
**ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE DISCUSSION
FORUMS WITH UNIVERSITY EFL LEARNERS**

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Using an e-learning environment undoubtedly has many advantages in foreign language learning contexts, especially when we consider their potential for enhancing learner autonomy and providing out-of-class language practice as well as maintaining language learning motivation. In this paper we describe an action research project conducted with first-year university students enrolled in the degree “English Language and Literature” (“Filología Inglesa”) at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in the Canary Islands, Spain, which explores affective and methodological reasons for limited participation in our interactive online learning platform (“Moodle”). We report on the effect of using different formats in the discussion forum application in our virtual learning environment (“Campus Virtual”) and the insights for future practice that we have gained.

Key words: e-learning environments, language learning anxiety, learner autonomy, motivation, online discussion forums.

La utilización de un entorno virtual de aprendizaje tiene, sin duda, muchas ventajas en contextos de aprendizaje de segundas lenguas, sobre todo en relación con su potencial para fomentar la autonomía del alumno y ofrecer práctica suplementaria fuera del aula, así como para mantener la

motivación. En este artículo describimos un proyecto de investigación-acción llevado a cabo con alumnos universitarios de primer curso matriculados en la asignatura de “Lengua Inglesa I” impartida en la licenciatura “Filología Inglesa” en la Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Islas Canarias, España, que analiza razones afectivas y metodológicas para explicar la participación limitada en nuestra plataforma virtual (“Moodle”). Presentamos los resultados del proyecto en relación con el efecto de la utilización de distintos formatos de foros de discusión en nuestro Campus Virtual así como datos reveladores que pretendemos incorporar en nuestra práctica docente.

Palabras clave: entornos virtuales de aprendizaje, ansiedad, autonomía del aprendizaje, motivación, foros de discusión virtuales.

1. Introduction

The Internet has, undoubtedly, greatly expanded the interactive potential of foreign language learning in its capacity to enable synchronous and asynchronous communication in text, voice, and video media, as well as providing a wealth of online resources and instantly accessible information. In Spain, virtual learning environments (VLEs) or interactive classroom platforms such as *Moodle* have, by now, been introduced into the majority of educational institutions. E-learning tools and their various applications can be exploited for a variety of language learning tasks inside and outside the classroom context, both as a resource bank for independent practice or as a platform for interactive learning activities and communicating in the target language.

Based on the many reported advantages of using a VLE in language learning contexts (e.g. Robb, 2004), and having the benefit of a pre-established *Moodle* installation in our university context locally known as the ‘Campus Virtual’, we have incorporated some of its many applications with our first-year learners enrolled in our undergraduate subject *English Language I* in the degree of “English Language and Literature” (*Filología*

Inglés) at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in Spain over the last two academic years (2007-2009). We have been investigating the ways in which an e-learning platform might be able to provide a motivating interactive learning environment for our learners, as well as lower the language learning anxiety we often observe as a result of the highly mixed levels of English and learning backgrounds we encounter at this initial level of tertiary study.¹ The potential for lowering anxiety as well as motivating our learners was the basis of our initial rationale when originally setting up our VLE, informed by the positive results found in previous studies (e.g. Muangsamai, 2003; Chen, 2003). It is important to point out here that we introduced an e-learning environment with our first-year learners as an optional, supplementary learning resource which was not officially required or evaluated in any way and which we hoped they would exploit independently as a means to further develop their language proficiency and language learning autonomy.²

During our experience with *Moodle* in the academic year previous to this study (2007-2008), we had been somewhat disappointed to realise as the course progressed that our learners did not seem to feel sufficiently motivated to use this e-learning platform, and the resources we had made available there, as much as we had expected they would, especially when they had to communicate their opinions in the *discussion forums* on a variety of relevant topics which we initiated at different points during the course. Consequently, we decided to embark on the current longitudinal action research project (2008-2009) as we wanted to discover how often our subjects actually used our *Moodle* e-learning platform and the resources they preferred before specifically exploring their use of online discussions in order to address the possibly inhibiting nature of this type of public asynchronous communication. We also aimed to investigate why our learners were not motivated enough to communicate their opinions and develop their language skills outside our class sessions, particularly because the link between Internet applications such as email, group discussion or live chatting and motivation have been widely documented (Cuadrado *et al.*,

2009; Stevens, 2004; Muangsamai, 2003; Warschauer, 1996; Warschauer & Kern, 2000; Warschauer *et al.* 2000; González-Bueno 1998), since learners “engage[d] themselves in doing activities and communicate[d] in authentic contexts with their target audience” (Muangsamai, 2003: 198). Thus, our principal aim was to explore the reasons for our subjects’ limited participation in the *virtual discussion forums* and whether this might be due either to affective factors such as language learning anxiety and lack of motivation, or methodological issues such as insufficiently developed autonomy.

2. Virtual learning environments in EFL instruction

Computer assisted language learning (CALL) has been a rapidly expanding phenomenon since personal computers emerged as significant tools for language teaching and learning in the 1990s (Hanson-Smith, 2001: 107). Nowadays, the Internet provides a wealth of online applications and opportunities for learners to enhance their communicative abilities either individually or collaboratively (Stevens, 2004). Over the last few years, we have been able to witness how foreign language learning and teaching environments have been greatly enriched by the growth and development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), an educational resource that is often conceived as “as part of the core of education, alongside reading, writing and numeracy” (Khvilon & Patru, 2004: 9). The importance of integrating new technologies into our educational systems is especially supported by the fact that younger learners and young adults are, in general, digitally competent to a high degree, often much more so than their instructors, and they usually find learning with computers more motivating.

Warschauer (1996: 9) found that motivation in using the Internet for learning derived from three major sources: the learners’ senses of (i) communication, (ii) empowerment, and (iii) learning. Warschauer’s research on the positive effects of network-based language teaching has been supported by later research studies (Cuadrado *et al.*, 2009; Muangsamai,

2003; Kannan & Macknish, 2000; González-Bueno 1998). Additionally, Internet-based teaching manuals (Dudeney, 2007; Warschauer & Kern, 2000, Warschauer *et al.* 2000) have become increasingly more available. We must also highlight the cultural enrichment that learners might enjoy thanks to the vast range of information available on the Internet related to the target culture in a foreign or a second language, which can be exploited as a means to provide context or cultural background in learning tasks in order to make classroom learning “more real” (Khivlon & Patru, 2004: 86).

As we have mentioned previously, the *Moodle* utility that we are focusing on here is the *virtual discussion forum*, where learners can interact with each other and their teacher, and which also offers different degrees of privacy. Discussion topics or questions are posted in the forum application, in our case by the teacher, and the subsequent responses can be open to all participating learners or restricted to smaller groups (see Appendix 1 for a sample discussion forum). The discussion forums are a place where learners can discuss relevant issues with each other in their own time asynchronously and in written form; this allows participants “more time to compose, edit and refine ideas before posting messages” (Chen, 2003: 1). *Moodle* also differs from many systems in that its messages are not only archived in the course, but are also sent to participating learners by e-mail as long as they have subscribed to that specific forum, overcoming one major problem with instant messaging systems which are soon “out of sight, out of mind” (Robb, 2004: 5-6).

Virtual discussion forums might be seen to be particularly beneficial as an interactive environment for developing communicative skills, since they encourage reading and sharing opinions in the form of posts by fellow students, and learners who are reticent in class have been found to express themselves more willingly online (Chen, 2003: 1). Learners might also feel more motivated by this truly authentic use of the target language, and benefit from the opportunity to acquire or consolidate new language forms from input from other learners and their own output, especially by means of

noticing both grammatical and ungrammatical constructions in their peers' contributions (Muangsamai, 2003: 67). It is possible that learners could feel motivated by being part of a community where they can use English for authentic communication with their classmates in their own time, although we are aware that this is somewhat idealistic since learners do not always make full use of out-of-class learning opportunities. A further advantage for teachers, especially relevant in the current research study, is the ease with which they can monitor their learners' participation in the online learning environment as they can obtain full reports on the activities of individual students using the participation reports in the *Moodle* platform. It is important to highlight here that the teacher's role might vary depending on the aim behind the learning task; for example, whether the task is accuracy-based and the students' contributions will be evaluated either by the teacher or their peers, or whether the activity is fluency-based and incorrect or non-standard language forms are tolerated.

In addition, a VLE such as *Moodle* has a large number of advantages as a tool to foster greater learner autonomy by means of self-directed out-of-class practice. Research into the methodological implications of these new learning environments (e.g. Lamb, 2004) has shown that learners generally welcome Internet applications as they can learn at their own pace, as well as interact with other learners and develop their language skills in asynchronous discussions with the advantage of greater time for rehearsal or reformulating language forms. The freedom to write and exchange opinions with their classmates in such a supportive environment has also been viewed by many as liberating (Muangsamai, 2003: 181). The connections made in online group discussions may even motivate higher levels of self-engagement with the learning process, and such a virtual learning platform can actually be an aid towards 'community building' in the classroom as learners become familiar with each other outside class by means of their photographs and online profiles which feature on the learning platform.

We were also aware of the possible drawbacks in using the *Moodle* VLE that we might encounter such as the possibly overwhelming and time-consuming amount of extra resource material provided, technological problems (the Internet is not always accessible), or the potentially inhibiting nature of interacting in public discussion forums, particularly as we had noticed this in our experience with students in the previous academic year. We felt this might be due to the fact that learners could feel exposed or observed by their classmates or teachers since their posts (mistakes and all) are permanent and those with lower proficiency levels might feel particularly vulnerable here. In fact, we had anticipated language learning anxiety to be a significant factor contributing to lower participation levels, which we hoped to address by means of experimenting with more private, group-based discussions.

3. Description of the research project

Our principal research focus stemmed from our initial belief, based on the low levels of participation we had detected the previous year, that much of our learners' reluctance to use new technologies as a means to discuss topics publicly might be due to affective concerns such as anxiety or inhibition, as well as the limited linguistic proficiency of many first-year learners on beginning their university studies. We also presumed that their levels of participation could be affected by their motivation being either more intrinsic or extrinsic in nature,³ especially since a considerable number of the students embarking on their degree in "English Language and Literature" (*Filología Inglesa*) might not be intrinsically motivated enough to fully enjoy and make the most of their language learning process. In many cases, they may have originally wanted to enrol in a different degree programme, as we have discovered on previous occasions, but could not for different reasons.⁴ Naturally, the lack of participation in online discussions could correspond to other possible reasons such as limited Internet access or insufficient 'computer literacy' (this will be addressed in section 3.2). In the following sections, we describe the research project we designed in order to

find out what might have made our learners reticent about sharing their opinions in the *virtual discussion forums* so that we can suggest possible solutions, as well as explore ways of encouraging our learners to become more intrinsically motivated to make the most of our *Moodle* learning platform.

3.1. Participants and research context

The students in our obligatory first-year subject *English Language I* meet five hours a week for class sessions. Our total sample was 39 subjects (21 in group A and 18 in group B), characterised by a wide range of levels of language proficiency, and predominantly local Canarians with a few from mainland Spain, but there were also students from other ethnic backgrounds (Italian, German, Moroccan, Swedish, Korean, Cuban, and Uruguayan). In our EFL classes, we use mainly original material along with two recommended textbooks: *Across Cultures* (Sharman, 2006) for the development of vocabulary and reading skills as well as for introduction of cultural elements related to English-speaking communities all over the world, and the supplementary grammar practice manual *First Certificate English Practice* (Vince, 2003). In addition to these materials, our class sessions are supported by various *Moodle* applications such as teacher-created grammar worksheets, links to language learning websites and relevant web pages for supplementary reading, as well as *virtual discussion forums* in which our students contribute their opinions on different topics arising from class sessions. These online applications which form part of our Campus Virtual for this subject were presented in an introductory whole-class training session in the ICT suite in our faculty building in the first week of classes at the beginning of the first semester.

3.2. Research instruments

The following instruments were used in order to gather data relating to our subjects' English language proficiency level, motivational profile, experience of the e-learning platform *Moodle*, and frequency of use of the discussion forums:

- a. *Entry level*: in the initial class session (September 2008) we asked our learners to complete an online test of language proficiency.⁵ For greater reliability we contrasted the results with a sample of written language in order to discover whether our subjects' participation in the discussion forums might be conditioned by their linguistic proficiency, with lower level students possibly participating less frequently than average or higher level ones due to inhibition or lack of linguistic resources.
- b. *Motivation*: we designed a questionnaire which was administered in December 2008 in order to establish the dominant type of motivation our first-year university students might have on beginning their degree studies (see Appendix 2). We classified motivation types as either *classroom learning motivation* or *language learning motivation* using Gardner's recently revised terminology (2007). *Classroom learning motivation* is short-term motivation which is usually extrinsic (instrumental or integrative) and externally driven, whereas *language learning motivation* is internally generated and more sustainable.
- c. *Use of Moodle*: a questionnaire eliciting data concerning our subjects' level of satisfaction with the VLE along with affective concerns and levels of participation in *virtual discussion forums* was administered in February 2009 after the first semester examination (see Appendix 3). This also contained an item eliciting data on our subjects' Internet access or technological competence in order to rule this out as a factor for low participation levels.
- d. *Virtual discussion forums*: using the participation reports available in the *Moodle* platform, we analysed the frequency of individual subjects' contributions in the discussion forums in order to establish their levels of participation. We only addressed frequency, and not the length or quality of entries, since we were not analysing language proficiency in this particular study.

3.3. Research procedure

It is a common fact that learners often feel exposed and inhibited when they are asked to talk in the target language in front of their classmates. In order to tackle this problem, teachers usually conduct speaking tasks in pairs and groups instead of as whole class discussions or debates. In our *Moodle* learning platform, the *virtual discussion forums* are usually open to all enrolled participants. This means that if a teacher opens a discussion forum by asking a question, all the students enrolled in the subject from both groups A and B can participate by posting an entry as well as read their classmates' contributions. In the previous academic year all the discussion forums were 'open' in this way, and we had been disappointed to find that participation levels were very low. Thus we decided to experiment with a more restricted format in which students only participated in discussions within their own class group.

We established the following time scale for the gradual inclusion of different forum discussion formats:

a. *Restricted discussion forums*: in this initial forum type, students were asked to participate 'within' their own group only with the topic introduced by each teacher, so there were two forums open with the same question. However, they could still read the other two groups' contributions. We introduced three discussions in this way (i) 'Beginning University', (ii) 'Natural Wonders' and (iii) 'Historical Events'.

b. *Open discussion forums*: we also decided to introduce a discussion forum, 'National Identity' (see Appendix 1), which was open to all enrolled subjects and which was opened up by only one teacher in the same way as we had done in the previous year in order to discover whether we had the same type of response as in the *restricted discussion forums*.

3. *Private discussion forums*: these forums were limited to the members of each one of the three groups only, which meant that students

were only able to participate in and read entries posted in their own reduced discussion groups rather than in the open or restricted discussion groups that had been used before. The final three discussion forums were (i) 'Television', (ii) 'Mini Sagas' and (iii) 'The Oscars and Cinema'.

4. Findings and implications

Once the data from the questionnaires had been collected, statistical analysis was used for the calculation of the mean, standard deviation (SD) and contingency tables of the variables.⁶ The entry L2 levels of the first-year university students who constituted our population sample ranged from A1 to C1 (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: CEFR*), with 48.7% of students having a level lower than B1 (A1 to A2).

On investigating the types and levels of motivation at work in our subjects, we designed a brief 14-item questionnaire using a Likert scale which was administered during a class session (see Appendix 2). The items either referred to intrinsic *language learning motivation* or extrinsic *classroom learning motivation*, with 7 items addressing each type respectively. We found that 51.2% of the participating subjects in this study seemed to have a dominant intrinsic *language learning motivation*, whereas the rest of the subjects in the group showed similar values for both *classroom learning motivation* and *language learning motivation* types. This is perhaps due to the nature of the degree they have enrolled in, in contrast with the more instrumentally motivated degree on offer at the same university in 'Translation and Interpreting'. Thus, it seems that a low level of *language learning motivation* is not the reason for lack of out-of-class participation in our online discussions.

We also wanted to observe the correlation between the learners' proficiency levels and their motivation type by using contingency tables in order to analyse the relation between these two variables (see Contingency Table 1). The results indicated that most of our CEFR level C1-C2 students

(83.33%) presented a dominant *language learning motivation* type and over half of the intermediate students (57.14%) also had a dominant *language learning motivation* type, whereas only 36.84% of our CEFR level A1-A2 students were found to have higher *language learning motivation*. These findings might be interpreted as indicating that higher proficiency levels reflect higher levels of *language learning motivation*.

CEFR levels	Motivation type			
	Dominant <i>language learning motivation</i>	% of subjects	Similar <i>language learning/ classroom learning motivation</i>	% of subjects
1. A1	6	36.84%	3	63.15%
2. A1+	0		2	
3. A2	1		7	
4. B1	3	57.14%	3	42.85%
5. B2	4		2	
6. B2+	1		1	
7. C1	4	83.33%	1	16.66%

8. C2	1		0	
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Table 1. Contingency table for proficiency level + motivation type

The data gathered from the questionnaire eliciting information about our subjects' Internet access and technological competence revealed that more than two thirds of our subjects (69.2%) had their own PC with an Internet connection rather than having to share one, whereas only two (5.2%) had to use public computers, and that a large number of students reported an interactive communicative use of the Internet by means of email (79.5%) and chat programmes (53.8%). Therefore, it appears that infrequent use of our virtual learning platform can be neither attributed to a lack of technological resources or competence, nor to lack of relevance to their own realities or needs, since, it seems that ICT tools played a large role in our subjects' academic and personal lives. However, it must be highlighted here that only 38.5% of our subjects claimed to use the Internet to improve their English, which might be an indicator of their lack of metacognitive awareness of the Internet as a powerful language learning tool or resource, or even as a means to further their self-directed learning. On investigating our subjects' use of the online *resources* in our e-learning platform, 84.6% reported that they used it on a regular basis, with only 10.3% admitting to not using it at all. All the different types of resources were used in varying degrees, with the most popular application overall corresponding to that used for posting updated information about classes or the subject in general, the 'Latest News' block (42.4%) and the 'general information block' (21.2%), followed by accuracy-based grammar practice activities (42.4%) and grammar links (33.3%). Interactive tutorial dialogues were also used regularly by almost half of the sample (36.4%) in order to contact their teachers, mainly for informational purposes.

With regard to the analysis of the frequency of students' participation in the *Moodle virtual discussion forums*, after tracking the

online activity of each subject using the participation report included in our e-learning platform, it was observed that there were four different participation profiles: (i) 6 subjects (15.4%) *never* read or wrote entries in these forums; (ii) 11 subjects (28.2%) only *participated passively*, i.e. they read what other classmates had posted but did not contribute by writing an opinion; (iii) 19 subjects (48.7%) read their peers' contributions and *sometimes* wrote their own opinion; (iv) 3 subjects (7.7%) *participated in all* the seven discussion forums set up during the year (see Table 2 below).

Discussion forum participation [Mean: 2.49; SD: 0.854]	Percentages of subjects
1. Never reads or writes	15.4%
2. Reads but never writes	28.2%
3. Reads and sometimes writes	48.7%
4. Always reads and writes	7.7%

Table 2. Subjects' participation in the *virtual discussion forums*

Questionnaire results showed different reasons for using or not using the *virtual discussion forums*: 57.6% gave interaction with their classmates as their main reason for participating, with only 36.4% claiming to use them to improve their English. With regard to our original premise that low participation in online discussion forums might be due to affective issues such as anxiety, only 12.1% claimed this to be the case, with the same

amount reporting it as a resource which was too complicated. Other reasons given were lack of time, lack of something to say, technical problems, and lack of interest.

The comparison of the variables corresponding to *discussion forum participation* and *proficiency level* (Contingency Table 3) revealed that there was no significant difference in the participation of our subjects, with lower and intermediate level learners participating slightly more than higher level learners: 57.9% of CEFR level A1-A2 students (11 subjects out of 19) and 57.1% CEFR level B1-B2 students (8 subjects out of 14) as opposed to 50.0% CEFR level C1-C2 students (3 subjects out of 6) read and sometimes/always posted a contribution. Thus, it does not seem to be a question of proficiency level or lack of communicative competence that prevents learners from participating in these *virtual discussion forums*. There may of course be other factors involved such as the fact that more proficient students might not be motivated to post entries as they see little benefit in doing so, but it is beyond the scope of this study to address this variable. For the purposes of this analysis, we consulted the participation report for each subject in each discussion forum we had set up in order to access data corresponding to the number of posts they submitted or the number of forums they viewed rather than the quality or length of their entries.

CEFR levels	Students' discussion forum participation			
	Never reads or writes	Reads but never writes	Reads and sometimes writes	Always reads and writes
1. A1	1	1	7	0
2. A1+	0	1	1	0
3. A2	1	4	3	0
4. B1	2	2	0	2
5. B2	0	2	4	0
6. B2+	0	0	2	0
7. C1	2	1	1	1
8. C2	0	0	1	0

Table 3. Contingency table for proficiency level + discussion forum participation

Our concern about the students' low participation levels in *virtual discussion forums* had led us to devise different discussion formats with the expectation that the use of a *private discussion forum* in which students could only read and be read by their own group classmates might motivate and encourage them to actively participate in this type of format. However, as can be seen in Table 4 below which breaks down the participation results

for each of the seven *virtual discussion forums*, the findings revealed that there was no notable difference in participation levels on experimenting with different discussion formats (*open vs restricted vs private*), since there was an average of 29.9% of students participating in *restricted discussion forums* and an even lower average (19.86%) actively reading and writing in the so-called *private discussion forums*.

Particip.	Restr. 1	Restr. 2	Restr. 3	Open 4	Priv. 5	Priv. 6	Priv. 7
Yes	41%	15.4%	33.3%	25.6%	21.1%	10.3%	28.2%
	Average: 29.9%				Average: 19.8%		
No	59%	84.6%	66.7%	74.4%	78.9%	89.7%	71.8%
	Average: 70.1%				Average: 80.1		

Table 4. Subjects' participation in the different discussion forum formats

Table 5 compares the variables *proficiency level* and *detailed forum participation*. A closer look at the results revealed that in five of the seven *virtual discussion forums*, the participation of lower level students was slightly higher than the participation of intermediate students, and considerably higher than that of the advanced ones. These figures could indicate, on the one hand, that advanced learners feel that they do not need extra practice and that the forum format or topic did not seem to motivate them to participate more actively. On the other hand, it could be concluded that lower and intermediate level students, aware of their need to improve their level, made the effort to practise their English in these *virtual discussion forums*, but that the differences in the forum format did not seem to encourage them to participate more in a particular type of format, since in fact the figures showed that there were more contributions in the *restricted*

discussion forums (89.4%, or 17 contributions out of 19 subjects, for lower level students, 92.8%, or 13 contributions out of 14 subjects, for intermediate students and 66.6%, or 4 contributions out of 6 subjects, for advanced ones) than in the *private discussion* forums (57.8%, or 11 contributions out of 17 subjects, for low level students, 64.2%, or 9 contributions out of 14 subjects for intermediate students, and 50.0%, or 3 contributions out of 6 subjects for advanced students).

CEFR levels	Restr. 1		Restr. 2		Restr.3		Open 4		Priv. 5		Priv. 6		Priv. 7	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1. A1	6	3	1	8	4	5	1	8	2	7	2	7	2	7
2. A1+	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	2	1	1	0	2	1	1
3. A2	2	6	0	8	1	7	2	6	1	6	0	8	2	6
4. B1	3	3	2	4	2	4	1	5	1	5	1	5	1	5
5. B2	2	4	1	5	1	5	2	4	1	5	0	6	3	3
6. B2+	1	1	0	2	1	1	2	0	1	1	0	2	1	1
7. C1	1	4	1	4	2	3	1	4	1	4	1	4	1	4
8. C2	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1

Table 5. Contingency table for proficiency level + detailed forum participation.

5. Conclusions and areas for future study

Having seen that the lower than expected levels of participation in the *virtual discussion forums* do not seem to be related to variables such as *level of proficiency*, low levels of intrinsic *language learning motivation*, or affective factors such as language learning anxiety, we shall suggest some possible conclusions and areas for future research.

Many of our learners did not seem to consider our *Moodle* VLE as a means to improve language proficiency; they seemed to use it as an online resource for academic support (for example grammar practice). They participated in varying degrees when required to give opinions in the *virtual discussion forums*, and not quite so much as they did when required to submit written work in class for formal evaluation. At first sight, it might merely seem to be a question of passivity; however, we would like to suggest that it is perhaps also a question of limited autonomy and metacognitive awareness of the role of self-directed practice in language learning (Anderson, 2008). We also feel that some learners might be overwhelmed by the quantity of resources available and especially in view of the competition we face with other subjects they are enrolled in.

Our learners appear to need more guidance and support to help them become gradually more autonomous as they still seem to be somewhat teacher-dependent at this initial stage of their university studies. As corroborated in a recent qualitative study, learner independence is the change most frequently reported by beginning university students as they complete the transition from school to tertiary education (Bavendiek, 2009). They seem reluctant to realise that it is their responsibility to exploit learning opportunities outside class sessions; it is certainly not enough to provide a VLE such as *Moodle* and expect them to use it enthusiastically, especially since we gave them little training (one introductory session), and did not monitor them closely afterwards.

The possibly motivating effect of greater teacher participation as a group member might be a future consideration as shown by positive results in other studies (Muangsamai, 2003). The lack of official evaluation or grading of their online performance might be another factor which might lessen the perceived significance or usefulness of online practice such as the *virtual discussion forums* as found in other studies (Kannan & Macknish, 2000). This is something to be taken into account in setting up online discussion tasks in the future.

It is also true that we had positive results in the current study, particularly with reference to the higher than expected levels of participation of lower level learners. Maybe discussing topics with their classmates through an online written media encourages learners to be more confident communicators in English, or perhaps observing linguistic deficiencies in their peers' contributions helps them feel more relaxed and less anxious as they are able to notice and monitor others' mistakes (Rubio, 2007; Muangsamai, 2003; Arnold, 1999; Tsui, 1996). At first the freedom to make mistakes and unfamiliarity with peers might heighten anxiety, but after a while learners become more familiar with this format and see how their peers make mistakes too. Students who are reticent in class may also react differently in online forums as they have time to rehearse and revise utterances, for example, in such an asynchronous mode. In future research studies, we intend to focus on affective issues such as these with lower level learners, as well as the effect of greater teacher participation, regular explicit monitoring and feedback (together with official grading) for learners on their performance. We shall also integrate more VLE activities in class sessions, and invite learners to set up and monitor their own *restricted* and *private discussion forums*. Hopefully in this way we will enjoy higher levels of participation with the ensuing rise in language learning motivation, metacognitive awareness and greater learner autonomy.

Notes

¹ Anxiety has been shown to affect language learning negatively as many classroom-based studies have documented (e.g. Plastina 2005-6; Horwitz, 2001; Oxford, 1999, Arnold, 1999).

² At the time of conducting this study, our Campus Virtual was a new learning environment for the majority of our subjects. Nowadays with the implementation of the “European Higher Education Space” e-learning is becoming an obligatory component of all further education programmes.

³ For the purposes of this study, we consider intrinsic motivation to be the type of motivation to learn, that which is more internally driven and views learning as an end in itself, whereas extrinsic motivation refers to more instrumental reasons for learning such as professional advancement. Ushioda provides a concise summary of recent discussion of motivational types (2008: 20-22).

⁴ These reasons include lack of funds to travel to universities on the Spanish mainland or low grades in the entrance examinations.

⁵ We used *The Interactive Test of English Level* from the “Learn4good” website, one of many available online language tests which are free of charge and one that we have used on different occasions in class time with our incoming undergraduate students (http://www.learn4good.com/languages/english_level.htm). The results of this test correspond to eight levels, from beginners to advanced, which we converted to measures corresponding to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages for the purposes of this study.

⁶ The computer programme for statistical analysis SPSS 14.0 for Windows (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used in order to analyse the data.

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Appendix 1

Sample *open* discussion forum: “National Identity”

The screenshot shows a forum thread with three posts. The first post is the main topic, and the next two are replies. Each post has a title, a byline, and a body of text. The first post is titled 'National Identity' and asks for opinions on its importance and stereotypes. The second reply, titled 'Re: National Identity', discusses the author's love for their country and their view on stereotypes. The third reply, also titled 'Re: National Identity', shares the author's pride in their Spanish heritage and their opinion on stereotypes. The interface includes a search bar at the top, a post title bar, and navigation links like 'Delete | Reply' and 'Show parent | Split | Delete | Reply'.

11169: National Identity
by [redacted]

Hi everyone,

Recently we've begun discussing national identity in our classes. Here are a couple of questions for you to think about and reply to in your own time. Firstly, how important is national identity to you? Also, what do you think about stereotypes? Are they harmless, or maybe dangerous, in your opinion?

[Delete](#) | [Reply](#)

Re: National Identity
by [redacted]

I love my country and almost all brazilian people feel the same, so I think national identity is important. It's like to be part of something, I don't know how to explain this feeling.

I think the stereotypes are not false at all, but exaggerated. They generalize, so they can be dangerous.

[Show parent](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)

Re: National Identity
by [redacted]

National identity is important for me. I am proud of to be part of my country, Spain. I love my mother tongue , the food , the customs and culture of my country. so I don't change my national identity for anything in the world!
In my opinion , stereotypes are a little dangerous. I think that you can't generalize in this matter because not all people are the same.

[Show parent](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)

Appendix 2

MOTIVATION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

This anonymous questionnaire is part of an investigation project on learning English and the role of motivation. Please answer the following questions as honestly as you can, using the scale on the answer sheet. Thank you very much for your time and cooperation!

1. I really enjoy learning English.
2. I'm studying English because it will help me get a job in the future.
3. I like the sound of English when I hear people speaking.
4. My parents wanted me to study this degree.
5. I enjoy communicating with other people in English.
6. I'm studying English because I want to be an English teacher one day.
7. I usually try to read or watch films in their original language.
8. Knowing English will help when I travel to different countries.

9. I would like to spend time living in an English-speaking country.
10. I'm studying English because it's an international language of communication.
11. I'm interested in the culture and people of English-speaking countries.
12. I'm studying English because I can't do the degree I originally wanted to do.
13. I would like to meet more English-speaking people.
14. I enjoy English classes.
15. I use English on a regular basis outside class, at home or at work.

Appendix 3

CAMPUS VIRTUAL: “LENGUA INGLESA I” (Curso 2008-2009)

NUMERO DE IDENTIFICACION: ____ CURSO: 1º __Repetidor

1. ¿Utilizas la página web de la asignatura en el Campus Virtual?

SI tu respuesta es Sí, pasa a la pregunta 3, si es NO pasa a la pregunta 2.

2. ¿Por qué NO utilizas la página del Campus Virtual? Marca con una X tus razones.
- Porque no suelo utilizar Internet
 - Porque no sé cómo utilizar el Campus Virtual
 - Porque no me interesa
 - Porque no tengo tiempo
 - Porque hay mucho contenido y me agobio
 - Otro
3. Marca con una X los contenidos que has utilizado:
- Información general de la asignatura: proyecto docente, horario de tutorías de profesoras, novedades y anuncios, etc.
 - Useful Links* (bloque 1): enlaces web como la página de “BBC Learning English” o “Phonemic Chart”
 - Enlaces web relacionados con los temas de los distintos módulos, por ejemplo, la canción de Bob Marley, el artículo de *Wikipedia* sobre “Reality Shows”, el “listening” sobre Kennedy, etc.

-
- d. Enlaces web relacionados con aspectos gramaticales y léxicos tratados en los distintos módulos, por ejemplo, la página web para practicar “used to and would”
 - e. Actividades suplementarias de gramática realizadas por las profesoras (“handouts”)
 - f. Respuestas (“key”) a las actividades marcadas por las profesoras
 - g. Información sobre los otros participantes que cursan la asignatura
 - h. Diálogo de tutoría privada virtual
 - i. Mensajes de correo electrónico a otros alumnos o a las profesoras a través de la página de la asignatura
 - j. Tablón de novedades y anuncios
4. ¿Cuáles son los tres contenidos que aparecen listados en el nº 3 que utilizas con mayor frecuencia? Escribe aquí las letras correspondientes.
1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
5. Foros de discusión (marca con una X tu respuesta):
- a. No he leído ni participado en ningún foro.*
 - b. He leído algunos o todos los foros de discusión pero nunca he participado de forma activa en ninguno.*
 - c. He leído algunos o todos los foros de discusión y he participado en alguno de forma activa.
 - d. He leído todos los foros de discusión y he participado de forma activa en todos ellos.

* Si tu respuesta ha sido la (a) o la (b), ¿cuál ha sido el motivo?

6. Participar en un foro de discusión para mí es (marca la opción u opciones correspondientes):
- a. una manera de interactuar con mis compañeros/profesoras fuera de clase
 - b. una manera de aprender y mejorar mi nivel de inglés
 - c. demasiado complicado porque no me manejo bien en la página (ej. cómo acceder al foro, dónde escribir la respuesta, etc.)
 - d. vergonzoso porque no me gusta que otros compañeros lean cosas que yo he escrito
 - e. otro.

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