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This is the published version of a chapter published in *Opening Doors through Distance Language Education: Principles, Perspectives, and Practices*.

Citation for the original published chapter:

McBride, K., Beers Fägersten, K. (2008)

Students' Role in Distance Learning.

In: Senta Goertler, Paula Winke (ed.), *Opening Doors through Distance Language Education: Principles, Perspectives, and Practices* (pp. 43-66). San Marcos, TX: CALICO

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-12281>

# Chapter 3

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## Students' Role in Distance Learning

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### **Keywords**

distance learning, role of the student, learner autonomy, group learning, chat session, synchronous chat, collaborative learning

### **1. Introduction**

Much of the support that students have in a traditional classroom is absent in a distance-learning course. In the traditional classroom, learners are together with their classmates and the teacher; learning is socially embedded. Students can talk to each other and may learn from each other as they go through the learning process together. They also witness the teacher's expression of the knowledge firsthand. The class participants communicate to each other not only through their words, but also through their gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice, and the teacher can observe the students' progress and provide guidance and feedback on an as-needed basis. Further, through the habit of meeting in a regular place at a regular time, the participants reinforce their own and each other's commitment to the course.

A distance course must somehow provide learners other kinds of supports so that they also have a sense of connection with a learning community, can benefit from interaction with peers who are going through a similar learning process, receive feedback that allows them to know how they are progressing, and are guided enough so that they continue to progress towards the learning objectives. This cannot be accomplished if the distance course does not simultaneously promote learner autonomy, for the distance course format requires students to take greater

responsibility for their own learning. This chapter presents one distance-learning course that was able to address all of these goals.

The English Department at Högskolan Dalarna, Sweden, participates in a distance-learning program with Vietnam National University. Students enrolled in this program study half time for 2 years to complete a Master's degree in English Linguistics. The distance courses in this program all contain two types of regular class meetings: one type is student-only seminars conducted through text chat during which students discuss and complete assignments that prepare them for the other type of class meeting, also conducted through text chat, in which the teacher is present and leads the discussion of seminar issues and assignments. The inclusion of student-only seminars in the course design allows for student independence while at the same time encouraging cooperation and solidarity. The teacher-led seminars offer the advantages of a class led by an expert.

In this chapter, we present chatlog data from Vietnamese students in one distance course in English linguistics, comparing the role of the student in both student-only and teacher-led seminars. We discuss how students negotiate their participation roles through computer-mediated communication (CMC) according to seminar type, and we consider the emerging role of the autonomous student in the foreign language medium, distance-learning environment. We close by considering aspects of effective design of distance-learning courses from the perspective of a foreign language environment.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *Computer-mediated Communication (CMC)*

Students in a distance-learning course do not have the same supports that students in traditional classes have, and this needs to be addressed by a course design which provides alternative kinds of supports to distance learners so as to enable them to be more autonomous and independent (Neumeier, 2005; Paran, Furneaux, & Sumner, 2004; Sampson, 2003). The risk of students feeling isolated—very common in distance learning—also needs to be addressed and minimized (Huang, 2002; Spitzer, 1998). To meet these needs, communication is necessary, and CMC offers several possibilities to this end. The one utilized in the present study is synchronous CMC accomplished through text chat. Text chat makes relatively few hardware and bandwidth demands, as compared to voice chat and video conferencing. Being synchronous, however, it has many characteristics in common with oral language (Muniandy, 2002; Roed, 2003), which makes it an effective medium for interparticipant communication.

The familiar notion of turn taking in face-to-face communication, based on a number of both verbal and non-verbal factors, does not apply to synchronous text chat. Synchronous text chats are instead characterized by a loose and overlapping turn-taking structure (Cherny, 1999; Herring, 1999; Simpson, 2005; Smith, Alvarez-Torres, & Zhao, 2003). This characteristic of chat can make it challenging to follow, but it is also one of the reasons why there is typically greater student participation in chat (Simpson, 2005).

Chat has advantages in its own right that have inspired many to use it even in courses that were not done at a distance (e.g., Abrams, 2003; Chun, 1994; Sanders, 2006). Abrams (2003) and Ortega (1997) reported greater language production and generation of ideas in chat, as compared to similar time periods in face-to-face classes. Synchronous CMC can also enhance foreign language learners' noticing (Lai & Zhao, 2006; Shekary & Tahririan, 2006) and negotiation of meaning (Smith, 2003; Shekary & Tahririan, 2006), and several studies have found chat to have beneficial effects over time on foreign language learners' oral and/or written proficiency (Beauvois, 1992; Chun, 1994; Kelm, 1992; Kern, 1995; Payne & Whitney, 2002; Warschauer, 1996; Weininger & Shield, 2003).

In their study of classroom and online interaction, Hudson and Bruckman (2002) identified inhibition as an obstacle to participation in the foreign language setting. The text chat environment, however, has been shown to minimize inhibition and increase student participation (Hudson & Bruckman, 2002; Roed, 2003; Suler, 2004; Warschauer, 1996). This results in a form of communication which allows for a move away from the traditional pattern of Initiate-Respond-Evaluate interaction among teacher and students (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005; Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989).

Chat frequently results in more equitable participation among students. Students who are quiet during face-to-face classes tend to produce more in chat (Beauvois, 1992; Bump, 1990; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1996), and students in general have been found to take greater initiatives to communicate in CMC (Beauvois, 1992; Chun, 1994; Darhower, 2002; Deussen-Scholl, Frei, & Dixon, 2005; Kern, 1995). Given the increased number of student turns in the online environment, as compared to the classroom environment in which student turns are fewer due to teacher dominance, text chat represents a form of interaction which can be characterized as "egalitarian participation" (Hudson & Bruckman, 2002, p. 121).

A teacher's presence in chat sessions may reduce some of the benefits just enumerated. However, whether that is the case or not clearly depends on a number of factors, including the personalities of all of the participants (Ene, Goertler, & McBride, 2005; Goertler, 2006; Weininger & Shield, 2003). For a more detailed discussion of the teacher's role in a student-centered classroom, see chapter 4 this volume. Even in student-only chats, because students know that their chat sessions' chatlogs can be looked at later by the teacher (or others), their sense of accountability increases (Sengupta, 2001).

However, the teacher, as an authority figure and representative of expert knowledge, clearly has much to offer through his or her presence in a chat session, and this is perhaps especially important to students communicating in a second or foreign language (Ene et al., 2005; Goertler, 2006). Furthermore, even in chat sessions without the teacher, the teacher's presence is still implied for the teacher set up the sessions and is involved in the evaluation of such sessions. Cycling back and forth between teacher-present and student-only chats would be a way of reaping the advantages of both modes. A number of CALL studies have described courses that utilize this kind of a spiraling structure in which one kind of CMC activity serves as a preparation for another type of class activity, and this mixture

appears to promote reflection in the learners (Abrams, 2003; Deussen-Scholl et al., 2005; Kolaitis, Mahoney, Pomann, & Hubbard, 2006; Levy & Kennedy, 2004; Sanders, 2006; Wildner-Bassett [chapter 4 in this volume]). Neumeier (2005) suggests that by varying the mode and properly sequencing activities in courses structured around CMC, one can help lessen what Moore and Kearsley (1996) call *transactional distance*—a perception of distance between instructors and learners that can lead to a communication gap.

## 2.2 Collaborative learning and learner autonomy in the social domain of CMC

Group work has been shown to have pedagogical value (Bhattacharya & Chatterjee, 2000; Long & Porter, 1985; Shaban & Head, 2003) and places learning in a social context (Vygotsky, 1978). It is conducive to collaborative learning (Apple, 2006; Huang, 2002; Kitade, 2000). Collaborative learning is an important principle of social constructivism where learning is viewed as a natural outcome of negotiation and interaction with other people (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998; Jonassen, 1994; Petraglia, 1998).

Successful collaborative learning is based on convergent tasks (Slavin, 1995) during which “individual responsibility of all group members leads to increased learning achievement, regardless of subject or proficiency level of students involved” (Apple, 2006, p. 278). In fact, second or foreign language learners at a similar level of proficiency can contribute to mutual learning, a type of scaffolding which Donato (1994) refers to as collective. “Collectively constructed support (scaffolding) provides not only the opportunity for input exchange among learners but also the opportunity to expand the learner’s own knowledge” (Johnson, 2004, p. 130). Furthermore, scaffolding has been found to be more evident in synchronous CMC than in face-to-face discussions (Salaberry, 2000).

Long and Porter (1985) suggest pedagogical arguments for the use of group work in second language learning, including the creation of a “positive affective climate” (p. 207). Involvement contributes to a sense of community among learners (Long & Porter, 1985; Meskill, 1999), which in turn positively affects motivation (Long & Porter, 1985; Meunier, 1998). Within the boundaries of their groups, students can effectively exchange ideas, display knowledge, exercise authority, or even challenge each other (Barnes, 1973; Long & Porter, 1985). Learner autonomy, as a matter of both independence and interdependence (Little, 1991; Blin, 2004), can be promoted through collaborative learning activities (Henri & Rigault, 1996).

Autonomy “refers to a learner’s capacity for critical self-evaluation and self-determination, an ability to take control over and responsibility for her learning” (Schwienhorst, 2003, p. 428). Students, taking more responsibility for their own learning, need to be aware of their objectives and understand something about how these can be achieved (Hubbard, 2004; Kolaitis et al., 2006; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Schwienhorst, 2003). This critical awareness can be raised through corrective feedback and scaffolding, especially when these take a written form (Schwienhorst, 2003), and activities that get students to plan, monitor, and evaluate their

actions and choices (Kolaitis et al., 2006; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Schwienhorst, 2003). Kolaitis et al. (2006) found the effectiveness of their awareness-raising activities to be greatest when the activities were both cyclical and collaborative, using what was referred to earlier as a spiraling structure.

In order for peers to establish a group identity, their language use cannot be restricted to task-related functions but must include social ones as well. Phatic communication refers to the use of language in everyday social intercourse for the purpose of initiating social contact, establishing sociability, or bonding with other interlocutors (Malinowski, 1922; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Occurring as part of social rituals, it is not valued for its content, but rather for its role in characterizing ritualistic exchanges such as greetings or leave takings. Phatic communication itself is characterized by adjacency pairs, or units of conversation which elicit a certain response or type of response (Levinson, 1983), as markers of recognition and emotional agreement (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Participating in phatic communication is also a way of acknowledging the face of one's interlocutors. Face refers to "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). In other words, face is the image people present or project, or believe they project. Facework, then, is the active acknowledgment of another's image by supporting or threatening it via communication.

In a medium that is conducive to a high level of interaction and potentially reduced inhibitions, a significant task for students communicating with each other through text chat is to manage facework. Ultimately, the role of the student in distance learning is therefore to contribute to a communicative and social environment while asserting and acquiring knowledge. Because "[t]he basic dynamic of collaborative knowledge work is not the deliberate creation or spontaneous self-organization of teams and groups, but rather the conversations that happen in them" (Barth, 2005), this chapter examines the role of students in a distance-learning course through their computer-mediated conversations.

### 3. Course Structure

In an effort to address the disparate higher education systems in Europe, the Bologna Declaration of 1999 documents reforms needed to introduce international standards and compatibility, ultimately making European Higher Education more transparent and comparable and thus better positioned to attract students and compete with higher education systems in the United States and Asia.<sup>1</sup> Among the goals of the Bologna Process is the area-wide introduction of the three cycle system (BA, MA, PhD). Courses within each program must be assigned a number of standardized credits corresponding to the workload, system of evaluation, and learning outcomes, all of which must also be clearly outlined in a course description.

The present study is based on one of the courses of the Master of Arts in English Linguistics program offered by Högskolan Dalarna in Sweden. The *Linguistic Concepts, Linguistic Awareness* course is the first course of the program and is

a survey of both general and applied linguistic theories. The course is worth 7.5 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) credits and includes a workload of lectures, seminars, three written exercises, and one 2,500-word essay. Among the learning outcomes of the course is the achievement of a high level of independence,<sup>2</sup> referring to the general goal of cultivating independent thinking as well as the more specific goal of imparting learner autonomy since this course is primarily intended for distance students in Vietnam.

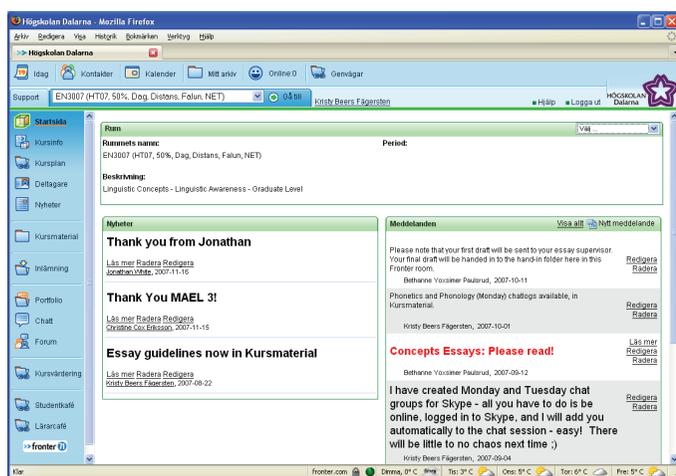
The Master's program in English Linguistics was first offered to students of Vietnam National University in August, 2006. Since then, there has been one cohort of Vietnamese students per semester, thus two intakes per year. Each cohort includes approximately 30 students who are then divided into four subgroups (named for the seasons: Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter) of six to eight students per group. Each subgroup selects a leader, and it is the group leaders' responsibility to establish and maintain contact among their group members throughout the duration of the Master's program. The practice of having a group leader serves several purposes. Most significant, group leaders take responsibility for the practical administrative matters regarding student-only meetings, thus eliminating the need for the students to repeatedly make decisions about the assignment of responsibilities. A group leader can also act as a liaison between the students and the teacher, ideally serving to economize student-teacher communication but also acting as a spokesperson for the group as a whole. Furthermore, allowing the students the opportunity to consensually decide upon their leader gives them the opportunity to exercise some control over the learning environment, which is an important practice in promoting learner autonomy (Schwienhorst, 2003).

The program courses are designed to include a schedule of preseminars and seminars. Preseminars are student-only meetings, scheduled by the group members themselves; seminars are teacher led, and are scheduled by the teaching staff. The *Linguistic Concepts, Linguistic Awareness* course begins with an on-site introductory session in Hanoi and continues as a weekly distance course. Each week there is a new concept, such as phonology, morphology, sociolinguistics, and so on, presented in a recorded lecture made available both on CD and online. The students view the lecture on their own time and then arrange to meet each week with the other members of their subgroup to complete a preseminar assignment that generally consists of application of theory to linguistic data. These student-only seminars are run as text chats, done through Skype, and are required to last between 60 and 90 minutes.

The distance courses in this program were initially conceptualized as a series of synchronous online voice chat seminars, but text chat was later introduced to complement, or even wholly replace, voice chat due to limited connectivity between the students' homes or workplaces and the campus in Sweden. The introduction of the text chat format represents an added benefit to teaching and learning in that it results in a written record of both preseminar and seminar activity. Chatlogs are submitted after every preseminar, allowing the teacher to monitor the students' participation, comprehension and progress. The students, in turn, have access to all chatlogs and can use them as review material.

All course materials, including the recorded lectures, syllabus, and chatlogs, are available via the web platform Fronter (see Figure 1) and are accessible to students via a login name and password. Fronter serves as a virtual meeting place and allows the teacher and students the possibility to post news items or messages, to upload documents, to provide links to additional online material, or to post questions in a forum. Fronter is the main locus of general interest interaction for the students and teacher outside of synchronous seminar text chats and, together with email, serves the majority of asynchronous communication needs.

Figure 1  
Course Website



#### 4. The Structure of the Seminars

The structure of each seminar can be considered in terms of three distinct phases: first, initial greetings and phatic socializing; second, task-oriented interaction and progression through the assignment; and, finally, the concluding and leave-taking phase, often including an evaluation of the day's discussion.

In Example 1, the students are discussing, in a student-only chat, the semantic interpretation of the sentences “The television drank my water” and “The dog writes poetry” in terms of feature analysis. “Television” is identified as lacking the feature “animate” and thus cannot be the subject of the verb “to drink,” while “dog” lacks the feature of “human,” which is required by the verb “to write.”

##### Example 1

- [9:35:21 PM] Autumn leader<sup>3</sup> added Autumn 1, Autumn 6, Autumn 2 to this chat
- [9:35:27 PM] Autumn leader says: Hi everyone
- [9:35:35 PM] Autumn leader says: how are you all today?
- [9:36:22 PM] Autumn 2 says: Hi, quite tired.
- [9:36:39 PM] Autumn 1 says: hi
- [9:36:04 PM] Autumn 4 says: Hi. Fine thanks

- [9:36:03 PM] Autumn 6 says: hello, are we all here?
- [9:37:27 PM] Autumn leader says: so today because of the net, just four of us here
- [9:37:34 PM] Autumn 6 says: Let's start with question 2, p109
- [9:37:36 PM] Autumn 1 says: where r Autumn 3, Autumn 5, Autumn leader?
- [9:37:40 PM] Autumn 4 says: nice to see you again
- [9:37:44 PM] Autumn 4 says: yes
- [9:37:53 PM] Autumn 6 says: a. The television drank my water.  
The subject television has the+animate feature while the verb drink needs a subject with the +animate feature.
- [9:37:58 PM] Autumn leader says: their net connection is out of order
- [9:37:44 PM] Autumn 2 says: yes
- [9:38:21 PM] Autumn 1 says: oh, pity
- [9:38:20 PM] Autumn 6 says: We have to go on without them

The first entries of Example 1 illustrate features of socialization typical of the first phase. Each of the participating group members contributes a greeting after the leader of the group Autumn enters into phatic communication with *Hi everyone* and *how are you all today?* The replies *quite tired* and *fine thanks* followed by *nice to see you again* complete the phatic adjacency initially instigated by the Autumn leader. The communicative exchanges of the first phase of both kinds of seminars are consistently phatic in nature, revealing the students' need to acknowledge each other and to establish a social environment before progressing to focus on content exchanges.

Noticeable in this first example is the entry: *hello, are we all here?* followed by *so today because of the net, just four of us here* and *where r Autumn 3, Autumn 5, Autumn leader?* Much like roll call in a classroom environment, it is typical of the initial phase of both student-only and teacher-led seminars to check if all members are present. While a list of group chat members appears in the Skype window, there may be inaccuracies. Online status, for example, is a variable set by the users themselves, and thus someone who is online and partaking of the group chat can choose to be invisible to the others. The next example is from a teacher-led seminar.

#### Example 2

- [13:01:41] Teacher says: Do the leaders know if everyone is here?
- [13:01:45] Summer leader says: some are still missing
- [13:01:59] Summer leader says: 2 of my group are still missing [...]
- [13:02:02] Summer leader says: we're summer
- [13:02:03] Teacher says: I'm very excited to finally \*finally\* be chatting with all of you!
- [13:02:06] Spring 5 says: all the members of Spring are here
- [13:02:31] Teacher says: Okay, great - we should get started, and if the final two show up then even better.

- [13:02:32] Summer leader says: the same with all of us  
 [13:02:33] Summer leader says: Teacher  
 [13:02:35] Spring 5 says: yes1 we are looking forward to chatting with you too  
 [13:02:41] Spring 2 says: Shall we start now or wait for some time ? [...]  
 [13:03:08] Teacher says: I would like to start now - oh, hello - one more!

The time stamps of these examples, much like the student-only chats, reveal the brevity of the initial greeting phase. Within minutes, the students are gathered, accounted for, and ready to progress to the task-oriented phase. There is, however, some overlap between the first two phases, and efforts to move to the second phase are sometimes delayed by a continuation of the first. Definitive moves to the task-oriented phase are often signaled by discourse markers like *okay*, *great* or *so*; indirect speech acts, such as *we should get started*; or direct speech acts, as in *Let's start with question 2, p109*. The use of discourse markers and indirect speech acts is characteristic of teacher entries as in Example 2, while the students in general tend to use direct speech acts in the form of imperatives as in Example 1. Further moves within the task-oriented phase can be identified in similar ways. Example 3 features three moves from the teacher within one teacher-led seminar, and Example 4 shows moves from a student leader during a student-only seminar.

#### Example 3

- [14:15:54] Teacher says: Can we discuss the nuclear warfare article? [...]  
 [14:58:33] Teacher says: So, let's be clear on some things: [...]  
 [14:59:26] Teacher says: So, check frontier at the end of this week. [...]

#### Example 4

- [10:17:20 PM] Spring leader says: that's the first example  
 [10:17:48 PM] Spring leader says: move on to the second [...]  
 [10:27:30 PM] Spring leader says: Chi, move on to the rule of 3, ok? [...]  
 [10:25:50 PM] Spring leader says: Let's move to the rules of three [...]

Student-only seminar assignments include a number of discussion questions for which the students are to formulate answers in preparation for the teacher-led seminars. It is thus important for them to progress through the questions in order to complete the assignment in a timely manner, which can explain their overall preference for imperatives and direct speech acts and for their tendency to refer to the topics as numbered items on a list, as compared to the teacher, who refers to the discussion topics by name.

In student-only seminars, indirectness is preferred in moves towards the concluding phase, suggesting that contributing to the *progression* of the student-only chats is acceptable, whereas there may be a reluctance to end the session prematurely. The concluding phase of the student-only and teacher-led seminars is often entered into when the allotted time period nears its end, but it tends to begin by an evaluation of the work done.

## Example 5

- [10:30:13 PM] Autumn 3 says: so i think we have been very hardworking [...]
- [10:30:35 PM] Autumn 3 says: and serious about our pre-assignment
- [10:30:37 PM] Autumn leader says: yeah. I also think so
- [10:30:39 PM] Autumn 4 says: yes
- [10:30:43 PM] Autumn 6 says: Ok, We should stop here now.
- [10:30:50 PM] Autumn 4 says: i think so
- [10:30:52 PM] Autumn leader says: yeah
- [10:30:54 PM] Autumn 2 says: yes,
- [10:30:53 PM] Autumn 3 says: Why shouldn't we stop here
- [10:31:02 PM] Autumn 3 says: it's too late now
- [10:31:11 PM] Autumn 4 says: Bye bye every one. See you again on thursday.
- [10:31:14 PM] Autumn 3 says: and the baby is crying for her mother
- [10:31:16 PM] Autumn 6 says: Bye, see you later.

The move to the concluding phase is abruptly begun by the evaluation *so i think we have been very hardworking ... and serious about our pre-assignment*. The evaluation receives a number of replies of agreement, and the move to conclude is taken up in the reply *ok, we should stop here*. Example 5 shows how the concluding phase also mirrors the initial phase in that the discussion becomes again personal and phatic: *it's too late now* and *the baby is crying for her mother*. Furthermore, like greetings, individual leave-taking expressions are numerous, with nearly every participant signing off. In fact, the leave taking continues for 40 more seconds, including six more turns. Finally, the concluding phases of each seminar type are consistent in their inclusion of references to the next meeting, for example, *see you again on thursday*.

It is interesting to note in this non-face-to-face context the repeated use of the expression “see you,” also seen in a greeting in Example 1, *nice to see you again*. The widespread use of “see you” suggests not only the students’ reliance on recognizable formulaic language for successful openings and closings, but also a visual component to the chat because the students “see” each other on the screen in their virtual persona.

Each of the three phases contributes to framing the student-only and teacher-led seminars, allowing the students to easily identify the points of progression and adopt different roles accordingly. There is equal opportunity to participate in the first and last phases since each student is just as able to greet and take leave. The second phase, and moves in and out of the second phase, however, require clear displays of knowledge of the subject matter and greater language proficiency, as opposed to the first and third phases where formulaic social language can sustain interaction. As a consequence, some of the students become more dominant in the discussion, while others restrict their contributions mostly to brief phrases that express agreement or request clarification. This can be seen in the examples featured in the next two sections where we consider second-phase discourse and the negotiation of different student roles in preseminars and seminars.

## 5. The Role of the Student as Group Member

The student-only seminar format requires the students to assume responsibilities normally associated with the teacher, and thus the students must avail themselves of discourse techniques and tactics for contributing to and advancing interaction, discussion, and learning. Much of this work is done by the students who were chosen by their peers as group leaders and who are thereby responsible for dealing with the practical aspects of organizing and completing the preseminars.

The chatlogs show evidence of effective organization and only rare and very low-level occasions of conflict, suggesting that having a designated and permanent leader contributes to creating group identity and coherence. It is not, however, always the official group leader who leads, but sometimes another student who leads by means of demonstrating knowledge and thus authority on the topic of discussion. Nor is it always the group leader who uses directives to move the discussion along. Example 6 shows an instance in which another student took on the role of leading discussion.

### Example 6

- [10:15:09 PM] Spring 4 says: agree every body?  
 [10:15:19 PM] Spring 1 says: agree  
 [10:15:21 PM] Spring 5 says: why Spring 4?  
 [10:15:36 PM] Spring 5 says: what 's presupposed here? [...]  
 [10:15:39 PM] Spring leader says: what does it presuppose? Spring 4

In the fifth turn, the group leader signals acceptance of the change in leadership, asserted by Spring 5's *why Spring 4? what's presupposed here?* by repeating the question: *what does it presuppose? Spring 4*. At the same time the group leader reaffirms some of her power by phrasing the question in slightly clearer language. A similar example where a more indirect strategy is chosen is shown in Example 7.

### Example 7

- [9:59:48 PM] Autumn 3 says: let's start with presuppositions now  
 [10:00:12 PM] Autumn 4 says: ok  
 [10:00:15 PM] Autumn leader says: ok  
 [10:00:17 PM] Autumn 3: we should now focus on examples  
 [10:00:17 PM] Autumn 2 says: Yes  
 [10:00:25 PM] Autumn leader says: yeah

The group leader had started off the student-led seminar by writing *so let's start with our task*. Another student takes control by specifying what should be done, *let's start with presuppositions now* and *we should now focus on examples*. This change in direction of the discussion is confirmed by the other students, and crucially by the group leader. The fact that leadership can be thus shared attests to the effectiveness of the organizational structure.

Still, the role of the student is very much affected by the presence, real or imagined, of the teacher. It is ultimately the teacher who assumes the role of primary authority by virtue of status and knowledge of the subject matter. Although teach-

ers do not participate in preseminars, students continue to defer to them, aware that they are to complete an assignment which was designed and will later be evaluated by their teacher.

Example 8

- [10:29:09 PM] Autumn 4 says: I am not clear about this
- [10:29:11 PM] Autumn 3 says: any one knows about this
- [10:29:23 PM] Autumn 6 says: There is one thing that is vague to me.
- [10:29:24 PM] Autumn 5 says: I find it quite vague
- [10:29:28 PM] Autumn 3 says: we should ask the teacher, then
- [10:29:38 PM] Autumn 4 says: yes
- [10:29:40 PM] Autumn leader says: yeah. I think so
- [10:29:41 PM] Autumn 2 says: yes, should ask the teacher
- [10:29:45 PM] Autumn 4 says: i agree

## 6. The Role of the Student as Autonomous Learner

The Master's program in English Linguistics includes on-site seminars at the beginning of each term. It is the opinion of the three participating teachers that, during this face-to-face classroom-based interaction, the behavior of the Vietnamese students can generally be characterized as inhibited since teacher-prompted or even spontaneous contributions tend to be offered only reluctantly, tentatively, or very quietly. The online preseminar and seminar chatlogs, on the other hand, present evidence of lively, fast-paced interaction. Students nearly simultaneously contribute comments or answer teacher prompts, and discussions are not limited to the comment of the one student whom the teacher may call on or who happens to answer first.

Not having to grab the floor, interrupt, or even raise their voices to be heard, there is greater opportunity for equal participation among the students, but also the potential of being easily ignored. The discussion is open to all participants, and as each of their contributions appears on the screen, it is then available for other students or the teacher to react to. Of importance, the synchronous text chat format also affords the teacher the chance to comment on many or all of the contributions, such that students receive immediate feedback in terms of evaluative remarks on the content of their contributions, at least in those chat sessions in which the teacher is present. The text chat format of the seminars allows the students to emerge and be seen by the teacher as individuals, developing independently and autonomously.

In Example 9, the students are discussing an article about the language of nuclear warfare which includes a number of euphemisms. The main argument of the article is that euphemistic language obscures the realities of nuclear warfare and can desensitize people to potential nuclear horrors.

Example 9

- [13:53:11] Teacher says: Many euphemisms - why is that? What purpose does the author claim they serve?
- [13:53:12] Spring 1 says: Counter value attacks

- [13:53:13] Summer leader says: “to pat the bomb”  
 [13:53:15] Spring 5 says: for e.g “colleteral damage” for human death  
 [13:53:23] Spring 4 says: nuclear lang is really powerful in controlling people’s thought  
 [13:53:32] Summer leader says: i think they serve to obscure from the listeners  
 [13:53:34] Spring 2 says: in two ways  
 [13:53:38] Summer leader says: the grim reality  
 [13:53:42] Summer 5 says: language has strong power in contrlling people’ thinking  
 [13:53:44] Spring 5 says: to avoid talking about the reality I think  
 [13:53:49] Spring 1 says: to direct perception away from the dreadful results  
 [13:53:52] Spring leader says: counter value attacks  
 [13:54:08] Summer 1 says: the author wants to sanitize  
 [13:54:21] Teacher says: That’s fabulous - what wonderful answers.

The responses are contributed within 2 minutes. We can see in the example the common occurrence (in these chat seminars) of two students contributing similar answers, in this case, *counter value attacks*. When a group discussion takes place in a classroom environment, it is unlikely that such overlapping or competing interactions would occur among these students or that students would repeat each other in this way. Although classroom interaction is certainly not without spontaneous repetition or simultaneous talking, such occurrences can seem less salient in the “silent” mode of text chat. It thus allows for these behaviors, rendering them less chaotic and repetitive than they would be in a face-to-face interaction.

Example 9 closes with evaluative feedback from the teacher: *That’s fabulous-what wonderful answers*—an evaluative commentary about the responses in general. In this foreign-language medium linguistics course, teachers seldom, if at all, attend to form by pointing out or correcting language mistakes. Instead, feedback is restricted almost entirely to content. The next example, directed to a specific student, shows a rare case in which the teacher calls attention to form by commenting on the student’s lexical choice.

#### Example 10

- [14:20:09] Teacher says: And what is the purpose of euphemisms [...]  
 [14:20:37] Autumn 6 says: to mitigate the impact  
 [14:20:47] Teacher says: the impact of what?  
 [14:21:00] Autumn 3 says: to describe abstract things  
 [14:21:02] Autumn 2 says: impact of thought?  
 [14:21:02] Autumn 4 says: to allow infinite talk about nuclear holocaust without ever focusing the speaker  
 [14:21:04] Autumn 6 says: of what you are saying  
 [14:21:04] Autumn 5 says: of nuclear weapons  
 [14:21:16] Teacher says: (mitigate is an excellent word: to make easy or lessen the severity of something)

In Example 10, the teacher asks for clarification of a reply (*to mitigate the impact*) to a prompt (*what is the purpose ...*). It is a different student who first manages to offer a clarification (*impact of thought?*) before the original student answers, *of what you are saying*. Shortly thereafter, yet another student contributes a response (*of nuclear weapons*). The teacher's subsequent comment is formed as a parenthetical response so as not to interrupt the flow of contributions, thereby indirectly confirming the collective relevance of all the students' responses. The teacher's parenthetical statement draws attention to the word "mitigate," positively evaluating its usage, while at the same time providing a brief definition for the others. The gloss function of the comment motivates the parenthetical expression; the evaluative "excellent" establishes the comment as praise. The feedback thus attributes value to each of the students' responses and contributes meaningfully to the discussion while indirectly addressing and praising a particular student.

#### Example 11

- [13:54:54] Teacher says: If you were able to get through the whole article, did you maybe find yourself understanding how the language allows you to distance yourself from the grim reality?<sup>4</sup>
- [13:54:52] Spring 3 says: Yes
- [13:55:25] Summer leader says: yes
- [13:55:29] Summer leader says: a bit
- [13:55:31] Spring 2 says: a delicate implication in his language
- [13:55:36] Summer leader says: the author found the language
- [13:55:39] Spring leader says: yeah, I found that a little
- [13:55:40] Summer leader says: fun fascinating
- [13:55:46] Spring 5 says: Langague may chang your ideology
- [13:55:53] Summer leader says: and she focus her attention on mastering the language
- [13:55:52] Spring 5 says: yes
- [13:55:54] Teacher says: That's the whole point! Well said!
- [13:56:07] Teacher says: (Well said, Spring 5 )
- [13:56:14] Spring 5 says: thanks

In Example 11, the prompting question includes a subordinate clause that contains the intended question of focus, namely, how does the language allow one to distance oneself from the grim reality? The first responses to the question reveal that many of the students attended to the yes-no proposal of the prompt: *did you find yourself ...* Not until Spring 5 says *Langague may chang your ideology* is the underlying question attended to, which prompts immediate feedback from the teacher, *That's the whole point. Well said!*

In contrast to Example 10 in which the parenthetical comment was intended to be nonintrusive to the flow of incoming responses, the feedback in Example 11 serves to differentiate implicitly between many responses. The teacher's comment might have been interpreted as applying to any of the students' responses. The teacher therefore singles out one response as relevant by providing positive

feedback to one student in particular, addressed by name, *Well said, Spring 5*. The student acknowledges the feedback by thanking the teacher for the comment.

The student-only seminars encourage autonomy and independence in the sense that students are not dependent upon the teacher, and, in the teacher-led seminars, the text chat format further contributes to the creation of an environment that is conducive to independent thinking and individual autonomy. Unlike the role of the student in the preseminars in which the students mainly work together to advance through the assignment and exchange ideas, the student's role in the teacher-led seminars is to emerge as an independent entity who can apply knowledge and express ideas. The text chat format of distance learning reduces inhibitions among students by neutralizing or lessening the role of face in interaction. It thereby invites a greater number of turn-taking sequences in which the notions of interrupting and holding the floor are rendered inapplicable (Cherny, 1999; Herring, 1999; Hudson & Brockman, 2002).

One consequence of this is a greater potential to achieve egalitarian participation (Hudson & Brockman, 2002) such that all students have an equal chance of contributing. However, participants—particularly those reading and writing in their second language—may experience the chat sessions as presenting an excess of entries in situations like the examples above. An onslaught of entries requires extra effort on the part of the students to keep up with the discussion because they continuously need to attend to each other's ideas, responses, or questions, and adjust their own contributions accordingly. At the same time, the written format of text chat can, for some L2 learners, serve to reduce some of the cognitive load that they might experience during a discussion with such a rapid exchange of ideas (Payne & Ross, 2005; Payne & Whitney, 2002). The text chat format of distance learning is therefore in need of structural parameters to assist students in both coping with and taking advantage of the characteristics inherent in this form of CMC. In the next section, we consider how distance courses can be designed for content-based programs in a foreign language environment.

## 7. Discussion

The chatlog data provide insight as to how students interact with each other in teacher-present versus teacher-absent learning environments. In this section we consider how a course structure that balances both types of CMC forums affords distance-learning students opportunities to assert their own knowledge and learn from each other in a collaborative atmosphere. We propose the inclusion of group work, a distinction between student-student and teacher-student activities, and attention to both individual development and collective progress through teacher feedback.

### 7.1 Group Identity

The Vietnamese students taking courses in the Master's program in English Linguistics with Dalarna University in Sweden are members of a number of different groups (e.g., the overall group of Master's students, the cohort of people starting

at the same time, and the smaller seminar groups). Each of these levels of group membership contributes to a positive identity-forming process which in turn contributes to a collaborative and supportive distance-learning environment. The lack of regular face-to-face meetings and even a lack of geographical proximity among the students, who live in various regions of Vietnam, can therefore be compensated for by fostering group identity at each of the levels and thereby enable the students to relate to each other in a meaningful way. Group work in student-only seminars allows the students to collaborate in a type of collective scaffolding (Donato, 1994), and this prepares them for the application of knowledge and independent participation in teacher-led seminars.

Group work starts with the scheduling of student-only seminars based on preassigned tasks. In the student-only forum, students are able to experiment with their type of participation, resolve disagreements, and navigate through collective progression. In this foreign language environment—specifically in which the foreign language is the medium of instruction as opposed to its sole focus—student-only group work provides the students with an opportunity to practice the language while discussing content and formulating ideas. Language learning goes hand in hand with content discussion. Students learn from and build upon other students' contributions, enabling each other to participate in and further the discussion.

One aspect of this particular distance-learning program is the selection of a single group leader per subgroup. Having one student leader per subgroup facilitates administration of the student-only sessions in terms of practical aspects such as scheduling, as well as pragmatic aspects, by providing a figurehead to defer to in times of confusion or conflict. Nevertheless, the practice of having a constant group leader may not fit all contexts. Group leaders may feel overburdened by the responsibility, while other students may feel the group leader somehow has an unfair advantage. A possible alternative to a constant group leader would be to assign leaders on a rotating basis, for example semester by semester or even session by session so as to distribute the responsibility more evenly.

Teacher-led seminars relieve students of the burden of having to lead the discussions because the teacher is deferred to as the authority figure and is expected to provide definitive answers, resolve disagreements, and determine appropriate use of time. In this forum, students can instead focus on their independent participation and the application of knowledge. It is during teacher-led seminars that students get the opportunity to showcase their comprehension and mastery of linguistic concepts that preseminar interactions help them to perfect. This forum therefore allows teachers to challenge students, but it also requires teachers to attend to content and form and provide feedback so that students can effectively and efficiently do the same.

## *7.2 Teacher feedback*

Our data suggest that, due to the high number of turns and entries in text chats, teacher feedback is critical to direct attention to specific content. Otherwise, students can feel overwhelmed by the sheer number and potential range of contribu-

tions and commentaries on the variety of points related to the content. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the teacher to help students attend to specific responses that are more meaningful or relevant. This also can serve to indicate to students something about the perceived value and solidity of their contributions.

In the context of this course, teacher feedback was almost exclusively devoted to content without focusing on form. When a foreign language is the medium of instruction and tasks are being conducted online, the noticing of linguistic forms is not viewed as the immediate goal by either the students or the teacher; rather, the focus tends to be on meaning. However, focusing on form is an expected and welcome side benefit of interaction (Shekary & Tahririan, 2006). There will be cases in which form-focused feedback can be beneficially introduced. However, an overemphasis on correction of form may have an inhibitory effect on student participation in synchronous CMC (Ene et al., 2005). It was probably out of concern for maintaining conversational flow that the teacher in Example 10, for example, wrote her commentary on word choice within parentheses.

In the student-only seminars, students receive a kind of feedback from their peers by the extent to which others agree or disagree with them. This process of working towards consensus functions as part of the collective learning process, whereas teacher-led seminar interaction calls for individual—and independent—participation. Teacher feedback, as opposed to feedback from peers, is valued as a gauge for monitoring comprehension and allows the students to develop individually, empowering them to become autonomous and independent. Students can therefore develop independently in two different ways: first, as a contributing member of a group and, second, as a person who may be singled out or addressed specifically by the teacher.

## 8. Conclusion

This chapter presented excerpts from logs of distance-learning interactions among nonnative, English-speaking Vietnamese students in a Master's program in English linguistics. This particular Master's program includes, in addition to teacher-led chat seminars, student-only preseminars among members of a smaller learning community. The excerpts were presented for the purpose of analyzing the role of the student in distance learning.

The division of students into small groups is intended to lessen the risk of isolation in distance learning by creating communities and thereby contributing to socially contextualized interaction. This is similar to setting up networks and groups in a virtual community such as Facebook. Small-group and student-only sessions facilitate socialization among distance learners, allowing them to coconstruct a group identity. The social context of the student-only sessions further allows for linguistic practice by presenting opportunities for scaffolding, ultimately preparing students for teacher-led sessions in which they can independently apply knowledge and better articulate their ideas. In the teacher-led sessions, where each student has the opportunity to enter into dialog with the teacher, students can then assume the role of autonomous individuals. In this role, distance-learning

students endeavor to apply knowledge and advance ideas which can then be evaluated by the teacher. (For more on this topic, see chapter 4 in this volume.)

Against the background of computer-mediated communication, we have investigated how this distance-learning format allows students to discursively perform the roles of both group members and autonomous individuals, identifying typical features of distance-learning chat discourse, including phatic communication, formulaic language, direct and indirect speech acts, hedging, and questioning. Our suggestions for course design take into account the varying roles of the student in distance learning and enable meaningful interaction in a foreign language context.

Classes that meet in a classroom offer students a community of peers as well as a physical environment (full of sounds, smells, shared space, facial expressions, and gestures) which contribute to establishing learning as part of a social process. Even if students do not talk directly to each other during class, their presence in the physical classroom shapes their mutual experiences and naturally embeds what is learned in a social context. In distance learning, the replacement of physical space with virtual space may jeopardize the development of a community. Therefore, enabling communication among participants in a distance-learning course is vital to preventing the students from feeling like a “castaway on a Distance Learning Island” (Paran et al., 2004, p. 347).

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**Discussion Questions**

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1. In Example 9, students are discussing complex concepts, but often their contributions are short sentence fragments. Should teachers of foreign language students demand fuller answers? If so, how could that be done? If not, why not? Under what circumstances should the teacher's feedback concentrate on form?
2. In the discussion section of this chapter, it was suggested that the practice of choosing a group leader might not work as well in all teaching contexts. What type of student population might resist this? What would be alternative ways of assigning responsibilities to the students? Could creating additional student roles, besides that of student leader, be used to structure student interaction? What kinds of roles would these be?
3. How would the role of the student leader change if this were a foreign language course as opposed to a content course conducted in the students' foreign language?
4. The large volume of contributions in some text chat discussions might be overwhelming at times to the students in a course like this one. As a result, little attention might be paid to some student comments. What kind of practices could be built into the course to make sure that students and teachers alike would attend, at some point, to all contributions in a chat?
5. It was argued that using a spiral structure in which students rotate between preparatory individual work, student-only seminars, and teacher-led seminars was useful in promoting critical awareness and learner autonomy. Why do you think this is?
6. Imagine that you are a teacher who has set up a course that is similar to the one described in this chapter, but you find that students are contributing very little in the student-only seminars. What could you do to encourage greater and richer student participation?
7. The students in the course described in this chapter were rather well behaved. What kind of etiquette rules could a teacher lay down if he or she thought that a particular student population would be more prone to rude behavior in the chats?
8. Kumaravadivelu (2003) talks about a narrow view of learner autonomy, "learning to learn," and a broad view, "learning to liberate." Can both types of learner autonomy be said to be operating in the course described in this chapter? How might concepts of liberation play a larger role in a course with a similar format?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Bologna Process and the European Framework of Education, see [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna_en.html)

<sup>2</sup> The course syllabus, written according to the Bologna guidelines, can be found at [http://www.du.se/Templates/SyllabusPage\\_\\_\\_\\_199.aspx?epslanguage=EN&kod=EN3007](http://www.du.se/Templates/SyllabusPage____199.aspx?epslanguage=EN&kod=EN3007)

<sup>3</sup> Students' names have been replaced by descriptive titles.

<sup>4</sup> The reader may note that the first chatlog entry here, to which the other comments are clearly responses, has a later timestamp than linearly later entries. This is a glitch in Skype chat (the program they were chatting in) that appears from time to time.

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