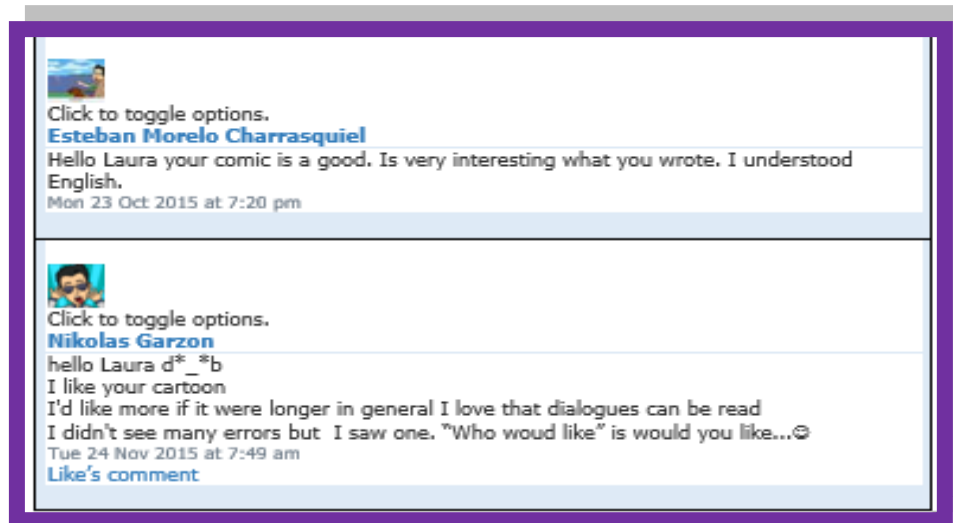
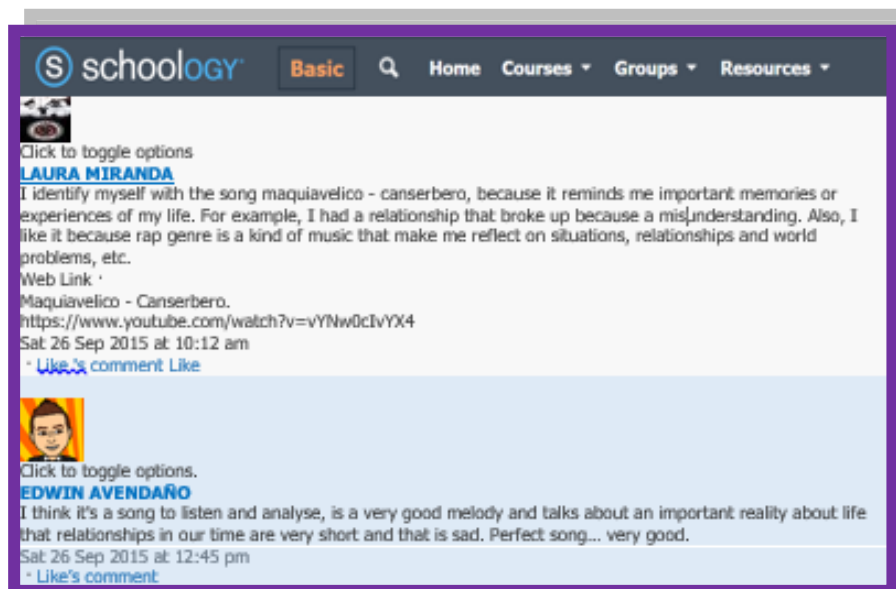


Figure 15.

One of the aims of the online learning environment was to promote reflection among all the members (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Accordingly, it was necessary to design activities that enable students to reflect upon diverse situations. For instance, they posted a song of their interest they felt identify with. This activity particularly evoked memories among the members and they reflected upon their lives, feelings and emotions. An interaction between students exemplifies these reflections. (Figure 16 activity 2, screenshot 10).



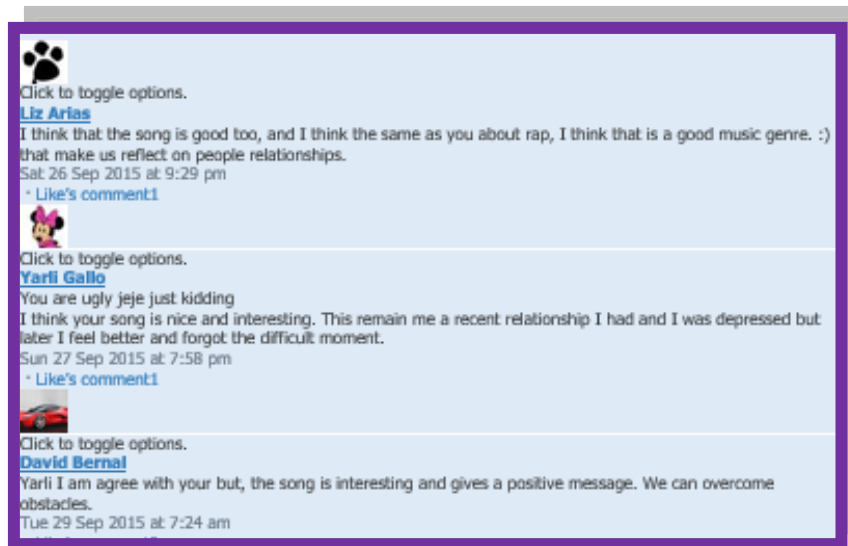


Figure 16

Edwin: “I think it's a song to listen and analyse, is a very good melody and talks about an important reality about life that relationships in our time are very short and that is sad. Perfect song... very good” Liz replies the comment: “I think that the song is good too, and I think the same as you about rap, I think that is a good music genre. :)” “That make us reflect on people’s relationships” and then Yarli says: “You are ugly jeje just kidding I think your song is nice and interesting. This remain me a recent relationship I had and I was depressed but later I feel better and forgot the difficult moment”, then David states: “Yarli I am agree with your but, the song is interesting and gives a positive message. We can overcome obstacles”.

“When students regularly document their perceptions of the contributions they are making to the ongoing exchange of ideas, they can learn an enormous amount about the conditions and behaviours that makes discussion successfully” (Preskill, 1999, as cited in Palloff and Pratt 2005:23)

All of the characteristics of collaborative work increased the students’ engagement and commitment because they recognized the multiple benefits it brings about. Working

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collaboratively strengthened students' learning process and improved their ability to share and to relate to each other. Also, it developed students' values such as respect and tolerance because they identified valuable characteristics in their peers that they had not realized before working together. The next example is taken from a semi-structured interview.

Erick 15: Pues yo conocí cosas que yo no conocía de ellos o de sus padres y de la forma tan bien como presentaron sus trabajos ehhhh, de que como unos hablaban de sus amigos otros de su familia y gustos mmmmm... de lo que les gusta hacer como su hobby.

(Erick' semi-structured interview, November 2015)

Finally, they experienced a sense of well-being generated during the process of working collaboratively. It depended on the sense of belonging that arose from a common commitment to openness and inclusivity (Palloff and Pratt 2005). Thanks to this sense of well-being, the members of the group were active participants in the activities proposed, demonstrating some features of a type of learner known as a “noisy learner” described by Nipper (1989 as cited in Palloff and Pratt 2005) as a successful learner in an online environment, one who is active and creative in the learning process.

“el trabajo que se hizo me pareció chévere y muy interesante porque se trabajó de una manera diferente y dinámica a la vez fue algo que no es tan común en un maestro que lo haga”

(Esteban' semi-structured interview, November 2015)

“Me pareció muy divertido, muy interesante, ehhhh, pude aprender a ahh, un poco a escribir en inglés, aprendí muchas cosas que no sabía, me pareció muy interesante porque hacíamos comentarios divertidos y nos reíamos pero a la vez lo tomábamos muy en serio” *(Ingrid' semi-structured interview, November 2015)*

The excerpt above informs me about how students constructed their social identity by participating actively and cooperatively in the learning community online. They

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supported, agreed or disagreed with their peers about the ways they behaved, thought and acted in the group and, in this way, they adopted or avoided these concepts, beliefs, expectations, likes or dislikes, shaping and reshaping their own social identity. In this sense, they needed to think critically about what all of these comments and posts could bring about in their own lives, if they decided to assume one of these options.

Regarding EFL learning, students portrayed English learner's language identity different from adults because they used language in a more informal way (Moje, 2000). For instance, in terms of the ways of expressing, the words that youngsters use are more colloquial, informal and, many times, modified or coined. In addition, students use of the language with different purposes but especially for expressing their passion, their beliefs and their ways of thinking.

In this chapter I illustrated in detail the results that emerged from the data analysis process and answer the question of how EFL students construct their social identity through literacy activities. Multiliteracies as ways of expressing Identity described social identity construction among EFL learners based on the way they represent themselves and the others in an online learning environment. Membership developed through collaborative work involved students in exchanging meanings, supporting each other, providing mutual feedback and promoting reflection among all the members. The following chapter presents the conclusions and the pedagogical implications of this study.

Chapter VI

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

The main purpose in this study was to explore the way in which ninth grade students construct their social identity in an online learning environment through literacy activities in EFL. To achieve this aim, an online learning environment was created on the Schoology platform which functioned as a social networking site in order for learners to interact, share their experiences and express themselves by participating in forums and creating their digital stories in a group called “Manuela”.

The pedagogical intervention referred to the following six stages: *building an online learning community, sharing my musical references, reflecting about myself through a comic short story, enjoy reading my classmates' comics, making my personal video and commenting my classmates' life stories.*

Results showed that multiliteracies played a remarkable role in students' social identity construction since they represented themselves by using multimedia applications such as avatars, images, pictures, comics and videos, talking about themselves, expressing their thoughts and their experiences.

Purpose	Research Question	Research Objectives
To propose literacy activities in an online learning environment in order to use English and ICT as a means of interaction and self-expression among learners.	How do EFL ninth grade students at a public school in Bogotá construct their social identity in an online learning environment through literacy activities?	---To explore the way in which ninth grade students construct their social identity in an online learning environment through literacy activities in EFL. ---To describe EFL students' participation in an online learning environment through literacy activities.

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The participation in forums by writing and reading comments enhanced EFL skills while students were portraying themselves and their classmates. Thus, they captured notable meaning making representations of the surrounding world within the online group.

The first category “Multiliteracies as ways of expressing Social Identity” demonstrated the importance of multiliteracies with regards to the construction and co-construction of social identities by multiple channels like visual, printed and media literacies. From this activity two main features emerged: reflecting a concept about myself and Others’ concept about me. In the first feature, it is important to highlight that the participants constructed their social identities providing beliefs and emotions by means of diverse images and comments in the group. All members of the online group constructed concepts about their peers when they observed their profiles and commented their impressions about students’ works. Based on multiliteracy activities learners established membership in the online group.

Correspondingly, they uploaded a picture, created an avatar or selected an image to be identified with. All of these images represented an individual online identity in real virtual settings with the purpose of having an effect on the others’ perceptions of the individual. Using images to reflect on learners' concept of self is highly important for group members to represent themselves. Through pictures and comments using the foreign language, students represented their feelings, ideas and perceptions on how they see themselves.

Gender stereotypes are evident in students’ representations of the self. In this way, most girls chose an avatar because it reflected their personalities. Girls wanted their classmates to admire their physical appearance. This fact revealed the highest self-esteem most girls possess within the group. Also, they define themselves with specific

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psychological characteristics that provided them a sense of the self. In contrast, most boys showed themselves as being very proud of their masculine qualities. Boys preferred to display pictures related to music bands, sports or football teams.

Within the online learning environment there was a self-recognition of the students as individuals in the social world. Therefore, they showed meaningful images that represented their personality as they want others to see them. Most of the group members wanted to portray positive images of them that disclosed a high self-esteem.

“Others’ concept about me” established the way others perceive and position their peers in the group. Additionally, social interactions constructed and defined social identity. Those interactions allowed the community members to share values and personal information, to create their own concepts and images of each participant. Also interactions permitted each member to agree or disagree with another peer’s representation of the self.

In addition, students showed themselves as real individuals of a social group that share interests, characteristics and opinions. Therefore, their social representations were assessed, recognized, or denied by the other members in the group (Jimenez, 2012).

Expressing opinions, emotions, agreements or disagreements about shared experiences permitted students to recognize different perceptions about their peers. In other words, participation in the online group shaped or reshaped others’ image.

The second category “Membership developed through collaborative work” described how students worked collaboratively in the online learning environment contributing to personal and collective well-being and strengthening of the learning community. By interacting, the participants exchanged meanings of their contexts and modelled their social identities. They worked together supporting each other, providing mutual feedback and promoting reflection. Collaborative work increased the students’

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engagement and commitment regarding their students' learning process. Supporting each other improved relationships. Students' comments valued each individual or team's work fostering students to create worthy activities and an interesting blog. Students changed their perception about others by reflecting on their interests and life expectations. It was interesting for all the group members to recognize their peers' qualities and values.

Providing feedback allowed students to increase their EFL level because they had to review English grammar structures and vocabulary worked in face-to-face sessions to write appropriate observations in the postings.

Promoting reflection was achieved by designing activities with themes that enabled students to reflect upon diverse situations. In addition, it developed students' values such as respect and tolerance towards their peers. Finally, they experienced a sense of well-being generated during the process of working collaboratively that permitted them to be active and creative in the learning process.

In conclusion, this research study tended to explore the way in which ninth grade students construct their social identity in an online learning environment through literacy activities in EFL. The main way to accomplish this aim is applying multiliteracies to foster students' participation and collaborative work in the construction and co-construction of social identities. Finally, it encompasses some pedagogical implications stated below.

Pedagogical Implications

This research study contributes to the educational setting by unfolding the forms in which EFL learners construct their identities in an online learning environment. Within this online learning environment, multiliteracies played an important role because they provided a variety of pedagogical possibilities to improve the EFL teaching and learning in my context. For example, the texts students created acquired oral, visual, audio forms that were

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fundamental in making meaning that transformed their social world. These multimodal representations of the language were displayed through digital media by revealing students' identities in both oral and written forms.

Multiliteracies also allowed the learners to work collaboratively sharing different experiences as language learners. Students' interactions afforded more opportunities to practice the foreign language. The online environments provided learners the opportunity to "learn, raise awareness and propose changes by studying social and cultural issues critically" (Medina, Ramírez and Clavijo, 2015:46).

Regarding social identity construction, the online environment provided an immediate space where they interacted whenever they wanted to. They enriched their learning processes and their personal development by expressing themselves, sharing life experiences, and recognizing their peers as unique individuals. In other words, it was by means of this type of environment that students also had the valuable opportunity to construct and co-construct their social identities recognizing the self and the others.

Having developed virtual and face-to-face classes allowed students and I to work together to improve EFL skills. The language instruction was more dynamic and meaningful for students and more rewarding for me as a devoted teacher because I could evidence progress among the learners. Furthermore, integrating technology within EFL literacy to my own pedagogical practices permitted me to better know the students, their context, their motivations and ways of learning to design activities according to their unique characteristics.

Nowadays, the students' needs are focused on digital media that enable them to accomplish more multifaceted and challenging activities.

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In this study, technology was a powerful tool because it allowed me to intertwine different modes and genres with a social interest which consisted of describing how social identities were constructed. Additionally, it also had incidence in developing learners' reflection, enhancing interaction and increasing students' participation.

Lastly, from my perspective as an EFL teacher, I would like to make emphasis in the use of social networks and Internet tools to enhance teachers' cooperation in sharing experiences to improve our teaching practices responding to the changes in the digital age.

Limitations

The study tackled different limitations related to the pedagogical intervention. First, the technological resources were not available as needed. As technology teachers were in charge of the computer rooms, they were forewarned in allowing other teachers the access to the classrooms. Additionally, the access to the web failed many times because the internet connection was poor at school or sometimes technology did not work as expected because computers were not updated thus students had to take turns to accomplish the activities.

Another constraint was the students' use of the language, as they presented a low command of EFL. It was especially challenging for all of us because they had to do the activities using English. Then, I needed to underpin English instruction and practice in the face-to-face lessons. The amount of work resulting was at times overwhelming as I had to prepare materials for face-to-face classes, to design tests to fulfil with the school program, to be homeroom teacher and researcher and to provide feedback to the learners.

Further Research Directions

Based on the conclusions and the pedagogical implications of this study, there are some suggestions that I would like to outline for further research.

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First, it is necessary that teachers learn to use diverse modes of communication for classroom learning by integrating new literacies in the school curriculum. It may Reinforced students' literacy practices by providing pedagogical opportunities that engage them in knowledge particularly in Colombian context. The impact of online learning environments is vital to development learners' identity and investment. Secondly, using media literacy that permit them face-to -ace interaction in synchronous would be interesting factor to enrich this type of work. Finally, it is necessary to employ other approaches to analyse data because many important features like gestures, emoticons and symbols that are included in semiotic ambits, are not taking into account in the data analysis.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Consent Form

CARTA DE AUTORIZACIÓN

Bogotá, 27 de abril de 2015

“Identidad social en un ambiente de aprendizaje en línea como medio para mejorar de prácticas de alfabetización en inglés como lengua extranjera”.

Estimados padres de familia:

Reciban un cordial saludo. Me permito informarles que en el presente año me encuentro realizando un proyecto de investigación llamado: Identidad social en un ambiente de aprendizaje en línea como medio para mejorar de prácticas de alfabetización en inglés como lengua extranjera. Este trabajo es asesorado por la Universidad Distrital “Francisco José de Caldas” como requisito para optar al título de Maestría en Lingüística Aplicada en la Enseñanza del Inglés. El objetivo primordial es enriquecer el conocimiento que se tiene sobre los adolescentes colombianos, y así, mejorar las condiciones de aprendizaje virtual de inglés. Su hijo compartirá información acerca de temas relacionados con la identidad social a través de su activa participación en una comunidad virtual, llamada “*Schoology*” estos encuentros virtuales se llevaran a cabo dos veces por semana, donde se tomaran sus comentarios y sus entrevistas serán grabadas en audio. La información que obtenga será utilizada solamente con *propósitos investigativos* y estará disponible en el momento en que desee tener acceso a ella. El estudio que se va a realizar dará inicio en el mes de mayo y culminará aproximadamente en Septiembre. La información que se obtenga será utilizada para mejorar los procesos de enseñanza y aprendizaje del idioma inglés. Dicha información será confidencial y se usarán nombres

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ficticios para proteger la identidad del estudiante. Además los resultados serán dados a conocer a los profesores de la institución.

Si usted acepta que su hijo participe en el proyecto puede preguntar cualquier inquietud sobre el mismo a la docente, solicitar la información requerida sobre los avances y resultados del mismo y retirar a su hijo en cualquier momento sin que esto afecte su rendimiento académico.

Es muy importante contar con su colaboración y quedo muy agradecida por la respuesta oportuna.

Atentamente,

Jimena Moreno
Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas

Yo _____ identificado con Cédula de Ciudadanía Número _____ estoy de acuerdo que mi hij@ _____ del curso 903 tome parte del proyecto de investigación de la asignatura de inglés “Identidad social en una comunidad virtual como medio para mejorar de prácticas de alfabetización en inglés como lengua extranjera”.

Firma: _____

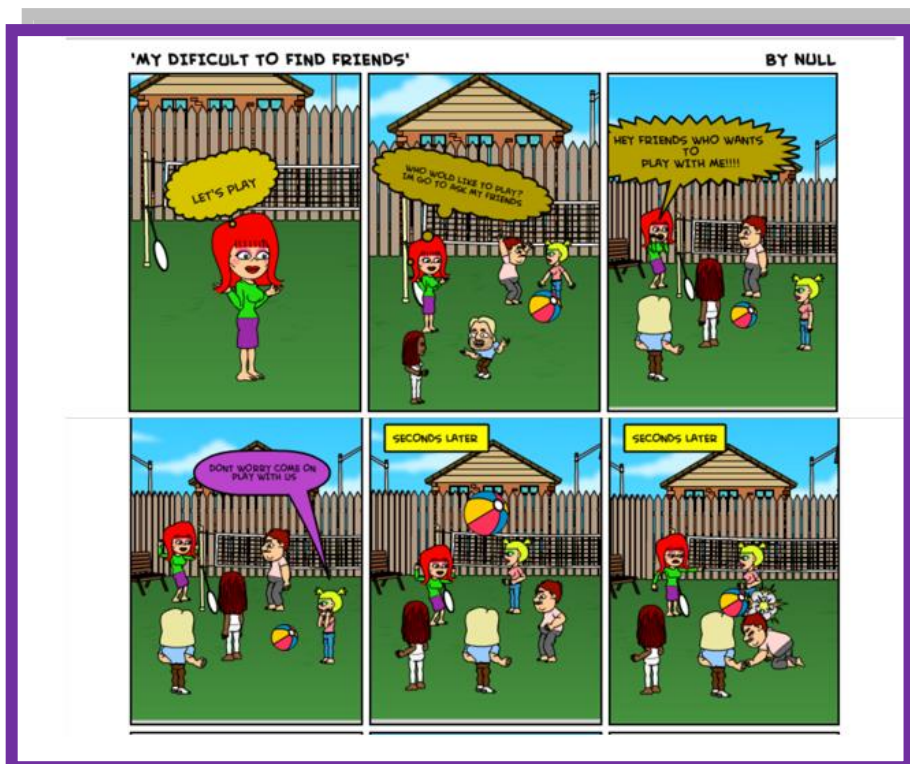
Appendix 2: Field Notes Format

School:		
Teacher researcher:		
Research question:		
Research objective:		
Activity:	Participants:	Session:
Date:	Hour:	Level:
Observation		Key Aspects to analyse

Appendix 3: Timetable of the Pedagogical Intervention

Session	Stage	Activity	Final Products
Weeks 1 and 2	Building an online learning community	Activity 1: students create a profile and customize it uploading an image or avatar.	Sharing a short biography, daily activities and interests Forum discussion about commonalities and differences.
Weeks 3 and 4	Sharing my musical preferences	Activity 2: students upload a song that identify themselves and comment it.	Forum discussion
Weeks 5 and 6	Reflecting about myself through a comic short story	Activity 3: students create comic about common situations they live in their daily lives.	Students' Comics
Weeks 7 and 8	Enjoy reading my classmates' comics	Activity 4: students read their classmates' comics and write comments about their perceptions about them.	Forum discussion
Weeks 9 and 10	Making my personal video	Activity 5: students create a short video expressing personal interests and life experiences.	Students' video stories
Weeks 11 and 12	Commenting my classmates' life stories	Activity 6: students watch their classmates' video stories and write comments sharing	Forum discussion

		insights and perception get from this videos in a forum.	
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Appendix 4: Student's Comic sample

