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Using Online Forums to Scaffold Oral Participation in Foreign Language Instruction

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According to sociocultural approaches to second language acquisition (SLA), participation in communicative practices in the target language is the goal of language learning and a fundamental part of the acquisition process. One role of language instruction is to provide scaffolding that enables language learners to participate in communicative practices while their competence is still developing. This paper focuses on a particular communicative practice, oral discussions of assigned readings in a second-semester Spanish class at the university level, and explores the use of online forums to scaffold student participation in this communicative practice. Using a combination of qualitative methods, I show how an instructor used forums to prepare her students for class discussions while also increasing and diversifying student participation during those discussions. This outcome problematizes the assumption that only synchronous (e.g., chat) as opposed asynchronous (e.g., forums) modes of text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) can be beneficial for oral communication in foreign languages. Furthermore, it indicates that learning outcomes may depend more on the way in which CMC is integrated into instruction than on the specific characteristics of the technologies used.

INTRODUCTION

As the recipient of an instructional research fellowship, I designed a project that involved collaborating with a Spanish instructor at a local university to implement a series of computer-supported learning activities for her class. Given the number of studies that have found text-based online communication to be beneficial for subsequent oral communication (Abrams, 2003; Beauvois, 1997; Blake, 2009; Compton, 2002; Hirotani, 2009; Lam, 2004; Payne & Ross, 2005; Payne & Whitney, 2002; Satar & Özdener, 2008; Sykes, 2005), I was particularly interested in designing activities that might lead to similar outcomes. The instructor and I worked with both synchronous (e.g., chat) and asynchronous (e.g., forums) modes of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Following Abrams (2003), I initially expected more from real-time chats than from forums. However, the instructor's use of forums ended up having a clearly observable impact on oral communication in the classroom.

I discuss this outcome in terms of *participation* and *scaffolding*, two notions brought into research on second language acquisition (SLA) by scholars working within sociocultural frameworks (e.g., Lantolf, 2000; Watson-Gegeo & Nielsen, 2003). Specifically, I claim that the instructor's use of forums served as scaffolding that facilitated student participation in oral class discussions about assigned readings. By having students post their ideas online prior to class discussions, the instructor prepared her students to participate in class. She then integrated her students' forum posts into class discussions to increase and diversify student participation.

This case of an asynchronous mode of CMC facilitating participation in oral communication is inconsistent with Abrams' (2003) widely cited finding that only real-time chat leads to this outcome. This case also challenges the premise that learning outcomes can be attributed to specific communication technologies. In line with Warschauer's (2000) claim that technology-supported learning outcomes result from the way in which technology is used more so than the characteristics of specific tools, I believe that it was the instructor who was primarily responsible for the positive learning outcomes I observed.

In this paper I attempt to provide a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the instructor's use of online forums to scaffold student participation in subsequent oral discussions in a second-semester Spanish class. My findings emerge from participant observations, ethnographic fieldnotes, audio and video recordings, discourse analysis of forum posts, interviews with students and the instructor, and an end-of-semester student survey. Based on my findings, I invite practitioners to consider similar uses of online forums in their instruction, and researchers to consider overall instructional configurations that include CMC instead of attributing learning outcomes to specific tools.

Scaffolding participation in oral discussions of foreign language texts

Sociocultural approaches to SLA build on Vygotsky's conceptualization of individual development as a process of internalizing social interactions and the culturally defined symbolic artifacts that mediate them (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). According to these approaches, participation in communicative practices in the target language is the goal of language learning and a fundamental part of the acquisition process (Donato, 2000; Kasper, 2001; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Swain, 2000; van Lier, 2000; Watson-Gegeo & Nielsen, 2003). Language learning is viewed as a process of becoming a full participant in a target language speech community, and this learning occurs through legitimate participation in the communicative practices of that community (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Of course, beginning language learners, like the second-semester students in this study, are generally not capable of fully participating in target language

communicative practices. Accordingly, their participation requires some sort of scaffolding—some support that enables them to outperform their current level of competence (Donato, 2000). Scaffolding was originally conceptualized as the support provided by an adult that enables a child to complete a task that he or she could not otherwise complete (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). This support might include motivating the child, focusing his or her attention, limiting the number of options available, or taking over certain aspects of the task that the child cannot yet handle. Scaffolding is often associated with Vygotsky's (1978) *zone of proximal development*, understood as the metaphorical distance between what a learner can accomplish alone and what he or she can accomplish in collaboration with a more capable peer. However, some researchers have pointed out that the scaffolding metaphor actually places greater emphasis on the role of the support provider than on the development of the learner (Griffin & Cole, 1984; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In the SLA literature, scaffolding is frequently evoked in the form of Donato's (1994) "collective scaffolding" in which learners support one another's development by collaboratively pushing their linguistic output to higher levels (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Ohta, 2000; see also Swain, 2000).

Given my focus on a language instructor's use of online forums to support oral participation in her classroom, I also draw on recent conceptualizations of scaffolding from the learning sciences that continue to emphasize the role of the instructor and instructional supports. In a special issue of *The Journal of Learning Sciences* dedicated to scaffolding, the guest editors define it as social and technological assistance that enables learners to "engage in a practice otherwise out of reach" (Davis & Miyake, 2004, p. 266). In that same issue, the notion of scaffolding is expanded to include not only support that makes participation easier, but also instructional moves that "problematize" learning by "provoking" learners to participate in ways that they otherwise might not (Resier, 2004, p. 282). With regard to technological scaffolding, sometimes it is designed to provide temporary support that will eventually be removed, like training wheels on a bicycle (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). In addition to this sort of "scaffolding-with-fading," there are also increasing cases of "scaffolds-for-performance" (Pea, 2004, p. 438) in which technological tools have become integral parts of practices such that there is no expectation that the practice ever be performed without the tools (e.g., Hutchins, 1995). Word processing software, for example, has become fundamental to writing by enabling textual manipulation that simply would not be possible without the technology (Resier, 2004).

In this study, I focus on the oral discussion of Spanish language texts. This communicative practice has long been "a hallmark" of advanced language courses (Donato & Brooks, 2004, p. 185), and as the gap between language learning and foreign literature studies slowly begins to close (Paran, 2008), there are increasing calls for reading and discussing literary and other authentic texts at both intermediate (e.g., Hoecherl-Alden, 2006) and novice levels (e.g., Scott & Huntington, 2007). Oral

discussions of foreign language texts have been linked to improved comprehension (Appel & Lantolf, 1994), increased cultural awareness (Hoecherl-Alden, 2006; Scott & Huntington, 2007), improved grammatical competence (Yang, 2001), and increased opportunities for meaningful, elaborate, and extended discourse in the target language (Donato & Brooks, 2004; Hoecherl-Alden, 2006; Kim, 2004; Mantero, 2002), which in turn benefits oral proficiency (Swain, 1985). These positive outcomes, however, depend greatly on the instructor's ability to orchestrate and scaffold class discussions in ways that encourage students to share, contrast, and further develop their own ideas (Boyd & Maloof, 2000; Donato & Brooks, 2004; Hoecherl-Alden, 2006; Kim, 2004; Mantero, 2002). This study shows that instructors can scaffold productive student participation in these discussions first by having students prepare their contributions in online forums prior to class, and then by shaping class discussions to provide students with opportunities to successfully share and expand on those contributions.

Text-based CMC and oral communication

One promising finding from research on CMC and foreign language instruction is that communicating online through text can prepare students for subsequent oral communication (Abrams, 2003; Beauvois, 1997; Blake, 2009; Compton, 2002; Lam, 2004; Payne & Ross, 2005; Payne & Whitney, 2002; Satar & Özdener, 2008; Sykes, 2005). Abrams (2003) suggests, however, that only synchronous modes of CMC provide this preparation. Working with learners of German as a foreign language, Abrams conducted a quasi-experimental study comparing three different forms of preparation for whole-class oral discussions about foreign language texts. The control group received all instruction in a face-to-face classroom, including sessions immediately prior to each oral discussion that included some activities based on the texts to be discussed. The synchronous CMC group met in a computer lab for the sessions immediately prior to their oral discussions, and engaged in the same text-related activities as the control group, but in web-based chatrooms. For the asynchronous CMC group, these text-related activities were introduced a week prior to the oral discussion and completed in an online forum as homework. In addition to these forum assignments, the asynchronous group received the same face-to-face instruction as the control group, except for the fact that the class sessions immediately prior to their oral discussions did not include any text-related activities. Transcripts from the whole-class oral discussions showed that the synchronous CMC group produced significantly greater amounts of oral discourse than either of the other two groups, while the asynchronous group significantly underperformed. Abrams suggests that the underperformance of the asynchronous group was related to the fact that their online interactions included extended delays between messages. She does not address the fact that, unlike the other two groups, the asynchronous

group did not explicitly prepare for the discussions during their class sessions immediately prior to the discussions.

Hirotani (2009) conducted a related semester-long study with learners of Japanese assigned to control, synchronous, and asynchronous conditions. The control group received all instruction in a face-to-face classroom while the other two groups had one session each week moved to a computer lab in which they engaged in small-group discussions in either chats or forums depending on condition. Individual oral assessments at the beginning and end of the semester revealed no significant differences between conditions in terms of development of overall oral proficiency. This outcome contradicts Abrams' findings, although two factors complicate comparisons. First, as Hirotani points out, her study was designed to investigate the impact of text-based CMC on individual oral proficiency while Abrams' study considers CMC as preparation for subsequent oral discussions. Second, Hirotani's forum group communicated in real-time with classmates in a computer lab, not asynchronously outside of class. This real-time use of forums may explain why Hirotani's two supposedly different CMC groups performed similarly.

Hirotani's findings aside, the research literature often reflects the assumption that chatting is beneficial for oral communication while forums are not (e.g., Antenos-Conforti, 2009; Sotillo, 2000). There is some logic behind this assumption. Using Biber's (1986) taxonomy of dimensions of spoken and written language, linguists such as Crystal (2006) and Baron (2000) have shown that logs from online chats can approximate transcripts of spoken conversations. Accordingly, studies on the benefits of using chat in foreign language instruction often cite the oral-like features of chat as an explanation (e.g., Pellettieri, 2000). Researchers working in an information processing paradigm claim that the underlying cognitive processes of chatting and speaking are the same, and that a decreased load on working memory makes chatting beneficial for the development of fluency (Blake, 2009; Payne & Ross, 2005; Payne & Whitney, 2002).

If chatting and speaking were similar communicative practices, we might expect their underlying cognitive processes to be the same (Scribner & Cole, 1981). However, claiming this similarity is to conceptualize chatting and speaking as monolithic communicative practices as opposed to mediational tools. The word "chat" may still index informal oral communication, but it has also become a label that is broadly placed on all forms of synchronous, text-based CMC. In this sense, chatting is a medium through which communication can take place more so than a communicative practice in and of itself. The same is true of speaking: we use this medium for a very wide range of situations, purposes, and genres (Bakhtin, 1986; Finnegan, 1988).

According to Scribner and Cole (1981), communicative practices are defined less by mediational tools than by the way those tools are used. From this perspective, there is a hint of technological determinism in the claim that chatting unilaterally

benefits oral communication while participating in forums does not. This claim attributes learning outcomes directly to communication technologies instead of communicative practices. It also ignores Warschauer's (2000) ethnographic work on the use of CMC in language learning. After spending extensive time in multiple language classes over a two-year period, Warschauer concluded that learning outcomes depended more on the overall instructional context in which CMC is used than on the characteristics of particular technologies.

At its core, the relationship between text-based CMC and oral communication is a question of transfer-of-learning: How does learning or doing something in one context (such as communicating online through text) facilitate doing something related in another context (such as speaking in class)? Several theorists have argued that transfer depends heavily on the degree to which an individual perceives learning and transfer contexts as related to one another (Engle, 2006; Greeno, Smith, & Moore, 1993; Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, 1983; Pea, 1987). In particular, Engle (2006; Engle, Nguyen, & Mendelson, 2009) suggests that instructors can facilitate transfer by "expansively framing" learning activities to encourage students to perceive those activities as relevant beyond their immediate context (see also Wenger, 1998 on imagined participation). I introduce Engle's notion of framing because it is applicable to the way the instructor in my study presented online forums to her students, and may relate to the facilitative role these forums played in oral discussions in her class.

The study presented in this paper is a qualitative exploration of the use of forums to prepare students for oral discussions about foreign language texts. It is not a controlled experiment based on pre and post-measures of oral performance, nor a comparative study of different types of CMC. As such, my findings are not directly comparable to those of Abrams (2003) and Hirotani (2009). However, while Abrams found that forums did not prepare students for subsequent oral discussions, this study illustrates that they can. Accordingly, this study challenges technologically deterministic views by showing that learning outcomes result from the socially defined communicative practices included in instruction, not from the characteristics of the mediational technologies used in those practices (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Warschauer, 2000).

CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

As a graduate student, I received an instructional research fellowship to design and evaluate a series of computer-supported learning activities for beginning Spanish instruction at the post-secondary level. My general goal was to investigate the ways in which these activities might influence subsequent oral language use in the classroom while also identifying design principles for the effective use of CMC. I was paired with an instructor of a second-semester Spanish course at a local university. She was

an Argentine woman in her thirties who had been teaching Spanish for several years and had some experience with online forums. While I already knew many instructors and staff at this institution, I had not met Lara[1] before this project.

Given my initial focus on the use of text-based chatting to prepare students for oral communication and Lara's previous experience with online forums, we agreed that I would take the lead in designing chat-based activities for the computer lab while she took the lead in using forums to complement reading assignments and discussions. This division of labor positioned me as more of an observer than a participant with the use of forums, enabling me to see an otherwise familiar practice from an unfamiliar perspective and to be surprised by what I saw (Willis & Trondman, 2000). In fact, surprises early in the semester led me to focus on the use of forums much more closely than I had initially anticipated heading into the project.

My analysis of Lara's use of forums is based on multiple data sources. I attended over 30 class sessions out of a total of 75 (the class met five days a week for 50 minutes during a 15-week semester). I decided which sessions to attend in collaboration with Lara based on the use of technology during specific lessons and opportunities to observe oral discourse in the classroom. I was introduced to the 20 students in the class as a Spanish instructor and educational researcher who would be helping Lara design computer-supported activities and investigating their outcomes. During the sessions I attended, I spanned the full participant-observer spectrum. I led sessions in the computer-lab, co-taught in the classroom, participated in small group activities with students, and frequently sat in a corner jotting notes. Based on my jottings and memories, I wrote detailed fieldnotes that were further augmented by audio and sometimes video recordings. This range of experiences shaped my understanding of the context in which forums were used.

I also collected all logs from both forum and chat activities, although only forum logs have been analyzed for this paper. I generally analyzed forum logs after subsequent oral discussions in order to look for evidence of comments that appeared online before students repeated them in class.

Additionally, in order to incorporate the perspectives of Lara and her students, I conducted multiple interviews and an end-of-semester survey. Lara and I communicated regularly in person, over the phone, and through email to plan and discuss the outcomes of the activities we had been collaboratively designing. Later in the semester, after I had begun to focus on the forums and wanted to compare my thoughts with hers, we arranged a semi-structured interview of about 20 minutes that took place in her office. I recorded and transcribed that interview, and I discuss it in detail later in this paper. I interviewed five students over the course of the semester through email and/or in person. In-person interviews took place on campus right after class, lasted 10 to 20 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed. These five students were selected because they were each involved in classroom or online interactions that had caught my attention, and I wanted to compare their

perspectives with my own. In this paper, I only discuss those interviews that pertained to the use of forums. All 20 students also completed an online survey at the end of the semester that consisted of 37 Likert-style and open-response questions about chatting, using forums, and speaking in Spanish. I based many of these questions on prior student interviews in order to see how widely the perspectives of interviewees generalized across the class. Again, only questions about the forums are discussed in this paper.

The course syllabus, as provided by the Spanish department, included 11 reading assignments ranging from a couple of paragraphs to a few pages. These readings were informational texts during the first half of the semester and literary texts during the second half. They were intended to provide a cultural component to an otherwise communicative curriculum, and to spur discussion by bringing in controversial topics such as deforestation and euthanasia. The syllabus included a class session dedicated to each of these readings. Lara used the forums to complement several of these sessions by having students post ideas and questions prior to class, or reflections after. While all students were required to contribute to these forums, they were not necessarily expected to respond to one another's messages. The forums therefore served primarily as a channel for Lara to gather information about her students' thoughts on the readings more so than as an arena for discussion.

The sessions dedicated to working with the readings involved a variety of activities, but at some point during each session Lara engaged the class in what I refer to as a "reading discussion." Reading discussions were marked by Lara's open-ended questions and the students' self-selected responses through either raising their hands or calling out. Early in the semester these discussions often lasted only 10 to 20 minutes, but by the end of the semester they sometimes lasted the entire 50-minute class. Lara signaled the beginning of these discussions by holding up the assigned text while saying something like, "Bueno muchachos, ¿pudieron leer anoche?" [*Ok guys, was everyone able to read last night?*]. She also often sat with the students during these discussions as opposed to standing in front of the class. This move physically positioned her at the same level as the students, and to some extent converted the semi-circle formation of the students' desks into a closed circle that she had joined (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: A reading discussion with Lara seated

Figure 2 depicts a typical seating arrangement of the 20 students in the class during reading discussions, with Lara sitting with the students. The figure also includes the percentage of turns that each student took across all 11 discussions. In summary, with the exception of Grace and Danielle, the more vocal students sat on the left side of the room.

A/V box			(front of classroom)				
camera	table			Lara			Steven
Adam							Ilana
Thomas							Anna
Monica							Grace
Amy							Jenny
Ned							Stacy
Ivana							Mark
Stuart	Larry	Madison	Miranda	Xavier	Danielle	Amber	Cessie
			(back of classroom)				

% turns:	> 10%	10% - 5%	< 5%

Figure 2: Typical seating arrangement during a reading discussion

Early in the semester I sat in various places in the classroom, but by the end I generally sat in the front left corner because there was room for my camera, I was close to the A/V equipment that I often operated, and this position offered a good

view of the students. Unlike days on which I participated in activities, I generally kept to myself during sessions that included reading discussions. I still engaged in small talk with students prior to class, and met with Lara after class, but on these days I set up my camera (if I had brought it), started my audio recorder, sat down at my desk, observed, and jotted notes.

Of the 11 reading discussions, five of them were directly preceded by a homework assignment that required students to post a message in a forum. In this paper I focus on the first three of those five sessions because each illustrates a specific way in which Lara scaffolded student participation in the reading discussion.

DATA AND FINDINGS

I start this section with specific examples of Lara's scaffolding of her students' participation during the first three reading discussions preceded by online forums. In the first example, Lara framed a forum-based homework assignment as relevant to the next day's discussion (Engle, 2006), and Mark, a student whose participation was generally uncommon, spontaneously repeated orally what he had posted the night before. In the second example, Lara created an opportunity in the discussion for Ned, a student who had posted a potentially volatile opinion in the forum, to bring that opinion into the reading discussion in order to spark responses from other students. In the third example, Lara called directly on some otherwise quiet students to share their forum posts in class, thus diversifying participation in the discussion. Especially in the second and third examples, Lara clearly positioned her "students' responses to texts [as] the starting point for further discussion rather than being the ending point" (Hoecherl-Alden, 2006, p. 247). After presenting these examples, I turn to interview and survey data in order to include the perspectives of Lara and her students on the use of forums in her class.

First reading discussion preceded by an online forum

The second reading assignment of the semester, titled "El Amazonas: pulmón del planeta" [*The Amazon: lung of the planet*], was the first to be preceded by a forum assignment. The reading discussion took place on Thursday of the second week of the semester. During the previous class session, Lara explained to the class that she had created a forum on the course website in which each student was to post a question about the reading, either about something they had not understood or "una pregunta para discutir en clase, más interesante" [*a more interesting question to discuss in class*]. Her wording was noteworthy because she framed this homework assignment as directly related to the next day's discussion. This framing served as scaffolding for participation in class by encouraging students to think about the coming discussion while posting in the forum (Engle, 2006). The homework task was also inherently

scaffolded in that the students could dedicate as much time as they chose, and the interface of the forum allowed them to modify their contributions both before and after posting.

From the start, Thursday's discussion showed signs of being influenced by what the students had posted for homework. Shortly after Lara sat down with the students and signaled the start of the reading discussion by asking, "Muchachos, entonces, ¿todos leyeron El Amazonas: pulmón del planeta?" [*So, guys, did everyone read "El Amazonas, pulmón del planeta"?*], Mark, a student whom neither Lara nor I could recall having previously taken a self-selected turn in class, raised his hand and repeated his forum post from the night before.

| 1 | Mark | Um, los indigenous tienen plantas para (inaudible) de sus flechas (inaudible) los animales que comen. *Um, the "indigenous" had plants they used on their arrows for the animals they hunted.* |
| 2 | Lara | ((laughs)) ¡Te encantó lo de las flechas de los indios! *You loved the part about the arrows of the natives!* |

Mark's comment repeated the general idea and several of the exact words from his post:

"La parta de me gusto mucho dijalo cundo los indigenas curare una sustancia que ponia en los flechas y para paralizar a los animales y quando para comer."
The part I liked a lot is when it said that the indigenous used curare on their arrows to paralyze the animals they ate.

Lara's animated response suggested that she recognized that Mark was repeating what he had posted online. Mark's oral repetition of his online comment left Lara and me buzzing after class as we discussed the incident:

1	Adam	Mark dijo algo, creo que por primera vez *Mark said something, I think for the first time.*
2	Lara	[por primera vez ((laughs)) *[for the first time*
3	Adam	Y dijo e-no exactamente lo mismo pero la misma idea. *And he said th-not the exact same thing but the same idea.*
4	Lara	[lo mismo que en el foro] *[the same as in the forum]*

Mark's oral reproduction of his online forum post was the first indication of the semester that Lara's use of the forums was scaffolding student participation in

subsequent oral discussions. Mark had declined to participate in interviews, so I was unable to get his thoughts on this incident. Nevertheless, given his sparse participation over the course of the semester, it was noteworthy that his spoken comment so clearly repeated his forum post. My subsequent analysis of the audio recording of this session and the forum logs showed that several students similarly echoed their forum posts during the reading discussion. Mark's example was especially salient because it happened right at the beginning of the discussion and was the first time he had participated in this type of discussion. In total, Lara and I both observed that a wider range of students had participated in this reading discussion than what we had previously seen. We also agreed that the homework forum posts must have contributed to this improved participation.

Second reading discussion preceded by an online forum

On the Wednesday of the following week, there was another reading discussion preceded by a homework assignment to post a question in a forum. Like the previous time, there were multiple examples of students repeating aspects of their forum posts. But it was the way Lara integrated forum posts into this discussion that resulted in my first "ah-ha moment" of the semester (Willis & Trondman, 2000). The text, titled "La conservación de Vieques" [*The conservation of Vieques*], was about a small island in Puerto Rico that the US military had used for decades to practice bombing. The vast majority of forum posts expressed concern and/or contempt for these bombings. Ned's post was a jarring exception:

> "Yo vi Vieques. No es muy especial. Porque no usa una zona de un aliado cuando nosotros hamos dado protección a ellos?"
> *I've seen Vieques. It's not very special. Why not use a zone of an ally [to practice bombing] when we give them protection?*

Lara later told me that upon seeing the message she wanted to bring Ned's experience and potentially unpopular opinion into the class discussion. She hoped that he would enter the discussion on his own without her calling on him directly.

Shortly into the reading discussion, Ned did join in, commenting that for some people the conservation of Vieques might represent resistance against the US military. Lara quickly asked her planned follow-up question:

> "Ned, ¿estuviste en Vieques, verdad? Cuéntanos la experiencia."
> *Ned, you've been to Vieques, right? Tell us about the experience.*

Over the next several turns, Ned responded to Lara's questions by explaining to the class that he had spent one day kayaking in Vieques the previous summer, and it was "okay." Talking more softly with a slight shrug and a grin, Ned finished with:

"Pero si necesito, uh, un sitio para practicar bomabardeos, it's a good spot."
But if I need, uh, a place to practice bombing, "it's a good spot."

As he repeated this same opinion he had expressed in the forum, Lara and several students responded with groans, gasps, and laughter. The subsequent turns reflected a dramatically different dynamic in the discussion than what I had previously observed. The next two students to speak, other than Ned, directed their comments directly at him rather than at Lara or the group in general.[2]

1	Ned	Pero si necesito, uh, un sitio para practicar bomabardeos, it's a good spot. *But if I need, uh, a place to practice bombing, "it's a good spot."*
2	**Ivana**	**((turning to her left to face Ned)) ¿Y que piensas de las personas que tienen cáncer porque los bombardeos?** *And what do you think about the people that have cancer because of the bombing?*
3	Ned	No hay muchas personas en esa área. ¿Quién va a una área de bombardeos? *There aren't many people in the area. Who goes to a bombing zone?*
4	**Grace**	**((looking directly at Ned from across the classroom)) No es quién va, es quién vive en esa región.** *It's not who goes, but who already lives there.*

It was while writing my fieldnotes for this observation that I realized I had seen something special about Lara's use of forums. She was scaffolding student participation not only by allowing students to prepare their comments in the forum before being expected to speak in class, but also by drawing on their posts to strategically shape the discussion. By asking Ned to post something about the reading, Lara gained valuable information about his related experiences and opinions. She used that information to have Ned introduce a controversial topic that motivated others to participate. Furthermore, after Lara drew attention to Ned's experience, three students then engaged in what might be thought of as collective scaffolding (Donato, 1994) in the form of problematizing (Resier, 2004). Each student's comment provoked a response from another as they engaged in meaningful student-to-student discourse through which they shared and contrasted differing opinions and perspectives. This is exactly the type of text-based discussion that is advocated in the research literature (Boyd & Maloof, 2000; Donato & Brooks, 2004; Hoecherl-Alden, 2006; Kim, 2004; Mantero, 2002).

Third reading discussion preceded by an online forum

A few weeks passed before the next reading discussion that was preceded by a homework assignment involving a forum. This text, entitled "Dos cuestiones difíciles" [*Two difficult questions*], dealt with the use of animals in scientific experiments and euthanasia. In the forum, the students were to post an opinion on one of these two issues. For the first time, Lara posted a response to a particular student in which she asked the student to be prepared to talk about her post in class the next day:

> "Es muy interesante, Cessie, que pongas a la pregunta un nivel mayor de complejidad. Puedes explicar en la clase que es esto de 'consequentialism'???"
> *It's very interesting, Cessie, that you raise the level of complexity of this question. Can you explain what "consequentialism" is in class?*

Lara had responded to student posts before, but she had never before used the forums to ask a specific student to be prepared to speak in class. She was very explicitly scaffolding Cessie's participation the next day by directing her actions and "reducing the degrees of freedom available to [her]" (Davis & Miyake, 2004, p. 266).

Lara also started this reading discussion in a new way. As soon as she sat down with the students and signaled the start of the discussion by saying, "Entonces muchachos, ¿pudieron leer la lectura para hoy?" [*So guys, did you all read for today?*], she turned to a particular student and his forum post:

> "En la lectura se plantea el uso de animales en los experimentos científicos como una decisión moral. Pero en el foro, ((looking towards Steven)) Steven, vos mencionas, esta no es una decisión moral."
> *In the reading, the use of animals in scientific experiments is presented as a moral issue. But in the forum, ((looking towards Steven)) Steven, you mention that it is not a moral decision.*

This was the first time during a reading discussion that Lara called directly on a student rather than waiting for students to enter the conversation on their own. Steven paused, stuttered a bit, and said:

> "Creo que si el animal es para comer ¿como entender el concepto del derecho del animal?"
> *I think if we raise animals for eating, how can we understand the concept of animal rights?*

His comment clearly echoed his post from the night before:

> "En mi opinion, esta cuestión no es muy difícil. El cuestión es si valoras de personas o animales mas. Si te gusta comer carne, ya ha respondido a ese pregunta."

In my opinion this is not a difficult question. The question is if you value people more than animals. If you like to eat meat, you've already answered the question.

This example is similar to the one in which Lara asked Ned about his experience in Vieques, but there were two important differences. First, Lara waited for Ned to enter the discussion on his own. Second, while Ned regularly participated in discussions, Steven did not. His participation was uncommon, and if Lara had not called on him, it was unlikely that he would have participated. Here, Lara's forum-based scaffolding, which illustrates Resier's (2004) notion of provoking engagement, led to the inclusion of a seldom heard voice in the discussion.

Lara repeated this tactic two more times during this reading discussion. At one point she turned to Anna and said:

"Anna, en tu intervención en el foro hablaste de *moral standing*. ¿Quieres explicar un poco más sobre eso?"
Anna, in your post in the forum you talked about "moral standing". Do you want to explain a bit more about that?

And, as foreshadowed by her forum post the night before, she turned to Cessie and said:

"Cessie, vos también habías hablado sobre una postura filosófica. ¿Lo puedes explicar un poquito por favor?"
Cessie, you also talked about a philosophical position. Can you explain a bit please?

Like Steven, Anna and Cessie didn't regularly participate in reading discussions. In all three cases, they capably repeated their forum posts when prompted to do so, thus making productive contributions to the discussion that they may not have otherwise made. Furthermore, as this reading discussion continued, they continued to participate more actively than usual. Lara's tactics therefore illustrate "scaffolding with fading" (Pea, 2004) in that she called on these students to get them to participate a first time, and they continued to participate throughout the discussion without her directly calling on them again.

After class, Lara explained to me that she had called on these three students because she wanted them to participate more and knew they were capable of doing so. She was especially pleased that they had continued to participate after being called on. We scheduled a time for a more detailed interview because I had several questions and interpretations to share with her. It seemed to me that she was using the forums to scaffold participation in reading discussions both prior to and during those discussions. First, she had her students prepare for oral discussions by composing potential contributions in the forum. Second, she drew on her students' posts to increase and diversify their participation in this oral communicative practice.

Interview with Lara

When Lara and I met to talk about the forums in general and the most recent reading discussion in particular, I asked about the request she had posted in the forum asking Cessie to elaborate on her comment in class the next day. Lara explained:

> "En realidad mi respuesta no tuviera que ver con que la viera Cessie…sino que tenía que ver con por un lado los otros se dieran cuenta que yo estaba entrando y estaba respondiendo y estaba también valorando en algún sentido más o menos los comentarios o las intervenciones. Pero al mismo tiempo de que también se dieran cuenta de que muchas intervenciones del foro podían pasar para la clase."
> *In reality my response wasn't so much for Cessie to see…but rather, on one hand, for the rest of the class to see that I was reading, responding to, and to some degree evaluating the comments. But at the same time I wanted them to realize that many of the comments from the forum could come up in class.*

In other words, Lara's forum post was less a felicitous request for an action on the part of Cessie than part of her overall scaffolding of her students' participation in reading discussions. Through this message she framed the forum posts in a way that might encourage all students to think about their posts as applicable to the next day's discussion (Engle, 2006).

I then asked why she had chosen to call on Steven, Anna, and Cessie. She responded that "a menos que yo les preguntara, no abrieron la boca" [*unless I had called on them, they wouldn't have opened their mouths*]. As I had suspected, Lara used what these otherwise quiet students had posted in the forum to provide them with opportunities to contribute to the class discussion. She added that these three students had made connections between their other academic interests and the assigned text, and she wanted to integrate their comments into the class discussion in order to encourage others to consider connections of their own. As Boyd and Maloof (2000) suggest, encouraging students to make these sorts of connections is one way in which instructors can facilitate productive discussions of foreign language texts.

I followed up with another observation with which Lara agreed:

1	Adam	Para mí me está resultando bastante interesante ver la forma en que el foro te permite a ti estructurar la discusión al día siguiente ya sabiendo cuales son las ideas allí en el grupo. *For me it's very interesting to see how the forum allows you to shape the discussion the next day, already knowing the ideas that the students have.*
2	Lara	Para mí es fantástico en este sentido. Ya sé por donde van y por

		donde no van.
		For me it's fantastic in that sense. I already know where they're going and where they're not going.

Her agreement validated my interpretation. The forums provided Lara with information about the knowledge her students brought to subsequent class discussions. She took advantage of that information to scaffold participation in discussions by creating personalized opportunities for her students—and especially some of her quieter students—to successfully contribute. Posting in the forums helped her students speak in class in large part because she had read their posts and shaped the discussion accordingly.

Student interviews and surveys

After the third forum-preceded reading discussion, I exchanged multiple email messages with Anna and Cessie about their participation in that discussion, and I also interviewed Anna in person later in the semester.[3] Both students agreed that posting in the forum had made them better prepared to speak in class the next day. As Anna explained:

> "I would not have been prepared to make a comment about my thoughts and experiences with the difficult questions we were discussing without having previously posted on the forum. I would not have known the necessary vocabulary, and having posted just the night before meant the words were fresh in my brain… I would also not have had the sentence structure and general flow of ideas in my head well enough to feel comfortable talking about it. I might have been able to think about the same things I thought about while making the post, but in the amount of time we have in class to think I probably would not have come up with a coherent series of expressions in Spanish."

Cessie also mentioned that she appreciated Lara's direct request in the forum to share her comment the next day because it motivated her to prepare more than usual.

Both Cessie and Anna clearly felt that posting forum messages about assigned readings the night before a class discussion better prepared them to participate in the discussion. To gauge how widespread this feeling was for the rest of the class, I included several questions about the forums on the end-of-semester survey. The results showed that some of Anna and Cessie's views did generalize fairly well. For example, 15 of 20 students agreed that posting in the forum helped prepare them to participate in the discussion the next day, with 15 of 20 also indicating that, during reading discussions, they remembered what they posted the night before.

Additionally, 19 of 20 students reported that they looked up vocabulary words while composing their forum posts.

The survey also included questions designed to measure the extent to which the students were picking up on Lara's framing of the forum activities as connected to in-class discussions (Engle, 2006). The results showed that about half the students were picking this up. 11 of 20 indicated that while composing their forum posts they thought they might say something related in class the next day, and 9 of 20 indicated that while they posted in the forum they thought Lara might bring up their post in class the next day.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Lara used forums to scaffold her students' participation in oral discussions of assigned texts in multiple ways. Her forum-based homework assignments gave students time to compose possible contributions in writing before having to speak in class. These tasks were also framed to encourage students to perceive their forum posts as relevant to the next day's discussion. Based on what her students posted online, Lara then shaped discussions to create opportunities for students to orally repeat what they had previously posted online. These repetitions led to increased and diversified student participation as well as productive examples of student-to-student discourse. Lara's scaffolding included calling directly on students that may not have otherwise participated (Resier, 2004). This tactic ensured that these quieter students gained experience with the increasingly valued communicative practice of discussing foreign language texts (Paran, 2008). It also provided these students with opportunities to use the target language in ways that potentially promote the development of oral proficiency (Swain, 1985). It is worth noting that Lara called on students that she believed were capable of participating, and that she knew had something valuable to share based on what they had posted online.

According to sociocultural approaches to SLA (e.g., Lantolf, 2000; Watson-Gegeo & Nielsen, 2003), this scaffolded participation is a key step towards autonomous participation in target language communicative practices. As students' competence develops, scaffolding can fade, such as when Lara called on students early during discussions and they continued to participate on their own later. A question that remains is if the forums themselves represent scaffolding that should eventually fade or if they are scaffolding for performance that might become a standard part of preparing for oral discussions (Pea, 2004)? As the use of CMC in foreign language instruction continues to grow, I suspect the latter may be the case.

Lara's use of forums to successfully prepare students for oral communication challenges claims that only synchronous as opposed to asynchronous CMC can be beneficial in this regard (Abrams, 2003). More importantly, my findings indicate that learning outcomes result from the way in which technologies are used in instruction

more so than the characteristics of those technologies (Warschauer, 2000). In Abrams study, forum-based tasks were introduced a week prior to oral discussions, while Lara assigned such tasks the day before. Interestingly, during my student interview with Anna, she commented that her forum posts were fresh in her mind the following day, but much less so as more days passed. I propose that the differences between Abrams synchronous and asynchronous groups may have had more to do with differences in task design than differences in technologies. As Scribner and Cole (1981) argue, it is engagement in socially created and valued communicative practices that has a lasting impact on individual development, not the characteristics of the mediational tools used in those practices. As researchers interested in the relationship between text-based CMC and oral communication in foreign languages, we must consider the overall instructional contexts that we observe rather than attribute learning outcomes directly to specific technologies.

Given my critical remarks about technological determinism in research on CMC and SLA, it is fair to ask if CMC was necessary at all for Lara to scaffold participation in reading discussions. For example, could she have achieved the same outcomes by having her students keep written journals about reading assignments? Had she framed the use of such journals as directly connected to subsequent discussions, they may have similarly prepared students to speak in class (Engle, 2006). However, a crucial aspect of Lara's scaffolding was the way she drew on her students' forum posts from one day to the next to productively shape discussions. This tactic required instant access to her students' ideas that journals would not offer. In this sense, I suspect that any number of tools that enable the immediate exchange of messages between students and instructors could have been used. Even so, I stress that it is the way in which Lara integrated such messages into her instruction that lead to the positive outcomes I observed.

In closing, I want to encourage other language instructors to consider adopting Lara's use of forums to scaffold student participation in oral discussions. Her forum-based tasks required only a few minutes for her students to complete, and as little as 30 minutes for her to read prior to class. In light of the positive outcomes described in this paper, this relatively small time commitment was time well spent. I insist, however, that this call for using forums to support oral language use should not be interpreted as a call against the use of chat for similar purposes. My initial analysis of the use of chat in Lara's class includes examples of students orally repeating utterances first composed in chat, and student comments about the usefulness of chatting as practice for speaking (Mendelson, in preparation). My focus on forums in this paper was motivated by the fact that I was pleasantly surprised by the outcomes I observed, and I wanted to share this surprise with others (Willis & Trondman, 2000).

Transcription conventions

For both forum logs and transcriptions of oral communication, Spanish language has not been modified. English translations (in *italics* just below the Spanish) sometimes reflect more normative language in order to facilitate comprehension. The following symbols have been used in transcriptions of oral communication:

(( ))   observed behaviors not captured in language
[ ]   overlapping turns
-      stutters or false starts
Bold   turns highlighted for analysis
" "   quotes in italicized translations indicate English use during an otherwise Spanish turn

Notes

[1] All names other than my own (Adam) are pseudonyms.
[2] In this segment of transcript, Lara's turns, consisting of recasts and calling on students who had raised their hands, have been removed. It is worth noting that Ivana and Grace's comments also echoed aspects of their forum posts from the night before.
[3] Steven declined to participate in interviews.

Acknowledgement

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