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Blogging: Promoting Learner Autonomy and Intercultural Competence through Study Abroad

BLOGGING: PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH STUDY ABROAD

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The current study explores closely how using a combined modalities of asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) via blogs and face-to-face (FTF) interaction through ethnographic interviews with native speakers (L1s) supports autonomous learning as the result of reflective and social processes. The study involves 16 American undergraduate students who participated in blogs to develop their intercultural competence over the course of one-semester study abroad. The results show that blogs afforded students the opportunity to work independently (e.g., content creation) and reflect upon cross-cultural issues. Critical reflection, however, relied on the teacher's guidance and feedback, as most of the students were cognitively challenged by not being able to clearly articulate different points of view. It is likely that students were not accustomed to reflecting. The findings also indicate that task type fostered autonomy in different ways. While free topics gave students more control of their own learning, teacher-assigned topics required them to critically think about the readings. Lack of access to Internet at the host institution and family also contributed to a limited level of social interaction. The study concludes that well-designed tasks, effective metacognitive and cognitive skills, and the accessibility to Internet are essential to maximize the potentials of blogs for learner autonomy and intercultural communication.

Keywords: Computer-Assisted Language Learning, Learner Autonomy, Task-based Instruction

INTRODUCTION

The traditional teacher-driven classroom has become pedagogically limited in making language learning a student-centered instruction that stresses learners' capacity to learn autonomously. According to Little (2003), autonomy entails decision-making, critical reflection and social interaction. Autonomous learners are responsible for their own learning and are actively involved in the learning process by setting personal goals, planning and executing tasks, and reviewing their progress (Dam, 1995; Little, 1996). Teachers play a supportive and facilitative role in the autonomous learning by encouraging students to take an active part in decision-making and problem solving, and offering them guidance. From a social constructivist view, the development of autonomy is a result of interplay between social and reflective processes (Little, 2003). Benson (2003) notes that during social interaction, students work collaboratively with others through which they develop high order thinking skills by observing, analyzing and evaluating information.

While there are many ways to foster autonomous learning, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is increasingly recognized as a powerful means for developing learner autonomy (Benson, 2004; Lee, 2005; Murphy, 2006; O'Rourke & Schwienhorst, 2003). The advent of Web 2.0 technologies (wikis, blogs, podcastings) brings new dimensions to online learning. Blogs, for example, are used in various ways depending on their pedagogical purposes. Personal blogs are collections of online journals that foster self-expression and self-reflection (e.g., Lee, 2010; Yang, 2009), whereas collective blogs involving an entire class or small groups promote interactive and collaborative learning (Lee, 2009b). Blogging fosters learner autonomy, as students take charge of making their own decisions as to what, how much and when to publish their work (Lee, 2010). Accordingly, students develop the awareness of their ability to plan, understand and regulate their own learning (Baggetun & Wasson, 2006; Ward, 2004).

Given that blogs are asynchronous CMC, students construct knowledge at their own pace, which enables them to reflect on the content (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Campbell, 2003; Murray & Hourigan, 2006; Richardson, 2005). In addition, Lee (2010) points out that blogs increase students' participation and motivation because they are intended not only for a sole instructor but rather for a broad audience. While blogging presents pedagogical potentials with regard to autonomous learning, the accessibility to networking influences participation levels (Belz, 2002; Lee, 2004). Lacking Internet access at home or in school creates learner stress and frustration. Consequently, the level of engagement diminishes and the quality of work suffers (Peterson, 1997).

With the aforementioned benefits, blogs have been increasingly implemented in L2 instruction across contexts. Research findings have shed light on our understanding of the effectiveness of blogs for developing reading and writing skills (e.g., Bloch, 2007; Churchill, 2009; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Lee, 2010; Murray & Hourigan, 2006). To promote intercultural learning, blogs have been incorporated into conventional classes and study abroad programs (e.g., Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Lee, 2009b; Sun, 2009). Existing CALL research, however, has not yet given much attention to issues of autonomy, as suggested by L2 researchers (Benson, 2006; Blin, 2004; Chapelle, 2001; White, 2003). To gain new insights regarding the emergence of autonomy beyond the classroom, the current study explored how blogs in conjunction with ethnographic interviews foster learner autonomy. Using a social constructivist approach, this study involved 16 American undergraduate students who participated in a blog project to develop their intercultural competence over the course of one-semester of a study abroad program. As a course requirement, the blog project aimed to use (a) personal blogs to give students individual spaces to write and reflect upon their experiences with the host culture and people on a regular basis, and (b) a class blog to open a social place where both students and L1s shared and exchanged cross-cultural perspectives using teacher-assigned topics. Real-time ethnographic interviews with local L1s as part of the class blog afforded abroad students additional opportunities for FTF intercultural exchanges. The combination of two modes of communication (CMC and FTF) was used to optimize students' learning potential according to their learning styles and personal needs. Importantly, blogs and ethnographic interviews enabled students to develop cultural insights independently and collaboratively outside of class. The study examined the impact of reflective blogs on self-directed learning from students' perspectives. Furthermore, factors that affected autonomous learning within the virtual learning environment were explored.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Learner Autonomy in Language Learning

In recent years, interest in learner autonomy has grown considerably in the field of language education (e.g., Benson, 2003; Hurd & Murphy, 2005; Lamb & Reinders, 2008; Little 2001; White, 2003). Despite the fact that autonomy has been defined in a number of ways, it emerges from the concept that an individual's taking control of his or her own learning and is often manifested by the ability to take initiative, monitor progress and evaluate learning outcomes (Benson, 2001; Benson & Voller, 1997; Holec, 1981; Little, 2003). According to Little (1994), learner autonomy is "the product of interdependence rather than independence" (p. 435), which underscores the dynamics between collective and individual actions. Similarly, Benson (2001) maintains that autonomy is supported by the social constructivism of active learning. Autonomy does not mean that learners work in isolation. Rather, they socially construct knowledge by actively engaging in the process of learning. Through social interactions, learners develop a capacity to analyze, reflect upon and synthesize information to create new perspectives. In this view, Little (1996) stresses that critical reflection depends on "the internalization of a capacity to participate fully and critically in social interactions" (p. 211). The process of internalization makes the individual become a self-regulated learner who takes a proactive role in the learning process rather than simply reacting to external stimuli (Dörnyei, 2005).

Other researchers highlight the importance of self-management (Rubin, 2001), self-motivation (Dickinson, 1995; Lamb, 2004; Ushioda 2006), self-confidence (Wenden, 2002) and learning strategies (Oxford, 2003) for learning autonomy. The challenge, however, lies in engaging learners in the cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective dimensions of language learning (Little, 2001; Reinders, 2006). Effort, therefore, needs to be placed on training students to learn autonomously with teacher intervention guidance and support (Benson, 2001; Dam, 1995; Little, 2007). As shown in the aforementioned concepts and skills, the notion of autonomy covers a relatively large number of constructs widely accepted by L2 practitioners as pedagogical principles. For the purpose of the current study, self-directness, critical reflection and cognitive engagement through social interactions are the key principles of autonomous learning for the blog project. The following discussion focuses on autonomy in CALL for out-of-class learning supported by a social constructivist approach.

Social Constructivism for L2 Learning and Autonomy in CALL

Over the years, research on CALL has shifted away from learners' interaction with computers to interaction with human beings through a computer (Warschauer, 2003). Consequently, a constructivist paradigm of language learning which emphasizes the shared and social construction of knowledge has been employed as the theoretical framework to support CALL (e.g., Hauck & Youngs, 2008; Lee, 2007, 2008). According to Duffy and Cunningham (1996), "[l]earning is a social, dialogical process of construction by distributed, multidimensional selves using tools and signs within context created by the various communities with which they interact" (pp. 181-182). Rather than learning residing in one-way delivery of knowledge from a teacher, it is an active, social, and collaborative process through which learners use a system of symbols (language) or a material tools (computers) to construct knowledge with others in order to accomplish a joint task (Lee, 2004; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). L2 knowledge is constructed through collaborative scaffolding (Kenning, 2010; Lee, 2008). Scaffolding, being assisted by an expert (e.g., a teacher or a native speaker), enables the learner to expand their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978)—the distance between what they can achieve by themselves and what they can achieve with assistance from others. As a result, the learner becomes self-regulated and works independently (e.g., Donato, 2000; Lee, 2008).

Within the social constructivist framework, researchers advocate that CALL provide catalytic conditions for active involvement in constructing knowledge, critical reflection on content, and collaborative interaction with peers (Benson, 2001; Blin, 2004; Leahy, 2008; Meskill & Ranglova, 2000; Murphy, 2006; Schwienhorst, 2008). As such, Dang (2010) claims that these elements are prerequisites for the development of autonomous learning. Among other CALL applications, electronic tandem language learning (e-Tandem) permits L1s of two different languages to work together via the Internet in order to study each other's language and culture. Over the years, many e-Tandem projects have been created in European countries including Germany and Spain. E-Tandem is underpinned by principles of reciprocity and autonomy, which allow both parties to benefit equally from the exchange and hold each party responsible for their own learning by deciding what, when, and how to execute learning tasks (see Brammerts, 2001 for review). Within the CMC context, researchers view online learning as an extension of classroom-based learning, which gives students more control of their own learning and promotes greater interaction and cognitive engagement (e.g., Hewitt, 2000; Jeong, 2004; Lee, 2005; Sykes, Oskoz, & Thorne, 2008). Unlike real-time CMC, asynchronous communication gives students more time to reflect on their ideas, which fosters critical thinking (e.g., Abrams, 2005; Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Jonassen, 2003; Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999). Lee (2009a), for example, reported that a discussion board enabled student teachers to gain an in-depth understanding of teaching principles and practices through critical reflections on others' postings. While critical reflection on the content is crucial for promoting learner autonomy, Lamy and Hassan (2003) stress that such an expectation needs to be explicitly explained to students. In addition to cognitive and social dimensions of language learning, affective factors, such as attitudes toward learning tasks, affect how learners engage in online learning. Thus, tasks

need to be attainable and take into account students' interests and motivation in order to inspire learner autonomy (Dang, 2006; Lee, 2002; Levy & Stockwell, 2006).

Developing Intercultural Competence: Blogs and Ethnographic Interviews

The need for language learners to develop intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been strongly advocated as an essential component in L2 instruction. Byram's (1997) ICC model which presents a conceptual framework consisting of four-interrelated components—*knowledge, skills, attitudes* and *awareness*—appears to be the most frequently adapted approach to develop intercultural competence (see pp. 50-63 for details). Within this framework, the goal is to promote cultural learning that goes beyond a superficial “facts only” approach. To become competent intercultural speakers, learners need to be open-minded to people of other cultures so that they understand cross-cultural perspectives with non-judgmental attitudes and respect (Bennett, 1993). In the process of developing ICC, learners are encouraged to reflect upon the cultural similarities and differences, and further develop the ability to tolerate differences that allow them to handle situations encountered with L1s. Common belief suggests that formal classroom instruction alone is not sufficient and close interaction with L1s is vital for students to gain ICC.

Among other approaches to intercultural learning, blog technology has been increasingly used to foster cross-cultural communication and awareness (e.g., Carney, 2007; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Lee, 2009b). Research findings have revealed that blogs afford students the opportunity to gain cultural knowledge from different perspectives (Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Pinkman, 2005). For example, using task-based activities, Lee (2009b) in her recent study of Spanish-American telecollaboration demonstrated how group blogs empowered students by raising cultural awareness through ethnographic interviews. Despite the favorable results, Carney argues that blogs open a new online discussion forum rather than a deeper cultural exchange due to the post-comment structure of blogs that results in brief exchanges and lack of continuity. Thus, teachers need to find ways, such as using guided questions, to stimulate students' high order thinking to build upon further discussions.

Another prominent approach to develop ICC is the use of ethnographic interviews, which have been implemented in both CMC and FTF settings. Ethnographic interviews foster real-world interaction in which an insider perspective is revealed in order to better understand cross-cultural differences. Most importantly, ethnography relies primarily on an understanding of the values, beliefs and attitudes underlying behaviors of others through first-hand observations (Allen, 2000). Research findings in FTF settings show that ethnography promotes learners' openness and curiosity toward the target culture and raises cross-cultural awareness (e.g., Bateman, 2002). Jackson (2008), for example, reported on a case study of Chinese students who engaged in ethnographic interviews. The results showed that the majority of the students increased their intercultural sensitivity and awareness after a 5-week overseas program. Within the CMC context, Lee (2009b) and O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) reported that students gained cross-cultural perspectives through interacting with L1s. A recent CMC study conducted by Jin and Erben (2007) indicated that students of Chinese developed greater intercultural sensitivity and showed respect for cultural differences when using an instant messenger (IM), a text-based chat tool. IM allowed both the students of Chinese and L1s to interact and exchange ideas in real-time. The process of analyzing and reflecting on L1 informants' perspectives enables students as outsiders to learn about the cultural framework governing the what, how, and why of insiders' expressions in everyday interactions (O'Dowd, 2006).

Based on these research findings, it appears that the use of combined modes of CMC via blogs and FTF interaction with L1s holds great potential for fostering self-directed learning¹ within the context of study abroad. This study investigates the role of learner autonomy and its pedagogical impact. The study was designed to address three major questions using social constructivism as a theoretical framework:

1. How do students view the effectiveness of using CMC (blogs) and FTF (ethnographic interviews)

- for intercultural learning in support of self-directed learning?
2. To what extent do blogs promote learner autonomy through social and cognitive engagement?
 3. What factors affect how students learn independently and collaboratively within the virtual learning environment?

METHODOLOGY

Context of the Study

The project involved the students from the U.S. who participated in two study abroad programs sponsored by the Center of Modern Languages (CML) at the University of Granada in Spain. The researcher and a partner teacher were resident directors and they taught similar courses regarding the language and culture of Spain. To provide students with increased opportunities to explore the target culture and interact with L1s outside of class, they worked closely to design the project for intercultural learning. The project consisted of three major blog tasks outlined in the syllabus which were worth 60% of the course work (see the Tasks section for details). Blog technology was used to foster critical reflection on cross-cultural issues, whereas FTF interviews offered real-time intercultural dialogue with L1s. Within this context, it was hoped that the combined CMC and FTF modalities would empower students to take charge of their own learning through a socially mediated learning environment. A course management system—*Blackboard*—was used to supplement course materials and organize assignments. *Blogger*, a free software blogging program, was adopted to create blogs because they were not available in *Blackboard* at the researcher's institution. A training session on how to use *Blogger* was provided to the students in a computer lab and a class discussion of how to conduct ethnographic interviews took place at the beginning of the semester.

Participants

Sixteen American students from two study abroad programs in Spain participated in the project in the fall of 2009. All participants completed a questionnaire concerning their personal, educational, and linguistic backgrounds. They ranged from 18 to 22 years of age. The students consisted of sophomores ($n = 7$), juniors ($n = 8$) and one senior. The majority of the students were either Spanish majors ($n = 7$) or minors ($n = 6$). The majority of the students had three years of Spanish in high school and completed one full year of college-level intermediate Spanish. Thus, they had sufficient language skills² to participate in the project. None of them had used blogs prior to the project. Most of them did not have the experience of interacting with L1s prior to the study abroad. During the course of one-semester abroad, students lived with host families, took classes at the CML, and participated in cultural activities arranged through the study abroad programs.

L1s ($n = 26$) ranging in age from 17 to 64 from the local communities and the University of Granada, Spain were invited to participate in the project. More than 70% of the L1s ($n = 19$) had experience dealing with American students, as they were host family members of study abroad students or were conversation exchange partners from the CML. In addition to regular interactions with the students at home or outside of class, the L1s consulted with them in the ethnographic interviews³ and participated in the class blog discussions.

Tasks

Three types of blogs were created for the project: (1) PERSONAL blogs, (2) a CLASS blog and (3) a PROJECT blog using a combination of free and teacher-assigned topics. Teacher-assigned topics were used to engage students in discussing and debating on cross-cultural issues, whereas free topics gave them a certain degree of freedom in decision-making and personal choice. [Table 1](#) summarizes blog tasks that students carried out within the allocation of time for each part of the project.

Table 1. *Description of Three Types of Blogs*

| Blog Type | Description of Task | Time Period |
|---------------|--|--|
| Personal blog | Each student is responsible for keeping a personal blog. The blog serves as a personal diary in which you write reflective observations about various aspects of the Spanish culture and address cultural differences from your own perspectives. To make meaningful cross-cultural observations, you should pay attention to current events, popular culture, native speakers' behaviors and attitudes and your surroundings (e.g., at home, on the street or in school). You are required to write three entries per week through which you reflect on the chosen topics. Each entry should have approximately 150-200 words. You are strongly encouraged to take pictures from cultural activities and incorporate them into your blog. | September 2 nd to October 29 th |
| Class blog | After completing weekly assignments on readings, cultural activities and/or ethnographic interviews, you should post a 200-word entry to share your observations. You are strongly encouraged to ask questions regarding the assigned topic and/or make comments on others' postings. Be sure to upload each interview to the blog for others to view. It is recommended that you use external resources (e.g., <i>YouTube</i> video clips, external links) to support the content. | September 3 rd to November 19 th |
| Project blog | For this project, you choose a topic that interests you the most and create a blog to compile and share information. You are required to read a minimum of 3 articles and conduct a minimum of 2 interviews with expert speakers to find out their own perspectives about the topic. You analyze the readings and interviews, and then write about your own observations. Be sure to upload the interviews and add additional sources (e.g., newspapers, podcasts, videos) to the blog. | November 10 th to December 8 th |

Procedure

At the beginning of the semester, the instructor informed the students that they were required to use blogs to carry out various tasks in order to develop their intercultural competence (see Table 1 for the description of each blog task). Students spent two weeks designing their personal blogs and posting the first three entries. Upon completion of the initial assignments, the instructor collected the blog addresses and made them available in *Blackboard*. For this assignment, no specific instructions were given to students. They, however, were asked to focus on cross-cultural comparisons through which they would bring their own perspectives to underlying values of the host culture. For corrective feedback, the instructor wrote comments on incorrect usage of lexical items and grammatical structures on students' entries. The entries were then returned to the students via *Digital DropBox* in *Blackboard* or e-mail. After receiving the instructor's feedback, students made error corrections by editing the entries on their blogs. Given that personal blogs were to promote self-reflection rather than idea exchange, students were not asked to read and make comments on each other's blogs.

In addition to personal blogs, the researcher set up a class blog to open an exchange space where students shared and negotiated their understanding of intercultural issues through responses with comments.⁴ For weekly assignments, students read topic-specific readings, participated in cultural activities (e.g., film, play, excursions) and/or conducted interviews with L1s. For example, one of topics addressed immigrants in Spain. Students first read a poem written by the Spanish poet Luis García Montero entitled *Piénsalo* (Think about it), and viewed *YouTube* video clips regarding the immigration issues. They then attended

the play about immigrants, *La vida por delante*, in a local theater. Finally, they interviewed their native speaker (L1) partners to gain individual perspectives on immigration issues. To facilitate the interviewing process, the instructor provided students with guidelines and they spent one class practicing interview techniques, such as asking structural and contrast questions (see Spradley, 1980 for information). All interviews were recorded using a digital audio or video recorder.⁵ Students uploaded the recorded interviews to the class blog for viewing. Finally, students spent five weeks conducting a cultural project after choosing a topic that interested them the most.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collected from blog entries, reflective reports, and post surveys were used to report the affordable and challenging aspects of the blog project in relation to learner autonomy and intercultural learning. Selective postings from class blogs⁶ were analyzed to find occurrences of cognitive presence during social interactions. Analyses were undertaken by means of descriptive statistics and content analysis. The coding for the content analysis was derived from the Four-Phase Practical Inquiry Model created by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001). Because it is designed for asynchronous CMC analysis, the framework was employed to investigate whether blogs promoted critical reflection through social engagements in the development of autonomy. Significantly, the four phases entail the progression of cognitive presence from lower to higher order thinking to capture students' thinking processes in the postings. Table 2 illustrates each phase of the model with examples⁷ taken from the current study. During Phase 1, students were able to identify problems and ask questions for further discussion, whereas in Phase 2, they exchanged ideas, clarified problems and offered suggestions. In Phase 3, students began to find solutions to the problems and finally, were able to apply new ideas and articulate their views.

Fourty-six blog entries with comments and responses were read and analyzed for quality by the researcher and a trained graduate student. To maintain consistency, both coders first worked on 10% of the data to identify speech segments, "the smallest unit of delivery, linked to a single theme, directed at the same interlocutor" (Henri & Rigault, 1996, p. 62) and established a inter-rater reliability of 91%. They then used the criteria indicated in Table 2 to code cognitive instances in the same blog transcripts. The two coders compared and discussed the discrepancies until they reached the final agreement (Inter-rater reliability = .87). The rest of the data (90%) was equally divided into two sections and each coder analyzed one of the sections, which made up 45% of the data.

Students wrote a one page reflective paper to report on their experience with the project. The primary goal was to empower students to evaluate their own learning using the retrospective method (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). The following questions designed to elicit comments on different aspects of learner autonomy (e.g., self-regulation, interactive reflection) were used to guide students' writing:⁸

1. How did you carry out your personal blog? Briefly explain the major steps you went through to undertake and maintain your blog. Was the use of the personal blog a worthwhile experience? Why and why not?
2. In your view, did the project (blogs and interviews) allow you to interact with others in a meaningful way? Why and why not? Use examples to justify your answers.
3. Did you enjoy participating in blog discussions? Did you find peer comments useful? If so, in what ways?
4. What did you gain from carrying out the project? How satisfied were you with the project? Did you experience any difficulties? Write any additional comments.

Table 2. *Four-Phase Practical Inquiry Model (adapted from Garrison et al., 2001)*

| Descriptor/Indicator | Sociocognitive processes | Example |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Phase 1/Triggering | Identifying potential problems Asking questions to prompt more discussions | “I’ve noticed that here most people don’t give tips. One night I was in a bar with a couple of Spanish friends. They told me that Spain as a society is not big on tipping. I’m not sure I like the idea. What do you think about not tipping people?” |
| Phase 2/Exploration | Exchanging ideas Discussing ambiguities Offering suggestions | “For me, it is strange that Spaniards would eat cookies for breakfast and have a piece of fruit or yogurt after the meal. My host mom often gives me a banana after lunch. I would eat it in the morning. She probably finds it weird. I’m curious to find out more about the Spanish culture.” |
| Phase 3/Integration | Connecting ideas to construct new meanings Incorporating information from other sources Creating solutions | “I find your point quite interesting. I also had the same experience. I don’t understand why Spaniards would speak to us in English. Maybe they just see us as a bunch of tourists who do not understand Spanish. Or they want to impress us with their English to get tips. Maybe we should just insist on speaking Spanish to them.” |
| Phase 4/Resolution | Applying new ideas Critically assessing and defending solutions | “Although I agree with what you have said, I still think that it is important for us to speak Spanish with local people. It’s so easy to just give up and switch to English. I’m here to improve my Spanish not English. I’ve learned things that I would never have learned from a textbook like <i>No pasa nada</i> (It is not a big deal) or <i>venga</i> (come on move or bye at the end of conversation). The point is that we need to take advantage of being in the target country. How many of us would have the opportunity to live in Spain again?” |

A conceptual content analysis of students’ reflective reports was used to identify factors that afforded and challenged students to carry out the project. Reflective reports were read and analyzed using ‘open coding’ to identify the recurring themes that emerged in the reports. The common themes were subsequently sorted into three major categories: sources of self-directedness (e.g., making plans, taking initiative, level of commitment, assessing progress), gains from the project (e.g., critical thinking, community building, peer support), and hindrances for the project (lack of time, Internet access, instructor’s intervention).

Students voluntarily completed an online survey hosted by *SurveyMonkey.com* to gauge their reactions to the project relating to various aspects of autonomous learning. The purpose of the post survey was to find out students’ perceptions of benefits and/or challenges of using blog activities. The descriptive statistics shown in Table 3 provided a layer of interpretive triangulation to support the qualitative analysis. The online survey consisted of 12 statements using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to elicit students’ responses in four areas; metacognitive (items 1-3), cognitive (items 4-6), social (items 7-9) and affective (items 10-12) dimensions of online learning (Table 3).

Table 3. *Students' Perceptions of Blog Assignments in Relation to Learner Autonomy*

| Statements of the Survey | Mean | SD |
|---|------|------|
| 1. Using blogs gave me more freedom and control of my own learning. | 4.43 | 0.63 |
| 2. I often developed a plan and found the best way for me to complete blog tasks. | 3.13 | 0.51 |
| 3. I was able to monitor my own progress by revisiting my own blog and made changes based on the instructor's feedback. | 4.06 | 0.68 |
| 4. Blogging allowed me to actively engage in the process of reflection on my writing about cross-cultural observations. | 3.81 | 0.54 |
| 5. By regularly writing reflective blogs, I was able to understand, generate and analyze cross-cultural issues. | 3.69 | 0.60 |
| 6. Reading others' postings helped me gain diverse cultural perspectives and reflect further about my own beliefs. | 4.25 | 0.77 |
| 7. Social networking via blogs was an effective way to share knowledge and exchange ideas with others. | 4.31 | 0.70 |
| 8. I found peer comments interesting and informative. | 3.56 | 0.63 |
| 9. I gained intercultural knowledge and communication skills through working with my peers and native speakers. | 4.13 | 0.72 |
| 10. I found blog assignments stimulating and meaningful. | 4.19 | 0.75 |
| 11. I felt comfortable sharing my ideas and interacting with my peers and native speaker partners via blogging. | 4.06 | 0.93 |
| 12. Using blogs was a motivational tool for me to learn about the Spanish culture and people. | 4.19 | 0.91 |

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the first research question, the effectiveness of blogs and ethnographic interviews for intercultural learning from students' points of view was considered by exploring key constructs of learner autonomy using post surveys and reflective essays in conjunction with quotes from personal blogs. Class blog postings were analyzed for evidence of cognitive engagement to address the second research question. By discussing affordances and challenges that students perceived while carrying out the blog project, various factors that affected how they learned independently and collaboratively in the virtual learning environment were identified to respond to the third research question.

It should be noted that due to the limited space permitted in this paper to include a detailed discussion of each student's blog entries, project blogs were excluded and quotes from personal blogs were used to support the qualitative findings.

Students' Perceptions of Self-Directed Learning: Affordances and Challenges

Self-regulation, metacognition and motivation are vital for self-directed learning (Long, 2000). The overall survey findings show that the project created affordable conditions to support learner autonomy. The high ratings of Statements 1 ($M = 4.43$) and 3 ($M = 4.06$) indicate that most students considered themselves to be self-managed and problem solvers. They acknowledged that writing blog entries on a regular basis required them to be self-directed, as this student wrote in her reflective paper:

Writing three entries per week was not easy for me. At the beginning I waited

until the last minute to post my entries which gave me no time to check what I had written. Pretty soon I realized that I needed to get organized and make good plans for my assignments. After that, I was able to manage my time and meet the deadlines. I also needed to find ways to overcome the problems, such as finding Internet access close to my host house. I think blogging made me become a more independent and active learner.

The finding suggests that procrastination and the lack of easy computer access contributed to the student's perception of learner autonomy. Moreover, a few students were frustrated by not being able to participate actively in the blogs. One student, for example, expressed her disappointment in the reflective essay:

My host family did not have Internet access. Many times I had to look for an Internet café so I could work on my blog and I ended up spending money for the Internet service. I wasn't happy about that. I couldn't really participate in blog discussions because I had limited access to Internet.

The comments confirm those reported in previous studies of CMC indicating that the accessibility of the Internet becomes essential for network-based learning and further affects students' motivation (Thorne, 2003; Ware, 2005).

Students were instructed to take part in blogging as part of course requirements. Yet, they had the power to take an active role in their own learning. More than 60% of the students reported that they often thought about how to complete the blog assignments (Statement 2). One student, for example, reflected that blogging held her accountable for her own learning by requiring her to make her own decisions as to what, how much, and when to write. From another student's point of view, the personal blog gave her the independence and freedom to choose cultural topics to build on her area of interest, while the class blog cultivated her ability to write and respond critically to a diversity of ideas. To this end, the students perceived that contributing to different types of blogs empowered them to become autonomous learners, as they made the informed choice of being self-regulated by working individually and collaboratively with others. Less self-regulated students, however, found maintaining three weekly entries challenging, as they acknowledged that they often failed to complete the assignments in a timely manner. Others students ($n = 5$) experienced difficulties expressing themselves fully using the L2. Consequently, they admitted that they failed to post blog entries in productive ways and were less motivated to participate in blog discussions. The findings indicate that the degree of autonomy was affected by the lack of willingness and self-determination to perform actively in learning tasks. Furthermore, the results suggest that the use of L1 should be an option because it would allow students to better reflect on their cross-cultural perspectives, as argued by CMC researchers (Elola & Oskoz, 2008; O'Dowd, 2006). The decision whether or not to use L1 should be subject to learning objectives. In this case, blogging was to develop cultural insights rather than linguistic gains. Thus, it would be appropriate to allow for the use of the L1 option.

Interestingly, nearly one third of the students ($n = 6$) noted in their reflective reports that it was not necessary for them to make plans as to 'what' to write since they were given the freedom to choose their own topics for the personal blogs. Rather, they had difficulty deciding 'how' to organize their ideas, as this student reflected:

Although blogging gave me a personal space to write about different cultural topics, I must admit that at times it was challenging for me to put my thoughts in order. I wasn't exactly sure what I should focus on. I guess I needed more directions.

A few students suggested that the instructor should have discussed strategies for online posting along with writing samples with the students prior to the project. Although most of the students demonstrated a

capacity for taking initiative and control of their own learning, there is a certain disparity among students which suggests that some learners managed their learning more effectively than others. Learners' self-regulation differs depending on personal style, skills and competence. The results may have been affected by the students' learning styles. It would be worthwhile to conduct a follow-up study of how different learning styles affect the way students perform various types of tasks.

One of the beneficial effects of the blog project was the development of critical thinking. More than 70% of the students found that blogs allowed them to engage in the process of self-reflection (Statement 4) that helped them understand, generate and analyze cross-cultural similarities and differences (Statement 5). The following quotation illustrates the student's positive view of using reflective blogs:

Blogging is the best way to keep track of your thoughts over time. It's like writing a personal online journal that gives you freedom to express yourself and reflect upon everyday experiences. Looking back what I wrote early, I now realize how much my perceptions of stereotypes have changed. I think every study abroad student should keep a personal blog.

The chronologically archived entries that recorded her writing enabled her to view changes in her own cultural perspectives from the fourth week to the seventh week, as illustrated in the following personal blog:

Here I'm constantly reminded that I should not take a shower for more than five minutes and I cannot use Internet for more than two hours a day. I don't really understand why. It seems that there are a lot of rules in the house. (Week 4)

By the seventh week, she showed a better understanding of host living conditions that led her to reflect on her own culture:

Now I understand that water and electricity are so expensive in Spain. I was not aware of this at all until I lived with my host family. I do think we Americans should pay more attention on things like this and we waste too much of everything. (Week 7)

The above posts demonstrated that the student manifested a reflective attitude and critical intercultural awareness. In addition, as shown on Statement 6 ($M = 4.25$), students believed that they benefited from reading each other's blog entries through which they gained different cultural perspectives and further reflected on their own. Therefore, based on survey responses, blogging strengthened reflective thinking as a key element in the development of autonomous learning, as suggested by other studies (Lee, 2010; Yang, 2009).

Individual reflection through social interaction supports the development of learner autonomy (Little, 2003). Students believed that social networking increased their autonomy by allowing them to share knowledge and exchange ideas with their peers and L1 partners (Statement 7). Overwhelmingly, nearly 90% of the students ($n = 14$) agreed that they gained cross-cultural perspectives from interacting with L1s. The following comments drawn from the reflective reports illustrate their optimistic experiences:

It was so interesting to learn about the host culture from personal views shared by real people not from a textbook. I became more aware of how I feel about my own culture by listening to and analyzing the information that emerged from the interviews. For me, it is the best way to get to know people from other cultures.

In my view, interviews created optimal conditions for me to interact socially with native speakers from whom I learned about their everyday lives, words and expressions that I would never have

learned from sitting in a regular class.

The above examples illustrate that learning the target culture from L1 perspectives is more meaningful than the surface learning of a set of simple facts about the target culture in a traditional classroom setting (Hauck & Youngs, 2008; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). As mentioned, the increased understanding of cultural norms and practices enabled students to become aware of their own beliefs and values, as illustrated in the following personal blog:

One of my favorite phrases is 'it's not a big deal' It's a very interesting expression that my interview partner explained to me. He told me that in Spain people try to enjoy life as much as possible. They don't worry much about anything. I like this attitude a lot. I think we Americans obsess on living so perfectly that we have missed things that make us happy. Spain has taught me to relax more ...

The above quotation demonstrates the positive result of using ethnographic interviews, as reported in Bateman's study (2002) showing "an increase in understanding of and respect for Spanish speakers" (p. 327). It is evident that the student showed the ability to compare and contrast the two cultures, which is fundamental for the development of ICC.

Comments gathered from the reflective reports reveal that most students enjoyed participating in blog discussions, although they commented that reading blog entries was a time consuming task. As a result, students perceived that they gained cross-cultural awareness and intercultural communication skills (Statement 9). One student, for example, wrote: "The discussion about the immigration issues in Spain, especially in the southern region of Andalusia was very informative. Blogs gave everyone a voice to express opinions and concerns. I've learned so much from reading others' comments about this debatable topic." The same student enthusiastically wrote in her personal blog how she experienced a self-discovery and personal interest during the reflective period:

I was excited at the chance to learn more about immigration in Spain. Participating in blog discussions was so helpful. It was an eye opening experience for me to learn about immigration in Granada that I knew little about. I became more interested and passionate about this topic. After reading anecdotes about the lives of Moroccan immigrants posted by the Spaniards, I was intrigued with their own experiences as immigrants. I decided to spend more time in Elvira street where Moroccan shops and people are so I can get to know them.

More than 30% of the students ($n = 5$), however, did not find peer feedback useful to generate critical thinking (Statement 8). The following quotations taken from the students' reflective essays exemplify this sentiment:

Most people made similar comments about the readings and some of them were repetitive. It seemed like people just ran out of things to say.

I was disappointed by the quality of the comments made by some of my peers. Their comments tended to be short and brief and were not terribly informative. They mostly praised each other's work, which was fine but I think they could have given more feedback on the content.

The results coincide with the findings found in studies conducted by Carney (2009) and by Lee (2010), who found that the comments did not show in-depth discussions of the content but rather surface level issues. The findings suggest that while students were capable of socializing with each other through discussing cross-cultural topics, they had limited ability to engage in high-order thinking. It is possible that the lack of continuity due to the post-comment structure of blogging may have affected the quality of

critical reflection, as argued by Carney (2007). Garrison et al. (2001) suggest that teacher presence and scaffolding play a facilitative role in giving subject matter expertise and guidance to students during social interactions. To this view, teachers could use guided questions to cultivate reflective thinking to foster further discussions.

High motivation and positive attitudes towards the learning context including the learning task and affective support promote learner autonomy (Dörnyei, 2005; Ushioda, 2006). The results shown in Table 3 indicate that nearly 90% of the students found tasks stimulating (Statement 10). Students repeatedly pointed out in their reflective reports that they enjoyed using both teacher-assigned and free topics. For example, this student noted: “I really liked how free topics allowed me to write about issues that interested and concerned me the most and teacher-assigned readings drew my attention to focus on specific aspects/issues of the Spanish culture.” Topic choice appears to be motivational to the students. Despite the fact that blog tasks created affordable opportunities for students to share and exchange intercultural information, a few students ($n = 4$) commented that they put a lot of effort into the project and participated actively in blog discussions because the high percentage of the course grade was based on the project (60%). In this case, having a good academic record motivated the students to become self-directed and self-regulated. The finding appears to support the claim made by Ushioda (2006) regarding the impact of academic success on students’ autonomous motivation in engaging in learning tasks.

Little (1996) argues that social interaction plays a key role in autonomy, as learners develop a capacity to participate fully and critically in learning tasks through interacting with others. The better the social interpersonal rapport the group has, the more willing each member is to share perspectives, seek help, and offer support (Lee, 2009a).

When asking students whether they felt comfortable working with their peers and L1 partners (Statement 11), they responded favorably to the virtual learning environment. Many students felt connected and gained a sense of community where they worked collaboratively to construct cultural knowledge and receive support from each other. This student, for example, made a supportive comment about blogging:

I think technology has become part of our daily life. I’m quite comfortable with social networking. I personally use *Facebook* and *Twitter* to connect with my family and friends. Having the opportunity to use the class blog to share and exchange cross-cultural observations made me feel emotionally connected. I was able to relate to some of the feelings expressed by my classmates ...

It is not surprising that students felt less intimidated writing and responding to comments made by their own peers than by L1s, as most of them were well acquainted with each other. Nevertheless, students remarked that questions raised by the L1 partners made them become more aware of cultural norms and practices. One student stressed that she would not have learned about intangible cultural practices (little c^9), if expert speakers had not shared their personal viewpoints about their own culture (Byram, 1997). A number of students agreed that blogging was a motivational tool for them to learn about the host culture and people (Statement 12). Similar to the finding shown in Lee’s (2010) recent blog study, students commented on their reflective papers that they felt compelled to write when they knew that their peers and L1 partners, rather than a sole instructor, would read and respond to their entries. It is likely that students viewed their L1 partners as experts, facilitators or consultants, rather than authority figures, with whom they felt less anxious and more confident in expressing themselves.

Cognitive and Social Knowledge Construction via Blogging

Critical reflection through online collaborative interaction promotes learner autonomy (Schwienhorst, 2008). The results displayed in Table 4 reveal that students produced a total of 219 cognitive events through social interactions. 14% of them consisted of triggering events, whereas more than 50% occurred

in the exploration phase. 27% of cognitive presence belonged to the integration phase and only 6% of the blog segments reached the resolution phase.

Table 4. *Students' Cognitive Presence in Class Blog*

| Indicator/Descriptor | Number | Percentage |
|----------------------|--------|------------|
| Phase 1/Trigger | 31 | 14% |
| Phase 2/Exploration | 117 | 53% |
| Phase 3/Integration | 58 | 27% |
| Phase 4/Resolution | 13 | 6% |
| Total | 219 | 100% |

Similar to the results reported in asynchronous CMC research (Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Liaw & Bunn-Le Master, 2010), the high rate of the exploration stage (53%) indicates that students mainly engaged in exchanging cultural information and brainstorming ideas. A typical example is shown in the following posting:

The truth is that not everyone watches or goes to bullfighting shows. I am against the idea of killing animals. The same thing can be said about flamenco. Some people cannot stand flamenco music. I have a friend who dances flamenco in a local bar near Elvira street. She also teaches flamenco if you are interested in taking flamenco dance lessons.

The student simply added his thoughts about the bullfight and flamenco music to previous messages without using sources to support his opinions. He then offered a suggestion for dance lessons but did not question or challenge others' ideas. During the exploration stage, students were able to compare and contrast the two distinct cultures by sharing their perspectives with L1s, as shown in the following blog exchange:

Student: "I found the meals quite different from what we have in the U.S. Here people would eat a large midday meal but would start the day with a small breakfast. My host mom would give me Maria cookies for breakfast. In fact, I always find myself hungry in the morning. At home, we have all kinds of food for breakfast like eggs, sausage, French toast and cereal."

L1: "That's quite interesting. I guess because we eat so late at night. Most people are probably not hungry in the morning. The lunch (comida) is the main meal in Spain and it is always made with fresh ingredients and care. We don't like the frozen food or TV dinners. Do you like finger food (tapas)?"

Despite the fact that students gained cultural knowledge and awareness from online exchange, the findings confirm the previous concerns raised by the students about the lack of substantial comments to generate critical thinking. It is possible that students were not accustomed to reflecting. They may also have felt reluctant to express their candid thoughts in an open source blog platform because they did not wish to make others feel uncomfortable or to provoke an unfriendly learning situation.

According to Garrison et al. (2001), the integration phase shows that the previous ideas are integrated into a new concept to construct meanings or solutions. Integration is the second highest cognitive presence (27%) found in the study. In this stage, students expanded on the discussion and develop a justified hypothesis, as shown in the following posting exchange:

Student A: “I was curious about how Spaniards view gay marriage. During my interview with Isabel, my exchange partner, I learned that the president Zapatero actually supported marriage rights for gays and lesbians. I was thrilled to hear about that. In fact, many young Spaniards I know have no problem with gay couples. I think Spain is going more liberal after a long time under a conservative dictator, Franco.”

Student B: “I agree with you. I think Spanish people are open to gay marriage. Based on Wikipedia, it has been legal since 2005. My host father told me that some people in Spain are concerned about same sex couples; especially those who are faithful Catholics. I don’t think there is any damage to the family in allowing gay couples to get married. Maybe people just need to be more open-minded.”

The above student built on the message that her partner composed to construct new meanings by using information from other sources, such as *Wikipedia* and personal communication. At the end she proposed a solution by suggesting that people need to be more open to gay marriage.

Controversial topics, such as immigration, appear to engage students in different phases of cognitive engagement. The following interactive exchange reveals how the participants constructed knowledge through sharing, questioning and seeking a solution to the debate on immigration issues:

L1: “The number of immigrants in Spain has increased rapidly. I personally am not against any immigrants who live legally in this country. I think they contribute a lot to the society. My family is originally from Italy. We have lived in Granada for more than 20 years. However, I am opposed to an estimated 300,000 undocumented migrants. I think these people bring all kinds of problems to the society. Some of them live on the streets, selling and using drugs, etc.”

Student A: “But if the government is not willing to help them become legal in the country, how can they work and support themselves? In the U.S. we have people enter with visas as non-immigrants and stayed illegally. Sadly, some lost their lives by crossing the border illegally. I just think people have the right to seek a better life and we should find ways to help them. Any suggestions?”

Student B: “To be honest. I have mixed feelings about this issue. I know immigrants come to our country for different reasons. We need them but we really don’t know what to do with them once they enter the country. I also think it is not feasible to deport millions of people. Perhaps, the best solution is to grant them guest worker permits.”

In the above excerpt, while Student A expressed her point of view by bringing the source from her own country, Student B offered a solution to the debatable issue. The findings are in line with other studies (Lee, 2009a; Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin & Chang, 2003) showing that topic selections affect the degree of social presence and the level of cognitive engagement. Moreover, the blog data reveal that expert scaffolding played a facilitative role in challenging students’ critical reflection by raising further questions, such as “What would you do if you ...?” or “Why do you think ...?” As a result, despite the fact that certain tasks were cognitively demanding, students managed to engage in further discussions. The following is an example of how the student responded to her L1 partner:

You have raised an interesting question concerning raising children by gay couples. I think it depends on the quality of the living conditions. If parents are providing a loving and caring environment, the sexual orientation does not make a difference. For example, Jodie Foster, the famous actress was raised by lesbian mothers. I really don’t have a problem with the idea. At

least these are my two cents of thought!!

In the above example, the student was able to construct new meanings by answering her L1 partner's question and giving an example to support her viewpoint.

Regarding the final stage of sociocognitive processes, the findings show that resolution was the cognitive activity that least frequently occurred (6%) during the social interaction. Given that the majority of the topics were based on cultural themes and most students had no prior knowledge of the content, it was challenging for them to engage in further discussions. Nevertheless, in the discussion about teaching methods used in Spain, one student successfully evaluated the solution proposed by his peer and offered an alternative solution, which was later accepted by others:

I agree with you that teaching methods are too traditional and it's hard to sit in class for two or three hours without interaction with others. I like your idea of having group discussions. However, I wouldn't want the whole class based on discussions. From my own personal experience, spending too much time on working in groups is a waste of time!! I would ask students to come with questions prepared before the class and spend the last ten minutes having students exchange ideas in small groups. I would then have them write an essay as homework to reflect upon the discussion. I think this is a better way to encourage class discussion.

This finding is not congruent with those of Pawan et al. (2003), who found that students who participated in asynchronous threaded discussions did not challenge other's ideas and simply exchanged information. However, the low rate of resolution suggests that most of the students were cognitively challenged by not being able to clearly articulate different points of view. The instructor's intervention plays a vital role in providing students with guidance and feedback to encourage critical reflection, as suggested by Garrison et al. (2001) in their study.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

Although the findings of this study have shed light on our understanding of the affordances and challenges of using blogs along with FTF interviews with L1s to foster learner autonomy through intercultural learning, much more research is still needed. As suggested by Lamb and Reinders (2008), it would be worthwhile to explore the role of teacher autonomy in online learning environments using personal reflections. One limitation of this study is that the data collection included only one type of Web 2.0 tool. Further studies might consider the investigation of learners' perceptions of autonomous online learning using other social networking tools, such as wikis or Tweets. The study included only L1s from Spain. Future research might include L1s from other Spanish-speaking countries, such as those of Latin America. This would illuminate how the target culture influences the way students socially construct meaning with others (e.g., sociolinguistic issues and lexical variation). In addition, given the complexity of self-directed learning, it is not possible to generalize from the findings of the current study which aspects of autonomous learning are the most prominent in the context of CMC. Replicating the study with the inclusion of other variables (e.g., gender, language proficiency level, intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation, learning styles and strategies) would enhance the conclusions. Finally, a follow-up study might consider instructor intervention at the various stages of monitoring students' blog comments to determine its impact on the critical thinking process.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The blog project examined how students engaged in cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective dimensions of autonomous online learning. The project for the development of ICC presented both promises and challenges for the study abroad students. Overall, students found that blogging supported

self-directed learning, as they individually and socially constructed meanings to develop their intercultural knowledge and skills. According to the post-survey findings, blogging promoted learner autonomy through self-regulation and self-management. In addition, students maintained that using blogs gave them a sense of belonging, as they collaboratively shared and exchanged cultural perspectives. However, a few students experienced difficulty in putting their ideas in order and suggested that the instructor should take a more active role in assisting students during the execution of the project. Furthermore, the results reveal that lack of access to the Internet at the host institution and family contributed to a limited level of participation. Consequently, some students were frustrated by not being able to participate actively in the blog discussions. The findings corroborated those reported in previous studies of CMC indicating that the accessibility of networking is essential for network-based learning and influences students' motivation to connect and interact with others (Lee, 2004; Ware, 2005).

Critical reflection as one of the major aspects of self-directing learning was manifested through collaborative interaction. Similar to Abrams's (2005) and Lee's (2009a) CMC findings, expert scaffolding played a facilitative role in cultivating critical thinking. The results of the study show that L1 partners went beyond offering cultural information and explanation of students' understandings. Their questions challenged students to think further about the cross-cultural issues. As a result, students strove for more in-depth discussions. However, some students did not find peer comments stimulating enough to generate further discussion. The analysis of selected blog entries for cognitive presence affirms that students mostly exchanged cultural information rather than challenging others' viewpoints by asking pertinent questions, as concluded in the recent CMC study of Liaw & Bunn-Le Master (2010). Despite the fact that all phases of cognitive presence were found in the blog entries, the exploration and integration occurred more frequently than the triggering and the resolution. According to Arnold and Ducate (2006), "*individual* resolutions were often based on *collaborative* integrations" (p. 57). Thus, teachers should make students aware of all four stages of sociocognitive processes and encourage them to actively engage in online exchange in order to take full advantage of their shared virtual space. Moreover, the findings suggest that topic selection (e.g., controversial issues vs. current events) and language proficiency (e.g., L1 vs. L2) may have affected the degree of interaction and quality of cognitive engagement. The option of using L1 should be considered to allow less proficient learners to fully express themselves.

In closing, this study contributes to the field of using digital technology for intercultural learning and its impact on learner autonomy, although the results reported from this study cannot be generalized to other settings. Without a doubt, the combination of CMC via blogging and FTF through interviews with L1s offered promising benefits to study abroad students, as they individually and collaboratively participated in blog activities. The findings show that the students' perceptions toward blogging have offered valuable insights into our understanding of its effectiveness for self-directed learning. Blogs as a mediated tool for intercultural learning outside of class have the potential to create a stimulating online learning community that is conducive to collaborative learning and reflective thinking. In addition, the use of free and teacher-assigned tasks contributes to the success of a blog project. The study concludes that well-designed tasks, effective metacognitive, and cognitive skills are essential to maximize the potential of blogs for stimulating learner autonomy and intercultural communication.

NOTES

1. For the purpose of the study, self-directed learning refers to learners' taking responsibility for planning, monitoring and evaluating their own learning. Learners are given certain freedom to make informal decisions and are encouraged to engage in critical thinking and collaborative interaction.
2. Students were required to take a proficiency-based test designed by the faculty of the CML and the majority of the students attained an intermediate level of Spanish proficiency to enroll in Hispanic

Studies.

3. While the majority of students interviewed the same informants throughout the course of the project, others changed their partners due to scheduling difficulty.
4. It should be noted that native speakers were invited to participate in the class blog. However, only 46% of them ($n = 12$) regularly read postings and wrote comments due to the low accessibility to Internet and a lack of technological skills.
5. As the majority of students own a laptop with video capability, some of them used iMovie (Mac users) or Movie Maker (PC users) to record interviews.
6. According to Darhower (2002) data reduction is necessary to maintain consistent and systematic data analysis. Therefore, group blogs from the third, fifth and seventh sessions were selected to reduce the sizable corpus of data. In addition, the selected sessions were chosen because they included the ethnographic interviews in order to fully capture the participants' behavior.
7. All examples were translated from Spanish to English.
8. It should be noted that students were allowed to use English to write reflective essays in order to fully express themselves.
9. Culture with a little c centers on the behavioral patterns and lifestyles of everyday people (see Byram, 1997).

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