

Becoming a Part of a "Community" Online in Order to Acquire Language Skills

By Leigh Thelmadatter, Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, Mexico
leigh@itesm.mx

It is a common belief among foreign language students that one needs to go to the country where the language is spoken to really master it (Carter, 1999). Students may not be that far off the mark. Sociocultural theory, which goes back all the way to the work of Vygotsky and Piaget, stresses the need for socialization and acculturation (adapting to the norms of a new or foreign community) for all learning in general and for language learning specifically. Socialization and acculturation are the processes by which human beings learn the rules and norms they need to function in a certain social group or community, whether that community is a country, a group identified by race, ethnicity, religion, etc. or a common goal such as a profession (Lantolf, 2006). However, for foreign language learners, the problem has always been how to get or duplicate that experience. Second language learners who learn a language in the country where it is spoken can simply walk out of the classroom and be presented with opportunities to put what they have learned to the test to reinforce and expand upon abstract concepts, such as grammatical rules through socialization. In other words, students can go test what the teacher taught them in the real world. Generally, foreign language learners in their home country have no such opportunity. Outside of the classroom, there is no opportunity and no need to do much more than what is necessary to succeed in the classroom environment, as it is the only "culture" they need to adapt to. Second language learners, on the other hand, have the opportunity and the need to do more than just simply pass tests. They need to survive in a wider environment, and the purpose of the classroom is to be able to do that more quickly. So for the foreign language learner, the need to adapt ends upon leaving the classroom while for the second language learner, the need begins there.

With such motivating factors (or lack thereof), it becomes clear why foreign language learners can be at such a disadvantage. This is not to say that attempts to imitate real world situations, such as conversation round tables, are completely useless; however, they suffer the same problem as more traditional classroom instruction - the restriction to an academic environment, usually with fellow students and teachers, who, more often than not, speak the students' native language as well. So we return to the essential element that the classroom lacks: contact with social situations in which the student must use the target language in order to communicate and adapt. Prior to the Internet, such contact was necessarily expensive (travelling or even talking by telephone) or extremely slow (communicating with pen pals). However, now some options exist that not only

permit students to interact with real speakers of the language in a cost-effective way, but have evolved to create social situations or communities in which the student can and must integrate. Whereas the telephone can provide immediate interaction with a member of the community the students are interested in, they cannot be a member of this community without being there. Through chat rooms, online role-playing games and more intellectual pursuits such as Wikipedia, the Internet provides "spaces" carved out of a larger "virtual world" in which communities are established based on common interests and goals. These communities parallel the communities humans create face-to-face, using one of the most basic tools we have - language (Moshell, 2007). While this use of language may lack intonation or visual cues at the present time because of technological limitations (however, these are steadily being overcome), the very basic elements that the second language learner faces naturally are found here as well: people outside the classroom in a situation where use of the target language is mandated in order to communicate and be accepted into the society, whether that acceptance takes the form of simply accomplishing a task like saying "hello," finding a needed object, or forming friendships with people thousands of miles away.

Sociocultural theory

What ties the various forms of computer-mediated-communication together with foreign language learning is concepts based on sociocultural theory. Sociocultural researchers take no interest in grammatical or other mechanical issues associated with language but rather are interested in how it functions for communication and how a learner develops confidence using this tool. The goal of teaching or learning in a classroom environment is to allow students to master rudimentary concepts such as grammar more quickly than they could by simply figuring out the rules on their own, but always with an eye toward the ability to use these concepts outside of the classroom, unaided by a teacher. The proof that the students have learned is not shown by passing a test, but rather by showing that the students can use what they have learned outside of the classroom. The goal of learning in general is to become a functioning and contributing member of a community, whether that community is another country or a member of a profession. Therefore, learning is social first, and learners themselves need to be active by interacting in their learning environment and that learning environment needs to be the "real world" or barring that, something that simulates it as closely as possible (Lantolf, 2006). The important thing to note here is that language needs to be used as a tool, a means to achieve a goal, not simply the goal itself. And like any other tool, language needs to be employed for the purpose it is designed for in order to be mastered. That use is communication with members of the target community the learner wants to be associated with. However, by virtue of it being "foreign," the target language is not being learned in the geographical region where it is commonly used. Assuming that the vast majority of foreign language learners

cannot travel to another country to “properly” learn the language, what can be done?

Virtual communities

Therefore, according to sociocultural theory, the learner needs to have some kind of community to adapt and integrate into in order for learning to take place. The term “community” like many other sociological concepts has problems with inconsistency and ambiguity and true consensus for a scientific definition does not exist. However, most sociological definitions of the term include: people in a group, social interaction and some kind of common tie or ties as well as the sharing of a “territory” to create and maintain social cohesion (Hamman, 1997). In communities that exist in the physical world, it is not difficult to see how all of these tie together, whether that community is a country or a group of English-as-a-foreign-language teachers who have a convention once a year. So when foreign language students feel the need to go to another country to truly learn the language, they look for ways to involve themselves in social interaction with a group of people who congregate in a specific place and have the common tie of using the target language. Without being physically present, is there some other way to (re)create such conditions?

Internet-based resources may prove to be the next best thing to physically being in another country. The use of media such as chat rooms, online role-playing games and Wikipedia can provide foreign language students “communities” in which they must use the target language for authentic purposes. The idea that media could help define new communities is not really new. Media such as newspapers, television and telephones have been studied sociologically for their effects on consciousness-raising in large-scale communities such as nations (Anderson, 1991). The difference with the World Wide Web is that not only can people in different physical locations be in low-cost long-term contact, but more importantly, the Internet provides tools such as web pages and chat “channels” as kinds of “territories” for groups of people to claim and organize as their own. Even though such spaces are mostly imagined, with possibly as little as a white box with words and a name on the screen, virtual communities evolve organically and most often by the exact same mechanisms used in the real world such as assigning roles and recruiting members by association. And like any other community, the use of language is essential. Most of the peculiarities of online communication, like the use of icons, called “emoticons” (e.g. :D) have been developed to fulfill the same functions as intonation and body language. These are agreed upon by the evolving community (Breeze, 1997).

The use of the term “virtual community” goes back to a book of the same name written in 1993 by Howard Rheingold. In this book, Rheingold talks about the interaction and emotional attachments he had online since 1985 when he

discovered WELL ("Whole Earth 'LectronicLink")—a computer conferencing system with chat and email capabilities. Then he makes comparisons of the well-known and often-used tools at the time—email, online conferencing, MUDs and MOOs (early forms of virtual reality environments where multiple users are connected simultaneously) with more familiar ways of forming communities to show that the same basic dynamics apply. Rheingold defines virtual communities as "... social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 1993). What makes virtual and "real-world" communities equal are the processes we use to form them, to maintain them as well as the motivating forces such as the need to be accepted by people who become important to us. Almost all of these processes and forces take shape using language appropriately to attain the desired social acceptance.

Types of online communities to explore

Computer and Internet technology have become a lot more powerful since Rheingold started experimenting with online communities in 1985. Interaction time is now faster and new ways of communicating have become available. However, English students at ITESM - Campus Toluca in Mexico using chat rooms, online role-playing games and Wikipedia, report very similar experiences to Rheingold's: making friends and caring about what goes on in their lives, with positive results, as will be seen below. They also report that combined with their prior knowledge of how crucial computer skills are in today's world, being part of an online community increases their motivation as they have the chance to talk to people all around the world. This echoes ideas and results that have been previously reported by research such as Warschauer's (1997) in the 90s and Moshell's (2007) in the 21st century. Chat rooms, online role-playing games and Wikipedia were chosen as the media to use for these students because most students had already had some experience with all three, although probably not for the same purposes and intensity as they would have as part of their English classes.

Chat rooms

This online resource has withstood the test of time but with some new twists. The basic white box with black text (or vice versa) still exists but now usually comes with new bells and whistles, like options for multi-colored fonts and images. MSN Messenger is probably the best-known chat program and is often-used by students, but I would like to focus on those chats that cater to EFL learners as well as on some really new and innovative ideas. Dave's ESL Café (<http://host8.123flashchat.com/eslcafe/>) is one of the older resources on the web for both EFL students and teachers. It and the newer ESL Clubhouse Chat (<http://www.englishclub.com/esl-clubhouse.htm>) are probably the best resources

for students at the intermediate to low-advanced levels. Both are designed specifically for language learners and both are moderated. This means that if participants (community members) are being abusive, they can be kicked out of the chat room, thereby creating a safer, more comfortable learning environment. The only drawback to these chatrooms could be the lack of native English speakers who participate and the temptation to chat in one's native language if and when the opportunity arises.

As a result of advances in technology, two other chat options that did not previously exist are voice-chat, and chat based on a three dimensional (3D) environment. An example of the first is Skype (www.skype.com), whose format intends to mimic that of a telephone, with the added bonus of having text chat to accompany it. In fact, for a fee one can dial a real telephone from the computer on Skype. Added features include search functions, where users can search for chat partners based on language spoken, location, sex, and age and a text chat option, which makes a convenient back-up when users encounter pronunciation difficulties. The major drawback for voice chat programs like Skype, MSN and Yahoo voice-chat is that they use a lot of bandwidth. Wide scale use by students may therefore not be feasible. Secondly, unless one uses a web-cam, which uses even more bandwidth, students are limited to a disconnected voice with no visual cues, much like they would have using a telephone. Like a telephone, voice chat programs are limited to one-on-one communication only, not allowing for practice in group conversations.

Chat in a 3D environment still consists of a rectangular screen with words typed in, but in sites like Cybertown (www.cybertown.com), the chat is set in the lower half of the screen while the upper half is mostly taken up by 3D images of certain town locations like the main plaza. The program also allows users to build homes in the neighborhood of their choice as well as to get a job to earn money to buy virtual items from the markets and from other users. In this type of problem, the sense of physical location is duplicated as much as possible to simulate the experience of being present in a group or community. The images imitate spaces we have created in the physical world (like plazas and houses) with the goal of relating one to another in much the same way we are ordinarily used to.

Since 2003 at ITESM—Campus Toluca, students have been encouraged to use the above resources for various projects for various courses, including those in lower-level classes, with different teachers favoring different chat options. Of course, for use as part of a university course, an evaluation of the students' experiences becomes a necessity. Since the goal of the project is for the students to assimilate as much as possible into the chosen community, and to have authentic interaction with people outside of the classroom, evaluation needs to reflect this type of learning. The type of evaluation that seems to work best is a combination of a chart where students record short notes about each session's experiences and a short (150-300 word) essay at the end of the assignment period to allow students to

expand in more detail on the more interesting aspects of their interactive experience. Other forms of evaluation were tried, such as printing chat conversations and then having the teachers correct grammatical mistakes, but this practice was soon abandoned because it was found that students subsequently severely limited the way they communicated in order to avoid making errors. The reflective essays have the added benefit of monitoring how appropriate the projects are for students as students reflect on what they learned and why. Since 2003, various modifications have been made in these projects based on what students have written in their essays.

What students think of chat projects

One advantage of having students write short essays about their chat experiences is that it gives the teacher really good feedback about what is important to them. Chat is the most-commonly used form of computer-mediated-communication used at ITESM-Campus Toluca and we have had several years of student assignments to learn from. However, the results of projects done by the author's English Advanced A and Advanced B classes in the fall of 2007 can serve as examples. English Advanced A students did text chat using any chat program of their choice. They had to chat 8 different days for a total of 200 minutes. For English Advanced B, the requirement was a total of 120 minutes due to the fact that the students were limited only to voice chat. The only restriction on chat partners was that they not be in Spanish-speaking countries. Contact with native English speakers was not required because the global nature of English-language communication makes speaking with other non-native speakers authentic as long as the students did not share an L1 with their partners, thereby using English as a lingua franca. Evaluation was carried out by means of the log and essay combination mentioned earlier. English Advanced B students also wrote logs and essays about their experiences.

As can be seen in Appendix A, students in both classes overwhelmingly (over 85%) reported finding someone interesting and worthwhile to talk to even though a significant number found problems with finding someone at the beginning (23% in text chat, 45% in voice chat). The main reasons for the difficulty in finding someone were either no one was online (only reported with voice chat), people were not answering student-initiated conversations (31%), or worse, being sexually-propositioned or subjected to foul language (22%). One interesting note was that only 4 of a total of 82 students mentioned feeling rejected because of their accent or their nationality. The probable reason for this is that most students found chat partners initially by using the English-as-a-foreign language sites and the "tolerant" global nature of the World Wide Web. Both situations would lead to communities of people with more international mindsets because all participants choose to be members of a community where they are likely to encounter people different from themselves. In contrast, learners who travel to countries where the language is spoken are likely to encounter those who have no wish to interact with non-native

speakers as well as those who do. Many students also found subsequent contacts by meeting friends of their initial contacts, leading to social networking.

In spite of the initial problems they encountered, most students reported that the project was worthwhile. Most students went over the minimum time assigned. This is especially true in voice chat where the average amount of time spent online was 207 minutes whereas only 120 were required. This could be due to the motivating factor of having the added feature of intonation to make the experience seem more "real." A number of students reported using web cams with some of their contacts to further enhance the experience. The text chat results were not as impressive with an average of 229 minutes where 200 were required. It is not clear from the essays, however, if this meant that students preferred voice chat since about 7 out of 30 students from the Advanced A class (text chat only) underperformed significantly in the assignment in a number of ways in addition to the total number of minutes spent on the project. However, it is important to note that many of the conversations, whether in text or voice format, were about very similar topics and students in both classes chose conversation partners who were of similar ages and had similar interests, much as they would in any other situation. Many also reported the desire to continue contact with their chat partners after the end of the project.

Role Playing Games

Role-playing games (RPGs) are activities where participants become part of a story, usually a fantasy-type story, where they either work together and/or against each other. RPGs were originally played on paper with pencils and dice, but since the 1990s nearly all RPGs have become computer-based, with the computer acting as a player and/or referee. RPG scenarios can be as simple as Crimson Room's (http://www.fasco-csc.com/index_e.php) goal of escaping from a locked room, but more often the scenario is a quest or journey, where players become a fantasy character and must use their skills to obtain treasure and experience. Some popular online RPGs include: Fairyland (<http://www.1010game.com/asp/downloadpage.asp>), Runescape (<http://www.runescape.com/>) and the simply-titled Quest (<http://www.questrpg.org/>).

In most chat rooms, the purpose is basically just to talk, so the only thing participants see is a blank screen with words on it. RPG programs, however, need to display images of participants (usually as simple animated creatures), landscapes, and objects such as weapons and treasure to find and possess. These additions give a sense of physical space along with the ability to converse with other players. The context of a game/quest provides participants with a common interest - the development of the storyline of the game as well as the development of their own

particular characters. Communication, physical interaction and common goals are elements of community as noted above in the introduction.

Brian David Phillips (1993) explores RPGs and their ability to foster language acquisition in *Role Playing Games and the English as a Foreign Language Classroom*. The major advantage that role playing games have is that they contextualize language into functions such as buying and selling, making requests, planning strategies with other players and receiving instructions/training to do specific tasks, such as building a fire for cooking. Participation in an RPG mimics many real-world communicative situations, such as buying and selling (as well as a few not-so-real ones such as casting spells). Communication patterns must fit the paradigm of pre-established rules in order to be accepted by other participants and the computer and for the learner to advance in the game. Online RPGs provide an element called "cast members," who can be native speakers of the target language who provide interactivity and community for the learner. These cast members can be persons who participate specifically for the benefit of the language learner or can be incidental contacts (Moshell, 2007). However, a major drawback to RPGs can be the fact that the technological generation gap between students and teachers seems to be very wide with this type of activity (Brox, 2004).

As with chat projects, students also create charts to record notes about each time they participate in the game that they have chosen and then write a reflective essay. The purpose of these is the same as that required for chat projects: to record their experiences and then to reflect upon them afterwards. Like in chat projects, the essays have served as a way to evaluate the usefulness of using RPGs for practicing and improving students' ability in English.

What students think of RPG projects

Projects assigned using an RPG as a medium are evaluated in ways similar to projects based on chats. Students complete a log and an essay describing their experiences in the RPG and reflect on what they learned (such as new vocabulary words, learning from mistakes they made, etc.). RPG projects have been used with far less frequency than chat projects for two possible reasons: 1) since teachers, including the author, are not as familiar or comfortable with RPGs, they tend to be less comfortable assigning and evaluating them, and 2) RPGs require more time for both the teacher and the student to become familiar with the individual programs than chats do.

Student feedback on RPG assignments has almost always included comments about the difficulty of learning the rules of the game, which usually require a lot of time before one is able to actually play. Much of the reason for this is that new players must create their characters and learn certain "survival skills" like making weapons, cooking, earning money, etc. before they can even begin a "quest." In

role-playing games like Runescape (www.runescape.com), other players are online at the same time and one can chat with them to ask for help. Unlike chat rooms where the basic goal is to communicate, however, these players are more often interested in pursuing their own objectives, rather than willing to help a new participant. As Fernando U. put it, sometimes he received help when he asked for it and sometimes he didn't and he became frustrated. At one point in the game, when he was supposed to find a wizard for his quest, he was actually "screaming" (writing in all capital letters, considered rude in online communication) for help but didn't receive it from the other players. He reported that he did eventually find the wizard on his own but his frustration with not being able to connect to the other players was evident. Diego C. and Denisse R. reported feeling alone at times in the game even though they could see the animated icons of the other players around them on the screen doing their own tasks. It is not hard to see this kind of situation's similarity to real life. On the positive side, most players report enjoying the game after getting over the initial "culture shock" and becoming competent in the environment. Denisse R. reported that she "became accustomed to using rare (sic. "strange") words like "dagger" and "quest."

Most students who complete such a project often return to it if the option is offered in the following grading period, usually returning to the same game which they had begun. The reason for this is that they have finally learned the basics of functioning in that society and can enjoy playing the game and the stimulation it provides. By far the most popular game to return to is Runequest. What brings students back to these games is the integration and the abundance of visual cues as well as a well-defined structure. Upon returning to the game, these students report having a sense of belonging and knowing what they should do, no matter who else might be in the game along with them at any given moment. They also report that the game challenges their reading skills in that their comprehension is tested because they have to apply the information they read. Relatively few students who chose this option report finding people with whom they form friendships, however. This is because most conversations with other participants seem to be limited to the needs of the game. It is interesting to note here that while RPGs provide more community in the sense of common goals and a better sense of "territory" than chat projects do, they do not seem to encourage the formation of interpersonal bonds that appear to occur far more frequently with students who choose to chat.

Wikipedia

We have seen that students engage in casual "conversations" in chat room communities, and that role-playing game communities involve the student players in the pursuit of common goals in a well-defined setting. A further step in the extent of the student's involvement, but on a much more serious note, is participation in the Wikipedia community (<http://en.wikipedia.org>). As with chat and role-playing games, participants in the Wikipedia community can establish a

"presence" online via a "user page" and interact with other community members via "discussion pages." However, the common goal of the Wikipedia community is not simply to talk or to play a game, but rather to develop the now-largest encyclopaedia ever compiled. Because anyone can edit just about any page on Wikipedia, interaction in this community is much more complicated than that of the two previous activities. To fully acculturate into this community, one needs to become familiar with and accept a number of established policies such as a *Neutral Point of View* and *Verifiability*. All community members start out as "editors," and have basic abilities such as editing and creating encyclopaedic entries. As editors interact with other members of the Wikipedia community and make contributions (recorded under their name), they can gain a reputation as a trustworthy member of the community. With this status, they can be nominated by a committee of trusted Wikipedia administrators to join their group, giving the new editors additional duties and privileges such as banning those who intentionally and repeatedly deface entries—these are called "vandals".

Because of its complicated nature, opportunities to experience a larger community are greater. As in any other society, the newcomers have to adapt to the rules of the community they want to be accepted into. The English Advanced B class had their first culture clash when they discovered that registering as groups, as required by the class, turned out to be a violation of the Wikipedia policy of one user only to a username (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WP:U#Sharing_accounts). After negotiation with the Wikipedia community, a compromise was reached. All of the students had to register individually, and then "group pages" (e.g. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:School_and_university_projects/ITESM_Campus_Toluca/Appleteam) were set up to accommodate the group work aspect of our course.

Through these group pages, students quickly started connecting with Wikipedians, getting ideas and valuable feedback about contributions. For example, the entries about *Toluca*, *State of Mexico* and *State of Mexico*, were thoroughly revised by students with suggestions from "mentors" (see Appendix B) who guided them. This seems to be a major advantage of working with a well-structured site, such as Wikipedia. Conversations seem to be easier to establish, the more goal-oriented the community is and there is less chance of vulgar or otherwise inappropriate behaviour taking place. Wikipedia policy specifically states that talk pages are not forums for idle chat (although some does occur, of course). See Appendix B for a sample of Wikipedia interaction.

Wikipedia was the focus of the English Advanced B course for the period August–December 2007. Students were required to establish their presence in the Wikipedia community and to contribute successfully in several ways, including a final project in which they had to write a complete article for the English language version of Wikipedia from scratch. Students wrote reflective essays at mid-semester about their interim experience and, along with writing the article for the final

evaluation, submitted a portfolio documenting the creation, negotiation with me, their teacher, and other Wikipedians and revision processes leading to the final project. While based on the self-monitoring of their experiences in the community and reflecting on how and why they did (or did not) learn during their experiences, the evaluation process here was more complex simply because the interaction in Wikipedia is more complicated. In addition, students needed to produce a result in the form of a product (revision and/or creation of articles for the encyclopaedia).

What is the same about evaluation for all these types of community interaction is that students (and teachers) need to think critically, to analyze the time spent online to determine which experiences lead to learning, and to evaluate what they learned. Evaluation cannot be a mathematical formula; for example, of the number of vocabulary words and grammatical structures learned/used correctly. Instead, teachers need to use the reflective essays to determine how well students integrated themselves into these communities and converse in a meaningful way. This means communication not as an abstract exercise but rather as a means to perform a function (eg. make friends, complete a goal in a game or write an appropriate article). These are all socially-based tasks and require a community and integration into that community.

What students think of working with Wikipedia

The August-December 2007 semester was the first time Wikipedia was used as the basis of student projects and the community for them to integrate into. For this reason, we have only one semester's worth of student feedback to work with, plus we cannot reliably state that student evaluation of using Wikipedia is due to the inherent nature of Wikipedia or the issues commonly associated with doing a type of project for the first time. Because the course is part of an ongoing action research project on authentic writing, a survey was given to students one month (after the second grading period), two months (after the third grading period) into the project and after handing in their final assignments. Appendix D contains the questionnaire questions and results. The first part consists of four questions:

I feel that I am sufficiently familiar with Wikipedia to do the writing assignments for the third partial/ final project.

I enjoy the time I spend working on Wikipedia.

I like the mentors and other people I have met on Wikipedia.

I will probably continue to contribute to Wikipedia after the course is over.

Students ranked their agreement/disagreement with these statements from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). After the second month, students were

also asked (the second part of Appendix C): if they felt that their answers had changed from the first questionnaire and if they had or had not, why or why not?

Some change in attitude in favor of working with Wikipedia is seen in the results for the four statements, especially the statement about feeling familiar enough with Wikipedia to do the upcoming assignments. However, this change is not very significant and along with the statement of working with other Wikipedians online (statement 2), their answers did not change. I did notice that students seemed more comfortable with coming to me for help with writing their contributions, and often seemed disappointed when I told them to ask their questions to other Wikipedians or deferred to an opinion (about what is acceptable content) given by members of the Wikipedian community.

When asked if they thought their perception of working with Wikipedia had changed, opinions were nearly evenly split between those who felt more positively about the experience and those who felt the same or even more negatively. Those who responded more positively seemed to do so because they felt more familiar and comfortable working with Wikipedia. This is probably because in the second partial evaluation, students only created their own personal pages in Wikipedia, met Wikipedians online and learned abstractly about Wikipedia's policies and guidelines. It was not until the third partial that students made actual contributions by modifying an existing article, writing a "stub" (a very short, one-paragraph article) and translating an English Wikipedia article to be included in the Spanish version of Wikipedia. For those whose answers did not change, only three felt positive before the experience and still felt positive afterwards. Fortunately, only one student reported feeling more negatively about Wikipedia after one month of working with it. The rest were simply not persuaded that working with Wikipedia was worthwhile and/or that they were capable of participating in the community.

However, feelings were more positive about the experience once the final projects were handed in. The end of the semester survey contained two open-ended questions: "Do you think you will continue to work with Wikipedia?" and "After this course, are you more motivated or less motivated to continue studying/practicing English on your own in ways other than Wikipedia?" "Why or why not?" For the first question, ten students answered that they would continue with Wikipedia, thirteen stated that they would not and eighteen stated that they might. However, when asked in general if they would continue studying on their own, twenty-nine said they would; one said maybe and only one said no (due to time constraints). The most common reason given for why they would continue studying on their own was that the course made them see other ways to practice English and how they need to work to use it better for their career and/or in a globalized world.

Conclusion

The purpose of introducing projects based on chats, role-playing games and Wikipedia is to give English-as-a-foreign-language students an opportunity to be in situations where they must use English in a way that could mimic the experience (at least partially) they would get by being in an English-speaking country. Socio-cultural researchers, beginning with Vygotsky and Piaget, believe that learning is a process of adapting oneself to the intellectual and behavioural norms of the community that one wishes to be a part of. The notion of community, defined as a group of people who share a set of beliefs, expectations and behaviours (including language), can be applied to online, virtual organizations of people such as chat rooms, role-playing games and the pages set up on the Wikipedia website (aside from those of the actual encyclopaedia) to assist contributors in learning the norms of the site as well as in communicating with each other. The reason for this is that researchers like Rheingold have shown that the same kinds of intellectual and emotional connections that we form within our real-world (face-to-face) communities are formed in online communities as well, through the same mechanism used in both kinds of communities - language communication. Therefore, if the social connections are the same and are formed by the same mechanism, students should be able to learn and improve their language skills in online communities as they would in face-to-face communities. This is a significant help to foreign language students who normally do not have the opportunity to interact with a community that uses the language they are trying to learn.

Chat rooms, role-playing games and Wikipedia have been used at ITESM-Campus Toluca since 2003 to try and give students this kind of experience with language outside of textbooks and classrooms. They have been used with varying degrees of success. Chat rooms, the first to be tried, have been the most successful. This is probably because they are relatively simple to enter and to learn their social norms. They are also most familiar to students already, since most students at our campus are frequent users of programs like MSN messenger (provoking their prohibition in our computer labs). Since the paradigm of the interaction is familiar and easy to master, students can move on more quickly to the business of communicating in English, the whole point of the exercise. The problems with online chat have to do with the relatively unregulated nature of most chat rooms, leading to encounters with vulgar and sometimes bigoted people.

RPGs and Wikipedia do not usually have the problem of vulgar and bigoted users; however they do present the initial hurdle of becoming familiar with a complicated interface. This delays any significant participation in the community, as students spend time reading instructions, training to do tasks, and generally becoming familiar with how the interface works. In the case of Wikipedia, significant teacher intervention is necessary in order to help students integrate into the community in a meaningful way within the time constraints imposed by the grading periods and the semester. Their main advantage, however, is that they offer a more task-

oriented environment (more than idle conversation) requiring cooperation and sometimes competition, which can lead to leaving a lasting impression on the chosen community, like the articles for Wikipedia written by students in Advanced B.

For all three options, planning is crucial. Teachers need to have a good idea of what they want their students to do and why. In the more complicated online communities, direct intervention and help with the students' adaptation to the community may be necessary. How well the activity is planned and executed may have a significant impact on the students' experience in the online community and how much they learn in the end. For more complicated interfaces, this can lead to mixed results for students, especially the first time the activity is used in the course. However, good planning and appropriate preparation of the students for the probable difficulties they will face will help them overcome such inconveniences faster and keep them from getting discouraged.

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Appendix B

Sample of student/mentor interaction on Wikipedia from group talk pages.

From Appleteam

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_talk:School_and_university_projects/ITESM_Campus_Toluca/Appleteam)

Some ideas for articles that might need creating or fixing...

As a starting point, I (a mentor) first looked at the article for Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Education and noticed that it could use some clean-up and work itself... Some ideas:

The article is out of compliance with the Manual of Style in many instances:

It uses external links in incorrect ways.

It seems to be poorly referenced, and could benefit from correctly formatted footnotes and more references in general. See verification policy, citation guidelines, footnote guidelines, reliable sources guidelines for more information.

The article could stand to be expanded and then split. Wikipedia uses what is called the summary style; where a main topic article contains a general overview, and redirects readers to specific sub-articles on each topic. For some examples of some feature quality articles on similar schools that use this summary style well, see Cornell University, Texas A&M University and Indian Institutes of Technology. This last one seems the best to use as a model, since it looks like the Indian Institutes of Technology is organized along a similar model to ITESM.

There's some obvious vandalism in the article. See if you can spot it and fix it.

Also, as a stub, consider creating an article about your specific campus of the ITESM, again as part of making the main article comply with summary style guidelines. Just some ideas to get started. As always, if you need any help with this, ask here or drop a note on my talk page. --Jayron32|[talk](#)|[contribs](#) 02:46, 14 September 2007 (UTC)

From Lovely Girls

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_talk:School_and_university_projects/ITESM_Campus_Toluca/LovelyGirls)

[edit] Hello

I (a mentor) would be happy to help you get started on Wikipedia. Would you like to begin a new article? You may correspond with me here. Just be sure to sign your posts with four ~~~~. Thanks.--Appraiser 11:17, 13 September 2007 (UTC)

Hello. Thank you for contacting us. Yes, we (student group) are thinking about writing a new article basing ourselves in other articles. However we think we should start writing a stub about our topic (women in Mexico). Mary ann21 18:27, 13 September 2007 (UTC)Pr3TtY 9r!

I (a mentor) found a few stubs related to Mexican women whom I found interesting:

Maria de Lourdes Dieck-Assad
Karina Falcon
Maria de los Angeles Fromow
Flora Guerrero
Amalia Hernández
Maria Teresa Herrera
Marisa Canales
Olivia Trinidad Arias

I (a mentor) would suggest that you choose one that will have plenty of on-line research material to cite in your article. These could all potentially be expanded into more substantial articles. To create a stub, I would suggest looking at athletes who will be competing in the 2008 Olympics. Many of them probably don't have articles yet. Examples might be:

Carolina Valencia
Samantha Teran

The gymnastics team: Marisela Arizmendi Torres, Maricela Cantú Mata, Yesenia Estrada Martinez, Érika Mariene García Aguiñaga, Elsa García Rodríguez Blancas, and Yeny Ibarra Valdez.

Let me know what you're working on.--Appraiser 18:33, 14 September 2007 (UTC) Thanks a lot for the links. ŦŦ (a student) be looking through them during the weekend. However, I won't probably report back until Monday. Hitoko 05:38, 15 September 2007 (UTC) Hitoko

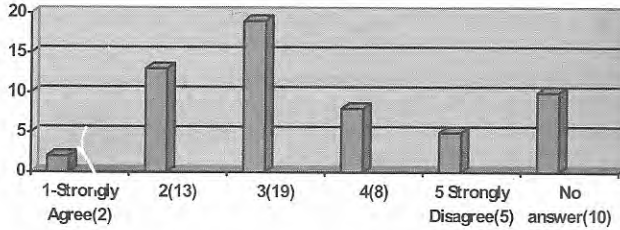
You might also look at Chicana feminism and History of women in the United States. I know these are articles about the U.S. and not about Mexico but I am mentioning them to illustrate the point that there are no parallel articles about the Mexican counterparts. There is no article titled Feminism in Mexico, Mexican feminists or History of women in Mexico. Of course, the articles that do exist about feminism in the United States are disputed and you might expect the analogous articles about Mexico to be disputed as well. Working on topics that are controversial can be frustrating because what you write is likely to be challenged, deleted and otherwise trampled upon. Nonetheless, I think these are important articles that need to be written. Are you game to take on this challenge?

--Richard 05:48, 15 September 2007 (UTC) (a mentor)

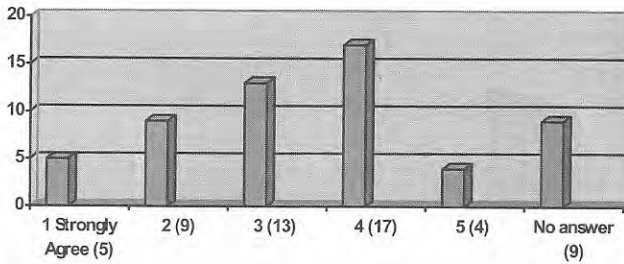
Appendix C
Wikipedia Survey Comparison

**After one month of working with Wikipedia (end of second partial)
(57 students surveyed)**

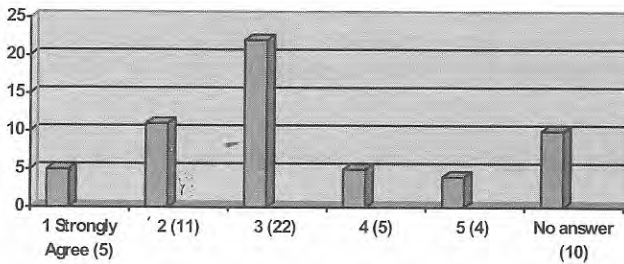
1. I feel that I am sufficiently familiar with Wikipedia to do the writing assignments for the third partial



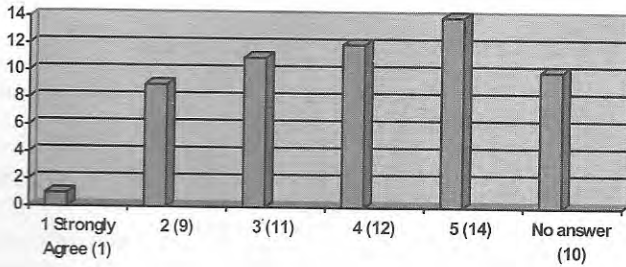
2. I enjoy the time I spend working on Wikipedia.



3. I like the mentors and other people I have met on Wikipedia.

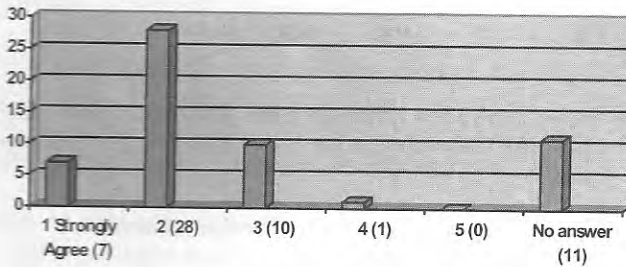


4. I will probably continue to contribute to Wikipedia after the course is over.

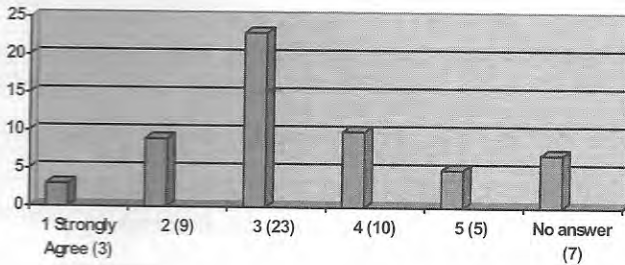


After two months of working with Wikipedia (end of third partial, just before doing the final project) (57 students surveyed)

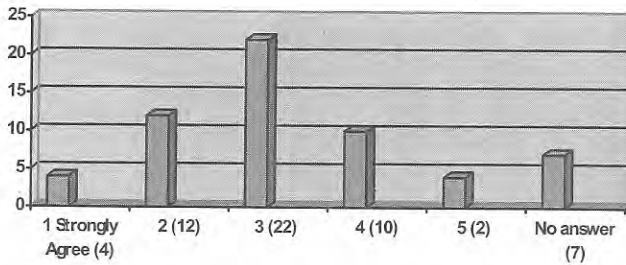
1. I feel that I am sufficiently familiar with Wikipedia to do the final project.



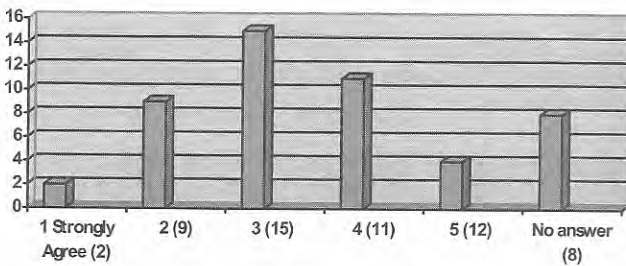
2. I enjoy the time I spend working on Wikipedia.



3. I like the mentors and other people I have met on Wikipedia.



4. I will probably continue to contribute to Wikipedia after the course is over.



Are your answers to the above questions different from those you gave after the second partial? Why do you think they have or have not changed? (57 students surveyed)

(Answers below are paraphrased to allow for grouping of similar sentiments)

No. of Ss	Item
18	My answers became more positive about Wikipedia (at least a little)
15	My answers changed because I am more familiar with Wikipedia
15	Working in Wikipedia is a good, proud, enjoyable, real, global experience
12	Doing the modifications and translation assignments in the 2 nd grading period helped me understand Wikipedia better
7	The experience improved/was more interesting in the 3 rd grading period
Total comments indicating change = 55*	
20	My answers are mostly the same between 2 nd and 3 rd partial
10	I still do not feel confident working with Wikipedia after making contributions
5	My lack of interest in working with Wikipedia hasn't changed
5	I think Wikipedia is boring and/or not worth the time being put into it
Total comments not indicating change =40*	

*As most students gave multiple comments to this free-form question, the number of responses does not correlate to the number of students who answered the survey (57)