

Integrating Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) as a tool in face-to-face English courses¹

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Introduction

CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication), although not intended for the language classroom, can be exploited for the language classroom with many advantages over paper and ink. This work explores the nature and use of BBSs (Bulletin Board Systems) and revises some of the work that teachers around the world have been carrying out to implement them in their curricula and to give their students the opportunity to interact with other learners around the world. Some of the work that was done with students at the College of Telematics at the University of Colima, Mexico will be described. Finally, a critical evaluation of the experience will be presented.

1. CALL and CMC

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has existed for nearly four decades. In the 1960s and 1970s, it virtually existed for only an intellectual elite. The reason for this was simple: as computers were very expensive, only a select number of institutions, universities and government programs could afford them. Nevertheless, the foundations for CALL, based on Skinner's behaviorist theory and structuralism, were set at that time (Skinner, 1957; Chomsky, 1965). Due to the influence of structuralism there was a belief at the time that language consisted of a limited number of rules. If one could learn those rules, one could apply them to an infinite number of situations, although exactly what the rules are and how they can be determined is still an issue. Exercises were designed to teach or test the structures of the language through repetition (conditioning). Although voices questioning the validity of a behaviorist model for CALL have been raised throughout the years, it has not been entirely rejected because it continues to produce results in appropriate circumstances and with some specific activities, such as vocabulary acquisition and grammar drills. One remarkable case is the American Army language training programs during World War II which succeeded under a behaviorist philosophy.

CALL was significantly transformed with the advent of the personal computer (PC). It is then that individual teachers, and eventually companies and institutions, started creating CALL software en masse. The communicative approach that emerged in the 1970s and has since prevailed in language education has also permeated into CALL design, al-

¹ This is a refereed article.

though most CALL software is still predominantly behaviorist. It was hoped that the so-called communicative CALL, with the technology available in the 1980s, would make content more meaningful, but it actually did not come close to being communicative in its purest sense. In this mode, computers acted as "the teacher," and the only feedback they were able to provide was "right" or "wrong." (See, for example, any of the programs developed in the 1980s, such as *Hangman*, *Skull or Grammar Master*.) *Storyboard*, however, did allow for more creativity, and newer versions have been released by its publishers. It is interesting to note that even today, many programs still provide predominantly behaviorist feedback.

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) emerged outside both CALL and the English Language Teaching (ELT) field. CMC was born and has grown with the Internet. It is difficult to tell one from the other at times. The first Internet tools could be defined as CMC. Tinet, for example, allowed the intellectual elites to communicate through text at a fraction of the cost of a phone call. These technologies, still in use, but now surpassed by more visual interfaces, allowed individuals to interact with each other (rather than with the computer alone); initially only through text, and eventually other media were incorporated. CMC is concerned with "communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers." (Herring, 1996, p. 1) Today with the rapid expansion of the World Wide Web (WWW), computers communicate with each other all the time, and people behind the computer screen can also communicate with each other, form communities, and create and maintain relationships. In the end, it is not the computers that communicate, but rather the people behind the screens that have developed complex ways of meeting and communicating through CMC.

Although the Internet is thought of as a rather new tool, it actually emerged from the interconnection of smaller networks. Local networks were already available in the 1980s. Known today as LAN (Local Area Networks), these computers were connected with each other within a computer room or even within a whole university campus. Communication was first possible only within these networks, but gradually they gained popularity as computers became widespread in more homes, schools and offices (Hiltz, 1994).

Some of the CMC tools are: e-mail, IRC (Internet Relay Chat), Videoconferencing, MSN (Microsoft Network), MUD (Multi-User-Domain, Object Oriented), BBSs, etc. These tools were not specifically created with language learners in mind; yet, since they have the potential for providing opportunities for meaningful interaction, they have been and are being used for educational purposes.

Computer-Mediated Communication can be synchronous (chat, MOO, videoconferencing) or asynchronous (e-mail, BBSs). The former means that interaction takes place when individuals who participate in the exchange are physically present at the different terminals at the same time. The latter means that communication occurs at intervals. These intervals can be very short (a few minutes), or they can take days, or even longer.

For most circumstances and for most people, the best form of interaction is synchronous because there is the possibility for negotiation of roles and meaning. The best form of synchronous communication is obviously face-to-face interaction. As a consequence, there is a tendency of technology to try to bring people as close as possible to face-to-face interaction. CMC represents a second-best solution to the problem of people not being physically present at a given place and at a certain time. There are several advantages of CMC when used in certain contexts. Some research has suggested that students who normally would have remained silent in the classroom contribute more in this kind of communication. Students are less afraid to "lose face." In a review of literature Abrams (2001) found that "Several studies in second language acquisition have already examined the ability of computer-mediated communication (CMC) to provide learners with a forum in which they can 'produce more language' (Kern and Beauvois) and 'more diverse discourse functions' (Chun, 1994) than during in-class discussions, and in which they can become the initiators of discourse instead of mere followers of teacher-directed interaction" (p. 490).

When comparing synchronous with asynchronous CMC, we find that both modalities can be beneficial, but in different circumstances. While immediacy may be required during a board meeting, in an educational context (usually a synchronous meeting), asynchronous communication would be more suitable for a situation in which students are required to present their ideas in an organized way. In this situation, real-time interaction is "neither necessary nor desirable" (Hoffman, 1996, p. 73). In synchronous communication, negotiation is possible, whereas it is more difficult in asynchronous communication. On the other hand, synchronous communication gives little time for reflection and the organization of ideas. These two modes of communication can therefore be complementary.

Computers in writing

Traditionally, writing has been an important part of language classroom instruction--sometimes in the form of very controlled exercises. In many cases, however, writing allows students to express themselves more or less freely in the target language. Because of its non-objective nature, writing has had problems in being incorporated into CALL, or

even CAT (Computer-Adaptive Testing). Recently, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) developed an Internet-based writing evaluation tool, which is one of the few cases of incorporating writing in CALL or CAT.

Evaluating writing by means of a computer remains a difficult task, since writing is essentially not a behaviorist activity. Writing involves creativity which cannot be evaluated objectively. "The early studies of computer use in composition focused almost exclusively on word processing ... The promise of the computer as a writing tool seemed to match the newly strengthened emphasis on the writing process in English composition and rhetoric" (Phinney, 1996, p. 137).

The early research on CALL envisaged the "computer-teacher." That is, based on the student's responses the computer should be able to intelligently guide the student to further questions or exercises. However, there has been a shift to viewing the computer as a tool, rather than as a teacher. CMC is a perfect example of the computer not intervening in, or evaluating what the user types. Yet, learning occurs through the interactive process that the student engages in with other individuals.

As stated above, CMC is not limited to the learning of languages. It is not even tied to specific learning at all because it is a creation of mainstream technologies which have been made available to individuals around the world. Indeed, most research on the use of CMC involves groups of learners in a wide range of contexts and ages, from K-12 to university undergraduate and graduate students. Many studies have been carried out with MBA students (videoconferencing); other studies involve history, math or biology students, and, of course, language learners. Sharda, Romano & Lucca, (undated) talk about several cases in which e-mail and bulletin board technologies "have been used to support group learning projects and group discussions ..." (p. 2).

Empirical studies

Many articles have been published on how to use CMC tools, especially e-mail and videoconferencing, as well as MOO and BBSs (see Warschauer, 1995; Liaw & Johnson, 2001; Hanna & de Nooy, 2003; Backer, 2001, for example). The range of efficacy and results is incredibly varied. Mostly, researchers have an optimistic bias, even when results may not be encouraging. There is a plethora, for example, of cases of "e-mail pen pals." In these studies, students sometimes fail to respond to messages, or they do so after a long period of time, and only upon a second request. There are, of course, dozens of possible explanations, but the most logical one may simply be a lack of interest on the part of the students.

Abrams (2001) investigated the participant roles that learners adopted in the two different writing environments: synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) and pencil-and-paper group jour-

nals. The results indicated that while some social roles appeared in both writing contexts (speaker, respondent, scolder, creator of in-group identity), others were found only in CMC (attacker, challenger, supporter and joker). Not only did learners adopt a greater variety of participant roles during CMC than in group journals, these roles were also more interactively negotiated in the CMC environment.

Law and Johnson (2001) studied the e-mail interaction between two groups of students, one in Taiwan, and the other in Texas. They found that "curiosity toward the other culture was a motivating factor for on-going correspondence, but cultural presumptions were sometimes a hindrance to communication ... cross-cultural e-mail correspondence sensitized the participants to cultural differences and served as a learning experience for better cross-cultural understanding" (p. 235).

Recent studies have found that in addition to enhancing learner's linguistic development, CMC has "equalizing social effects" (Abrams, 2001). This happens because in a normal classroom setting, it is the teacher who presides over interactions and it is the teacher who decides who will talk and when. At the same time, there are students who feel intimidated by the presence of their peers. In CMC, students feel freer. They can create their own roles and negotiate their own interactions. Why many students do not exploit this advantage remains to be considered. But for the sake of those who do, it is worth the effort it takes to implement CMC.

The most important ingredient for interaction to take place is a special appeal. It might be the very fact that their peers are from the other side of the world, or it may simply be that the choice of topics interests them; it may even be the fact that communication is taking place through a computer. However, this latter argument/situation may be rather weak because once the novelty factor of computer communication vanishes, interaction may disappear after a few responses if the topics are not interesting enough and if a solid enough relationship has not yet been built. An ideal interaction would be like that reported by Drave (1993) in which "Students are reading and writing in English as part of a negotiation process so enthralling that they forget they are using a foreign language."

Constructivism and Cooperative Learning

Constructivist theory, most notably established by Dewey (in Campbell, 1995), Piaget (1967) and Vygotsky (1978) states that learning is "constructed" by learners as they interact with each other and the environment, rather than "discovered," as in the Platonic idea of knowledge that exists independently of the individual. Moreover, Vygotsky argues that language and learning are "intertwined." Cooperative learning fits well within the constructivist model in that it "maximizes opportuni-

ties for authentic and communicative language practice in a motivating, supportive, and stress-reduced environment" (Ghaith, 2001).

2. BULLETIN BOARD SYSTEMS (BBSs)

This work focuses on Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs), which are a CMC tool. The web site Coocinda² (which is not an ESL/EFL page) defines a BBS as follows:

A BBS is a place where people with a computer and modem can come together and share files, messages and ideas. BBSs are usually free, labours of love by those who run them. Some BBSs may charge a small fee to help with the expenses, but most don't.

Some BBSs are devoted to specific interests; others offer a more general service. BBSs are like virtual communities, a place to meet new people and make new friends. You can meet James from another town, or Rosemary from over the road. You can exchange ideas with people that have similar interests, or learn new interests from others. You can play on-line games, competing against your friends and neighbors.

BBSs have an enormous potential for meaningful language practice. There have been many text-based BBSs and many styles have evolved over the years. We are at a stage in which BBSs can be found virtually everywhere and on any topic. They are "topic free." The kind of BBS that we will describe here is as it appears in its most recent and widely used interface: PHP (Hypertext Protocol). It is programmed by using databases. It is more user-friendly than its predecessors and it works almost like any other web site. That is, any literate Internet user can navigate through it easily without any further training because there are no special codes to learn. For the most part, its interface is much like e-mail. The most important thing is that one does not need to know how to write programs to make use of them. There are hundreds of BBSs available in many languages that cover many different topics. Nevertheless, becoming a BBS moderator does require more than just knowing how to use it; still it is not really very complicated.

Hoffman (1996) proposes various principles for establishing successful interactions. These are:

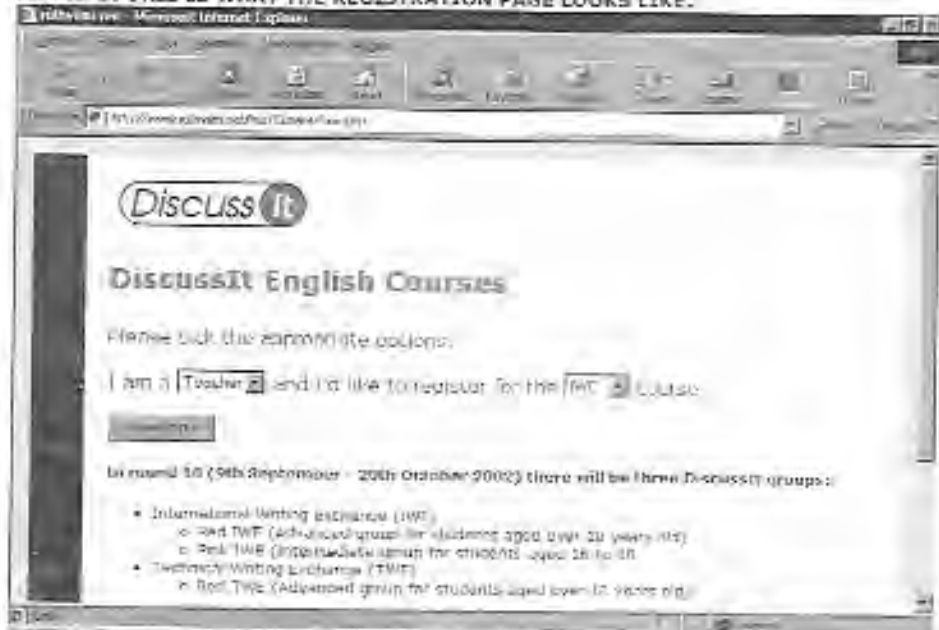
- A successful initial contact;
- The novelty and excitement of quick and efficient global communication;
- The need for a common purpose to facilitate a depth of authentic communication that includes creativity and originality; and
- Students' guided reflection, aided by the teacher, on their performance as individuals and as members of the group (p. 74).

² <http://members.zcomad.com/ai/coocinda/bbs/index.html>

BBS Projects

Ruth Viimi (<http://www.writelit.in/>) maintains an interesting site that contains various tools to aid her students. Her forums are open for other teachers to join. The limits she sets are realistic even for most Mexican contexts with large classes (my own classes have 36 students). In her forums, one can register as many as 50 students per institution. Teachers can register at <http://www.ruthviimi.net/html/Current/form.php>. The requirements, as well as every detail about the discussion rounds, are stated in the guide you will receive by e-mail upon registering, which you can normally do at: http://www.ruthviimi.net/html/Current/rwi_intro.php. As part of my research on the uses of BBSs, I registered one of my classes for the "18th round," which helped me have a better idea of how this site actually works.

IMAGE 1. THIS IS WHAT THE REGISTRATION PAGE LOOKS LIKE:



After registering, users are given a login and password, which will allow them to identify themselves and contribute to the forums with their postings. Students have control of their profiles. They can always access the information they have provided and change it. They can refer to their pictures and provide a short autobiography, etc.

IMAGE 2. EDITING YOUR PROFILE



The main purpose of a BBS is to have people write something, and it is this very specific characteristic that makes it unique for language practice. All forums have a core topic. Users will post questions to the community and other users will respond to them. There is great liberty regarding what can be posted in a forum. Normally, though, there is a certain netiquette as to what cannot be posted: e.g., offensive wording, vulgarities, etc.

There usually is a moderator. The moderator determines the topics although sometimes, the participants themselves set the topics. In the case of language courses, the moderators tend to set the topics for the students.

IMAGE 3. A SAMPLE LIST OF TOPICS IN RUTH VILMI'S FORUMS. THREADS ARE ALL DIRECT RESPONSES TO A POSTING; THESE NORMALLY RESULT IN FURTHER DISCUSSION.

Thread	Threads	Posts	Last post
B. Test messages	16	226	
IWE Round Eighteen Red Test messages	(11 new)	(124 new)	20/07/02 05:35 PM
B. Discussion topics 1-10	46	980	
IWE Round Eighteen Red Discussion topic 1			20/05/02 04:00 AM
Discussion with congregation	22	101	
IWE Round Eighteen Red Discussion topic 2	(11 new)	(71 new)	20/05/02 10:02 AM
B3. Fraud	3	5	
IWE Round Eighteen Red Discussion topic 3	(1 new)	(2 new)	20/05/02 02:24 AM
B3. The end of life	6	39	
IWE Round Eighteen Red Discussion topic 3		(13 new)	20/05/02 09:34 PM
B4. The rights of homosexuals	6	24	
IWE Round Eighteen Red Discussion topic 4	(1 new)	(14 new)	20/05/02 04:10 PM
B5. Biological warfare	2	10	
IWE Round Eighteen Red Discussion topic 5	(2 new)	(10 new)	20/05/02 07:50 PM
B6. The state of the world	3	15	
IWE Round Eighteen Red Discussion topic 6		(11 new)	20/05/02 09:29 PM
B7. Society and health	14	29	
IWE Round Eighteen Red Discussion topic 7	(1 new)	(19 new)	20/05/02 11:23 PM
B8. The presence of harm in children	13	40	
IWE Round Eighteen Red Discussion topic 8	(11 new)	(12 new)	20/05/02 01:15 AM
B9. Changing bodies and faith	2	76	
IWE Round Eighteen Red Discussion topic 9		(7 new)	20/07/02 03:00 PM
B10. In the news	11	61	
IWE Round Eighteen Red Discussion topic 10	(12 new)	(19 new)	20/05/02 10:21 PM
B. Overall average	7	25	

Another project that has been available is Masahito Watanabe's Ibunka project: <http://www.wata-wbb.com/> (You may need a plug-in to visualize this page).

This BBS includes some unique characteristics I have not found elsewhere. For example, there is a photo album of every class participating in the rounds, as well as video albums whenever possible;

IMAGE 4: A VIDEO ALBUM.

The screenshot shows a web bulletin board titled "WEB BULLETIN BOARD" for "Meikai Univ.". Below the title, there are navigation icons and a list of users. The main content is a grid of video album thumbnails, each with a small video frame, a name, and a date.

Video Album	Member Name	Avatar	Member Name
<p>slanab06.WMV Size: 497.9K Date: 02/09/11 14:33 9:39:37</p>	slanab07.WMV Size: 180.0K Date: 02/09/11 14:44 9:40:04	slanab08.WMV Size: 180.0K Date: 02/09/11 14:44 9:40:04	slanab09.WMV Size: 497.9K Date: 02/09/11 14:33 9:39:37
slanab10.WMV Size: 497.9K Date: 02/09/11 14:33 9:40:04	slanab11.WMV Size: 497.9K Date: 02/09/11 14:33 9:40:04	slanab12.WMV Size: 497.9K Date: 02/09/11 14:33 9:40:04	slanab13.WMV Size: 497.9K Date: 02/09/11 14:33 9:40:04
slanab14.WMV Size: 497.9K Date: 02/09/11 14:33 9:40:04	slanab15.WMV Size: 497.9K Date: 02/09/11 14:33 9:40:04	slanab16.WMV Size: 497.9K Date: 02/09/11 14:33 9:40:04	slanab17.WMV Size: 497.9K Date: 02/09/11 14:33 9:40:04

Another characteristic of the Ibunka project is that it gives teachers administrator privileges. This means a lot when dealing with administrative affairs. You can know whether your students actually posted anything on the forum and what it is they posted. You can also control their individual profiles--this is very useful when students forget their passwords, etc.

The most appealing characteristic of the Ibunka Project is that its moderator publishes a monthly newsletter in several formats that rescues the work of the term and encourages individuals to continue contributing.

At the end of a "round," critical and constructive evaluation is both encouraged and required of students and teachers alike.

3. BBSs IN THE COLLEGE OF TELEMATICS

The initial purpose of using a forum and integrating it into the classroom at the College of Telematics was to allow students to make their writings public. The rationale is that people write to be read in the real world. There is no reason why, then, writing in a foreign language should be different. While it had been possible for students to publish

selected pieces of their writing through different media (a class board, a newspaper, an oral presentation), the BBS forum provided a unique opportunity to make more of what students wrote available to their peers.

We used a platform that is available in our university: <http://siant.ucof.mx> as well as other external platforms. Due to space constraints, the details of this experience and its development will be the object of another article. In the following sections we describe some of our findings:

Normally, students are required to hand in a composition every other week. Word processing is encouraged, if not actually required in their assignments. Since we believe that writing compositions is a valuable learning experience, composition writing has long been present in our language programs. In the past, students submitted handwritten compositions, but as computers became available to everyone on campus and the advantages of word-processing became evident, all students have been encouraged to use them. With the use of the BBS students were able to save money on paper, avoid printing problems and make sure their work had actually been posted and that the teacher would therefore see it.

In our case, printing had always been a problem. The computer lab staff was not always available. We explored other ways of delivery. We accepted word files handed in on a diskette or sent through e-mail. Neither was absolutely reliable. Diskettes were often damaged and e-mail did not always arrive. So, to avoid these problems, the BBS proved to be a reliable delivery option for students' writing tasks. They could always verify that their work had been posted and delivery depended on them alone and not on external administrative limitations. This form of delivery proved to be ecological as well, since hundreds of sheets of paper were saved.

Instructions for any given assignment were made as clearly as possible. If students did not attend a class, the only thing they had to do was log in to the forum and read the instructions for the assignment. In our experience if a teacher does not explain the task clearly to the students, they tend to produce differing outcomes. Normally, instructions should be given in print. In the case of the forums, instructions were written as clearly as possible so that students knew exactly what they were expected to do.

IMAGE 5: INSTRUCTIONS

The screenshot shows a Microsoft Internet Explorer window with the address bar displaying "Recursos - CIAM - Microsoft Internet Explorer". The page title is "CIAM" and the URL is "http://www.ciam.edu.mx/". The page content is a forum post titled "Contratación del Turno" by user "Jose Miguel Rodriguez Heyet". The post is dated "May 27, 2005" and has a subject line "Duda del 27th May". The main text of the post discusses work schedules in the United States, comparing ten-hour days with three days off versus a standard eight-hour day and five-day week. The author asks for advantages and disadvantages of each plan and requests feedback on their choice. The post includes a signature for Jose Miguel Rodriguez Heyet, an English Teacher at the College of Toluca, with the email address "mjh@uad.mx". There is also a smaller version of the post visible below, which is partially obscured.

By being able to look at other students' writings, students get a better idea of what they are expected to do. Sometimes, as clear as the instructions may be, especially during the first stages of a project, students do not have a clear idea of exactly what they are expected to do to meet the teachers' requirements. They feel more reassured when, after looking at other students' responses, they see that they have written similar texts. This is critical for students' gaining confidence that they are doing what they are expected to do--or at least if they are wrong, so are the others! It also helps set a standard for the kind of work expected of a class.

IMAGE 6: SIMILAR ASSIGNMENTS.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the following content:

Author	Signature	Date
Mellon
Mellon

The text of the assignments includes:

- A good spouse is a good friend. The real test of love is not how you love, but how you support her/his spouse.
- A good spouse is someone that you love, but not in a way that you love someone else. It is not how you love, but how you support her/his spouse.
- The reason that you are married, is not because you love and there is no other way.
- What makes a good spouse?
- A good spouse is someone that you can trust. It is your best friend, somebody that love you and help you in your journey.
- When a good spouse supports your own progress and admits you will be get a solution, it is someone that works for the better and take care of you.
- Is your relationship in a healthy state?

Because this form of delivery keeps a record of all relevant information, administrators can always find out which students comply with their assignments. Cookie-enabled browsers (cookies are small packages that will keep information about as many details as the site administrator needs about its visitors) allow administrators to track all the relevant work a student does while logged on: Whether they read other students' articles or not, how long their visit lasted; how many articles they read; how many replies they gave and how many replies they received, etc.

Peer correction and group correction have a place in BBS-enhanced writing experiences. Administering them is complicated at first, but once the students (and above all, the teachers) understand the basics and form a scheme of participation, there can be writing exchange programs which are not limited by space constraints. Students can cooperate with international partners to support each other in their writing progress. They read someone else's work and return it with feedback. The original writer will reciprocate (that is, read their work and return it with feedback). This scheme gives any individual student the possibility of providing comments and feedback on any other text.

IMAGE 7 PEER CORRECTION

Internet Explorer - CIAM - Microsoft Internet Explorer

Address: Sigüenza

I give you a 5 (Excellent) but check your writing because you wrote the word "forever"
 twice.

I liked the story and how you answered it. I found some details you wrote will be and I think that must be will be. I give you 5.

I read this book too. And I think I give you a 5 in a long interesting essay.

Hello Uaida
 I read your comment on the novel. I see you've improved your English a lot. Congratulations!
 Abel Ramos
 Note: This document number was already done. You did not see details. The show. Run

BBSs are normally closed communities. However, some are open in the sense that everyone can read postings on them. Also, forums can be created for open writing contests. There are some forums where outsiders can fill in a short, objective evaluation form after reading a given article by a student. In the end, students with the highest grades enter "the hall of fame." Classmates can also be asked to participate in the selection of the best writings. This activity encourages the involvement of students in actually doing their best when writing for a contest and also motivates them to read other students' writings.

IMAGE 8: WRITING CONTEST WITH INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS IN COLIMA

Contest/Contest/Contest

Jose Miguel Rodriguez Boyer
English teacher, College of Telecommunication/Queretaro

What is the most peculiar experience you have ever gone through?

Write your story (100 words)
Vote for your favourite story (4) (the end)

I want to describe something that is even happened to me?
When I went to the beach and I really have a good time, staying also fun, and to watch things happened, but, the most peculiar thing was that I went with my all class mates, everything was fun, my friends stayed from 10:00 until 11:00 and the water I wanted was to rise, it doesn't seem nothing about problems or things that make me blue, but suddenly, in my room was a shark, who it the biggest size I have written quite not, because she? (shark) by car, but really she went. But when we wake there, she started to? (shark) in several, that it was eating 20,000 pesos. Imagine, I thought that she was dead, because for her crying and saying: I am not a shark! I am a daughter, but after 10 minutes, I can't believe my family is from and things like that, but she was yelling and crying, but she didn't? (shark) it was not, my dad was I just? (shark) and I'm supposed to? (shark) I know again.

As can be seen in image 8, the text is full of mistakes. These were taken advantage of for group analysis. The screen was projected in the classroom, and students were asked to identify the mistakes and prepare an explanation which would lead to correction. This helped reduce the students' average number of errors from over 30 (in a 100-word composition) to around 15 by the end of the semester. Regrettably, I did not keep statistics, although I still have all their postings on a disc, which could be studied for further analysis. However, it was obvious that at the end of the project students were paying more attention to their own writing and correcting their initial errors.

IMAGE 9: A SAMPLE EVALUATION IN RUTH VILMI'S FORUM

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying a forum post. The browser's address bar shows 'http://www2...'. The forum post is titled 'Evaluation of TWE Round Eighteen Red'. The user's name is 'RUTH VILMI' and the post is dated '01/25/02 09:04'. The post content is as follows:

I have found this course enjoyable, although I don't think of anything it has taught me directly, but it was great indeed to write something longer than a few sentences. Also this course made me realize how much I get influenced by the language I'm exposed to! I do that all the time, and it's not limited to English but affects every language I use (it's fun to use phrases you find from Watson's books). Next I'm going to try reading some Shakespeare and see if I begin to use those fancy words long since forgotten by the rest.

Oh, and the course really brought back to my mind how many words it takes to say something in English.

And then we got to my choice for the top three articles (but not in any particular order):

- [The technological gap \(by environment/ny nyvare\)](#)
- [A cyberworld? \(by andrew\)](#)
- [In the solutions.com mind \(by sharon/ny nyvare\)](#)

(Not only were these articles interesting and well written, but made me actually think about the question again myself. That's probably the reason these were for articles which first popped in to my mind when I was told to pick three.)

Considering what has happened during the last few years, I think 'In the news' is going to be a hot topic the next time it appears as an option. Also, I'd like some subjects about legislation and new technology. To start this as an idea for a new topic, how about copyright issues and new technology? It has technology, it has ethics, and should be discussed in a particular way. The point was seeing the round, and I would have written about it instead.

To conclude this list of the advantages of Bulletin Board Systems, let us add that students who use a BBS have an opportunity to use the target language in a meaningful context and to meet real people from a background different from their own—an opportunity, which in many cases, they may not otherwise have. The fact that students who participate in these exchanges are mainly non-native speakers adds to the value of this cooperative experience since they are more aware of the great barrier they have to overcome on their journey towards acquiring the target language.

"Possibly the most compelling appeal of computer networks is their ability to link language learners with native and other non-native language users. This dimension of networking can offer learners the exposure to authentic communicative language use that is so often missing in the micro-world of the classroom ... It offers an economical and convenient alternative to travel" (Hoffman, 1996 p. 68).

We did however, encounter several drawbacks to the use of BBSs. Though they are outnumbered by the advantages, they deserve some consideration before introducing BBSs into the classroom.

There is a dichotomy when using a BBS that has to do with flexibility. Since it is an open activity with only some control, it is expected that students contribute freely and as many times as they wish. However, some students fail to participate at all or do so only after the activity has ended, thereby no longer being able to receive feedback in the form of peer responses to their texts. This problem was partly solved by giving students strict deadlines for their participation in a certain activity. After a given date, a forum thread would be closed for participation, which meant that all the students were forced to participate before the specified date.

It is surprising that, while they are easy to operate by experts and regular Internet users, BBSs can be a frustrating experience for newcomers. Students may already feel nervous or insecure about their own language proficiency, and the additional anxiety involved in working with new technology may only add to the problem. Careful consideration needs to be given to the proper training of students in the basic operation of a BBS. That is, besides providing a detailed printed guide, the teacher should also be present the first time the students sign in, log in their data and engage in their first contribution to the forum. Otherwise, as Hoffman (1996, p. 69) states: "If the systems are difficult to use, the technology will overshadow the communication, sometimes blocking it altogether."

4. CONCLUSION

We have seen what BBSs are and presented some of the uses teachers have made of them. It is evident that a lot can be achieved through Bulletin Board Systems in terms of variety of activities. We can envisage many different student populations and many kinds of interaction (one-to-one, one-to-many, etc). We can work with individuals within a small community, or link two or more of these communities together. Distance is not an issue, since groups or individuals can be located anywhere there is an Internet connection and a PC available. The main contribution of BBSs (as well as other CMC tools) is that they give students the opportunity to meet other learners from around the world. Teachers can also take advantage of this and cooperate with partner teachers.

We have seen that becoming a BBS moderator is not a simple task, that planning is required and that careful consideration should be given to several details when starting a BBS community, especially to getting students to master the technological details. Of course, as Hoffman (1996, p. 69) says "Merely putting language learners in contact with one another is no guarantee that learning will occur." I think we have come to a time when teachers (and administrators) no longer naively believe that making an addition or change in the curriculum will provide miracu-

lous effects just as building a language laboratory, or using technology just for the sake of it, or buying a new book, etc. will not necessarily produce miraculous effects.

Regrettably, it is a fact that for most teachers it is still impossible to participate in such projects and even for those who do have this possibility, some may still wonder: Why bother? Yet, it is also a crude fact that most language teachers around the world are isolated, that having the opportunity to talk to "real people" in another language directly is not usually possible for most and that students find the majority of their class activities boring since they do not appeal to a real need for communication. BBSs may be a practical tool that can serve as a bridge between isolated teacher and student communities around the world and BBSs can provide these communities with opportunities for meaningful and purposeful interaction.

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