

*Developing learners' oral proficiency through online English  
conversation using VOIP*

**An article based Master's thesis**



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7 October 2010

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## ARTICLE 1

## ARTICLE 2

## Summary

This article-based Master's thesis investigates how undergraduate students in Iran learn English through regular topic-based online conversations with native-speaking conversation facilitators (CFs) living in different countries. The conversations are conducted under difficult circumstances due to slow internet connections. The aim of the study was to discover what changes in the design of conversation assignments and in the training and guidance given to CFs should be implemented in order to create patterns of interaction and conditions more conducive to language learning.

The core material in the study consists of two articles using a qualitative approach. The first article is based on semi-structured interviews with eight CFs. It sought to gain insights into the ways in which the online conversations were being conducted and how oral proficiency was being developed from the point of view of the CFs. The second article was based on the results of students' responses to open questions in a broad student survey, investigating their experiences and perspectives on learning a language through the online conversations.

Although the two articles used conventional qualitative methods, the thesis as a whole was an attempt to pursue action research, which consists of cycles of: action – research – evaluation – changes (intervention) - action etc. This meant that the researcher-practitioner has been inside the organization working as the main conversation administrator and designer while simultaneously pursuing the research. As a consequence of this position, in addition to the qualitative data used for the articles the researcher-practitioner has had access to a wide range of research material to support the analysis. The articles themselves are thus effectively "snapshots" of part of the research cycle.

The results of the first article showed that CFs with well-developed pedagogical and technical skills, including facility with written chat, were able to find ways to facilitate learning through their flexibility in the use of conversation assignments and variation in choice of topic. The CFs who encouraged students both to interact with one another and influence the direction of conversations were able to promote more

open dialogue, while CFs who followed conversation assignments too rigidly sometimes had difficulty in engaging students' full attention. CFs who were only able to talk with one student at a time due to technical limitations experienced particular difficulties in establishing a dialogue, especially with weaker students.

In the second article, analysis of survey responses showed that most students enjoyed and learned from the conversations, indicating that the CFs' abilities to adapt their language to make it comprehensible, and give explanations and examples where difficulties arise are essential to facilitate a smooth-running interaction. Students also stress that the CFs' appropriate use of corrective feedback, willingness and ability to vary questioning techniques and conversation topics, all help to enhance learning, as does the socio-affective support given to the students to enable them to relax in the online environment. Some students, however, saw room for improvement through an increase in the CFs' flexibility with conversation assignment questioning and through the introduction of a greater variety of topics so that conversations do not become routine and predictable. A significant number of students also thought that more explicit correction or highlighting of mistakes would be helpful. The explanations and interpretations of the different findings and the implications for changes are discussed in the two articles

The thesis itself is organized with an initial introductory chapter presenting the background for the study and an overview of relevant research followed by chapters on theory and methodology. Summaries of the articles are then presented followed by a discussion focusing on the meaning of the results of the two articles in the wider research context and the validity of the study as a whole. The conclusion outlines the implications of the study and suggests possible future directions in the field. The articles themselves are placed at the very end of the thesis.

## 1.0 Introduction, overview, the context of learning

*The project needs to touch their heart in some way if it is to sustain them*

(Reason & Marshall, 2001, p. 415 cited in Herr & Andersen, 2005, p. 72).

This quotation, which is a part of the advice given to those considering writing an action research dissertation, aptly sums up my personal motivation for choosing to work on this particular research project. The study focuses on the online teaching of English to university students in Iran who are not allowed to attend universities or institutions of higher education in their home country solely on account of their adherence to the Bahá'í Faith. These students are also shut out from public employment, are the subject of systematic persecution by the authorities and, as I have witnessed, are randomly jailed for shorter or longer terms purely as a result of allegiance to their religion.

Aside from the personal motivation of doing research which supported such a discriminated minority group, it was extremely important to me that the research I did should not be disconnected from the world of practice. At the time I started work on this thesis (2007), I was already deeply involved with working for BIHE (The Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education: henceforth referred to as "The Institute": see [www.bihe.org](http://www.bihe.org)), the volunteer-run university which the students attend. The Institute was developing and running English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses. I was contributing to this development, and therefore the idea of doing action research on the EFL project appealed to me because I knew that my continued practical involvement at the Institute would ensure that my motivation could be sustained throughout the thesis. The decision to pursue research on the work I was already involved with also reflected my belief in the importance of the process of reflection, evaluation and change with the aim of continual improvement in any working situation, as manifested by the action research paradigm. In this sense I concur with Battaglia (1995, p. 89, cited in Herr & Andersen 2005, p. 73) that "*action research is an attitude or becomes an attitude that is brought to one's practice*".

In addition, my motivation for choosing this particular study was linked to my background as an English teacher, and a particular interest in working with foreign language learning through cross-cultural exchange. Prior to engagement with the Institute, I had been responsible for coordinating many EU-funded Leonardo and Socrates international school exchange and work-placement projects. My involvement in these activities was linked with a belief in the importance of the development of oral foreign language proficiency as a means of allowing inter-cultural understanding, thereby helping in a practical way to broaden the minds of the young people engaged in these exchange projects. In general, I find the teaching and development of conversation skills more interesting than the teaching of writing skills due to the kind of "whole person" interaction which is involved, potentially allowing a spontaneity, creativity and engagement which is unique to this more immediate form of human communication.

Last but not least, having worked as a classroom teacher of English at high school level for a decade prior to my involvement with the project described in the present study, I had come to understand that engagement with modern technology and developing a deeper understanding of its effects and pedagogical potential was, for me, a necessary condition for continuing to work in the field of language education.

## 1.1 Overview of the field of research

Within this field of language education, as in so many other areas of life, the development of modern communications technology has opened up possibilities which were previously unimaginable. When the latent potential latent of these technological advances can be exploited, as for example in this study through the organization of online conversations between native speakers and language learners, language education can potentially be revolutionized. Therefore, the question of how these new technologies can be harnessed for educational purposes is an important one which is only just beginning to be touched upon. Research into the question of how distance

language learning courses or other online exchanges involving language learning can be designed, planned and organized to integrate the develop of oral proficiency will surely develop into a field of research which will expand greatly over coming decades.

The proliferation and rapid evolution of different communications technologies and their application to language learning make it difficult to gain an overall perspective of the research field. I will therefore offer a brief presentation of recent developments by separating out the most relevant technologies and their most important characteristics, mentioning significant findings according to the type of technology being researched, and assessing the "state of the art" in relation to the current study (see Kern (2006) and Thorne (2008) for more detailed overviews).

The acronym CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) was originally used to describe how computers could potentially assist language learning through interaction between the learner and the computer. As technology developed to allow more communication between people, the term CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) came into play to reflect the human communicative element. Within CMC, a distinction is drawn between asynchronous (non-simultaneous) and synchronous (simultaneous) forms of communication. In language learning contexts, asynchronous communication is usually through e-mails, discussion forums and messaging boards. Within synchronous communication we can identify four main areas which can usefully be differentiated: first, written chat (e.g. Instant Messenger), second, voice chat (e.g. Skype, often with written chat as a simultaneous option), third, audiographic conferencing (a combination of written chat, voice chat and the use of a whiteboard or similar graphic tools), and fourth, audiovisual conferencing (i.e. videoconferencing), which may include some or all of the elements used in audiographic conferencing as well as the visual element. These four different forms of synchronous CMC require increasing amounts of bandwidth and internet speed. Thus written chat takes a minimal amount of bandwidth while videoconferencing requires all participants to have high quality, reliable technology available, a situation which is still unusual in mass education, and is not relevant to the present study where students

generally only have access to the limited bandwidth and internet speeds suitable for written chat or voice chat.

In pedagogical design for language teaching purposes, significant differences have been identified between the use of asynchronous and synchronous CMC. The latter "real-time" technology offers learners the opportunity to negotiate immediate feedback with their partner or teacher, an option which is not available in the asynchronous form where the learner often has to wait hours or days for a response. Depending on the complexity of the exchange, the language level of the learners and the skill of the Tutor or language expert, the learners may only partially understand responses, feedback or correction when it does arrive. Thus while synchronous communication has obvious benefits in terms of the satisfaction of immediate response, increasing the probability of mutual comprehension, the asynchronous form has the benefit of giving participants time to reflect over their language to gain understanding before making new contributions.

Relatively early research on CALL (Ortega, 1997, p. 83) compared synchronous online interaction through written chat with face-to-face class discussions showing that online class discussions undertaken through written chat could have certain advantages: First, because the medium allowed learners to take more control over the discussion as compared with a teacher-fronted classroom, second, because it encouraged learners who were shy in face to face discussions to participate more actively, and third through the potential of the written chat facility to promote attention to learners' own language production through the possibility of reflection and editing. As a result of these advantages, written chat discussions have become more common in language classroom use, reflecting developments in the wider society especially in youth culture. A large number of written chat studies have been and continue to be undertaken; often seeking to understand how such written chat for can promote learning through noticing of different language forms (e.g Sotillo 2005; Fiori 2005; Shekary & Tahririan 2006; Lee 2008; Sauro 2009). This increased usage of written chat for language learning has also extended beyond the classroom, to include the organization of transnational or cross-cultural exchanges between learners in different

classrooms. One particularly interesting form of this kind of "telecollaborative" exchange has been named "tandem" exchange: Two learners who have different mother tongues and wish to learn each others' language, collaborate using written chat exchanges (and also asynchronous exchanges) to help one another to learn the other's native language. (For compilations in this area, see O'Dowd 2007; Belz & Thorne 2005). Most of the benefits of this type of exchange have as much to do with the development of intercultural communicative competence as they do with language learning, again reflecting developments in the wider world, and the need for learners to build capacity and skills to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds

Following the success of the introduction of written chat as a form of variation in language classrooms, some researchers (e.g. Felix, 2005, p. 19) posited that similarities between written synchronous communication and oral conversation would entail that the use of the written chat is likely to strengthen learners' oral skills. However, arguments against this "*perceived resemblance to oral conversational language*" (Thorne, 2008, p. 421) focusing on fundamental differences in the two forms of communication as a result of key aspects of physical social presence, or the lack of it, show that such comparisons may ultimately be unproductive. Rather than focusing on possible similarities or differences between two fundamentally different forms of communication (with and without computer mediation), Payne and Ross (2005), and Tudini (2003, 2007) chose to research this by comparing and contrasting the two technologically simplest forms of synchronous CMC: voice chat and written chat. This research indicated that the two forms could be mutually supportive, such that written messages could be utilized to assist and strengthen oral production.

Even before these comparative studies using both voice and written chat, researchers at the UK's Open University (henceforth referred to as the OU) had started working with pilot studies (Kötter, 2001) using the third form of synchronous communication: audiographic conferencing. The OU pioneered the use of the Lyceum multimedia learning platform in its distance language learning programmes (Hampel & Hauck 2004; Lamy 2004), with further research undertaken on task design (Rosell-Aguilar 2005, 2006). The continuing work of the OU researchers is particularly

relevant in relation to the present study since both deal with distance language learning environments, rather than classroom-based or hybrid language learning (mix of classroom and distance learning or online exchanges). The OU researchers have found that designing tasks for developing oral proficiency through online interaction for weaker learners may be particularly challenging, and one even went so far as to conclude that students below intermediate level should not be involved in such oral interaction (Kötter, 2001). This is partly because while such learners may require extra (non-linguistic) stimulation in the form of images and graphics to facilitate language development, there is a real danger of overloading their cognitive capacities. The simultaneous challenge of attempting to use a new language and also manage a new technological environment can cause stress which hinders learning. Other important OU findings in the audiographic environment include the extraordinary importance attached to Tutors' socio-affective skills in assisting students in the distance language learning environment, which is beyond that which is normally required in the pedagogical or didactic role of ordinary classroom teachers (Rosell-Aguilar, 2007). This is again mainly the result of the fragility of the learning environment which can cause considerable anxiety, especially for new language learners. Gaining a better understanding of anxiety in online language learning environments has been the subject of other more recent research (Satar & Özdener, 2008; Arcos, Coleman & Hampel, 2009)

Other significant and potentially ground-breaking research in the field of distance language learning and the development of oral proficiency has recently been undertaken in a study of first year language students at the University of California (Blake, Wilson, Cetto & Pardo-Ballester, 2008). It comprised three different groups of students whose learning gains were compared over one year (classroom learners, hybrid, and full distance learners). The distance learners were "*required to chat live using both text and voice with their instructor in groups of no more than three at least once a week for one hour and several more times with their assigned partners, as their mutual schedules permitted*" (Blake et al., 2008, p. 117). Results of testing showed that even taking into account the affect of different variables, "*the first-year DL and hybrid students in this study approximate oral proficiency outcomes similar to those of first-*

*year students working in traditional classrooms"* (Blake et al., 2008, pp. 123-124). This shows that lower level language learners who never meet physically can still potentially develop oral proficiency to the same level as those learning face to face. The result of this latest study may have significant implications for the way oral skills are taught in the long-term future, be it in a classroom, hybrid or full distance-learning environment. They are a quantitatively-based form of proof of the potential of voice and written chat to equal, or even potentially outperform the teaching of oral skills through traditional methods. In this context, the present study, which investigates how online conversations between learners and native speakers can promote oral proficiency, is timely in that it seeks to provide new knowledge in the field through the use of qualitative research methods, employed under a unique set of circumstances which will now be presented.

## 1.2 The context of learning

The study focuses on the teaching of English conversation via VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) to undergraduate students by volunteer Conversation Facilitators (CFs) who are all either native speakers or have been living at least 20 years in an English-speaking country. The students are living in Iran while the CFs are located around the world, mostly based in English-speaking countries. Between 2005-2008, a comprehensive series of EFL- EAP (English as a Foreign Language - English for Academic Purposes) courses were created for students who are, as already noted, otherwise denied the right to higher education. Three of these online courses currently include the teaching of oral proficiency through conversations aimed at students in the lower to higher intermediate range of language ability. Each course consists of a number of modules comprising a series of lessons developed using Flash technology, with each section concentrating on the different language skills. The ultimate aim of the courses is to prepare students for academic study in English, since an increasing number of textbooks on their major courses of study are now in English, while most of their online courses are delivered through the medium of the English language. Some students also go on to take higher degrees for which they need English.

The different EFL courses are all available on the Institute course web site. Students communicate with their writing Tutors and CFs through a course site messaging facility. On the course web site, students find different written assignments directly linked to the course materials, as well as a series of conversation assignments most of which are thematically linked by module to the main course materials. During a short semester of approximately 16 weeks, 10 conversations are scheduled. The conversations are nominally weekly, but these weeks are interrupted when the students have other classes and when they have final exams. The topic questions for each conversation are visible in written form on the course site for students and CFs. Students prepare for the conversations by reading the conversation assignment questions and thinking about them before the conversations. After the first article was written, the system of preparation was changed so that students were also required to do written preparations before conversations.

The conversations were initially added into the Institute courses as an afterthought, after the first written EFL course had been designed. They were added when it was found to be possible to hold conversations through a donated conference phone bridge and could initially accommodate up to six people. The conference phone bridge was gradually replaced by the use of different VOIP options (Skype, Yahoo etc.). Because the conversations were not fully integrated into the design of the EFL courses, they have remained as a kind of "add-on", in many ways separate from the written parts of the courses. They are conducted by native speakers who are not trained EFL teachers, whereas the written parts of the courses are taught by qualified EFL teachers using asynchronous methods (mostly through correction of written assignments). There is some informal collaboration between the conversation facilitators (CFs) and the writing tutors, but there is no formal institutionalized collaboration. There have on average been 500 students on the three EFL courses with conversations, with approximately 70 volunteer CFs serving each semester.

Each CF is normally assigned a group of students at the start of the semester. The length and technical quality of the conversations vary greatly. On average, conversations last 20 minutes to an hour with 1-4 participants, but they are often

interrupted or disrupted by technical problems, mostly due to the state of telecommunications and interference by the Iranian authorities. When using Skype or other VOIP software, the CFs tend to decide themselves how many students to talk to at a time. This usually depends on the quality of the line. Increasingly, conversations are conducted on a one-to-one because it is not possible to maintain the internet line with more than one student at a time.

Due to time pressures, and because of the existence of the CFs, the great majority of the writing tutors rely entirely on asynchronous written connections with their students, with only a minority using synchronous written chat and very few talking with their students. Therefore, in addition to helping the students speak English, the CFs perform another important psychological function, sometimes giving students a chance to break out of isolation and get to know other students. In addition they provide an invaluable extra source of feedback for the EFL course administration, on top of written feedback.

### 1.3 Research aims and organisation of the thesis

In accordance with the action research methodology (see chapter 3), the general purpose of the present study was to find out more about how these conversations were being conducted in order to identify areas where improvements could be made. The areas where possible improvements were considered most likely were first, in the design of the conversational activities, and second, in the training of the CFs. The more specific aims of the study are described at the conclusion of the following chapter which presents the theoretical foundations for the study. The third chapter goes on to explain the methodological approach, including a section on the practical challenges which were encountered as a result of the untraditional choice of methodology. The fourth chapter summarizes the results of the two articles while chapter five discusses the results including issues of validity. The sixth and final chapter concludes by pointing out some general implications and possible future directions for research. The two articles are placed at the very end of the thesis.



## 2.0 Theoretical foundations for the study

In this chapter I first briefly explain how the theoretical foundations for the study were laid, since in an action research thesis the process is different from that in a traditional theory-driven thesis (see the next chapter on methodology). I then explain the rationale for the choice of the sociocultural paradigm as the basis for the study, and go on to describe how the choice of literature developed in a dialogical process, fuelled by the influences of the emerging data and research questions as the structure and content of the two articles emerged. In the explanation of the development of the literature and approach used for the second article, I show how the need to discuss results revolving around central issues in second language acquisition studies (hereafter referred to as SLA) which have generally been confined to research using the cognitive paradigm, presented a challenge for the consistency of the theoretical approach.

### 2.1 Theory and action research

In action research, the initial process is normally data-driven rather than theory-driven. In other words, some action must take place before research can begin. Only after some activity has occurred will the researcher-practitioner get a better sense of what needs to be investigated, and decide by what means to gather data and which methods to use. In this situation, where it is difficult to know where the data will lead, the flexible and responsive approach which the action research methodology represents is appropriate. The fact that data must be gathered before theory becomes relevant by no means implies that theory is less important than in other forms of research, but the initial choice of literature is difficult since *"it is hard to say what literature will later become relevant. It therefore makes sense to postpone reading until the relevance of literature can be judged more easily"* (Dick, 2000). In action research, engagement with the literature is therefore the result of a gradual dialogue (dialectic) developing between the researcher's observations and the data, and relevant literature. New literature is gradually incorporated as part of growing understanding. As Herr and

Andersen (2005, p. 84) say: "*The end result should be that the data analysis is pushed by relevant literature and the literature should be extended by the contribution of this action research*".

## 2.2 Choice of the sociocultural paradigm

It quickly became clear that the theoretical approach (research paradigm) for the present study needed to be broad enough to accommodate the complexity of a learning situation involving language learners and language "experts" (native speakers) coming from very different cultural backgrounds, meeting online, and attempting to communicate in English through the tools of computer mediated communication (CMC). A sociocultural approach to language learning, with its emphasis on the situated nature of learning was able to provide the platform for an understanding of the conversations through the conscious accommodation of the range of complex factors impacting the conversations. The sociocultural approach could do this because it emphasizes the need to take fully into account the significance of social, cultural and historical influences and does not underrate the significance of the use of computers and internet in framing the learning context and mediating learning. It also pays due attention to participants' agency and choice in determining learning outcomes within this broader context.

In SLA studies, the main alternative to the use of the sociocultural paradigm is the cognitive or information-processing approach which is, for example, the basis for the majority of the quantitative studies which have been undertaken in the field of written chat (see overview in chapter 1). However, these studies by necessity focus on narrow, restricted areas of language learning by using reductionism, in an attempt to control variables with the intention of producing results which might be generalized (e.g. Mackey's (2007) compilation of traditional SLA studies on conversational interaction). Since the action research approach used in the present study did not initially have a clear focus since it was data-driven, the reductionist approach of the traditional SLA studies was not appropriate. More importantly, given the initial uncertainty as to which direction the research would take, and because of the complexity of the learning environment, it was more natural to use qualitative rather

than quantitative methods since:

*qualitative research questions tend to be broader than quantitative ones, often focusing on the big picture or the main processes that are thought to shape the target phenomena (...) usually it is not possible to be more specific (...) without limiting the inquiry, and therefore investigators emphasize the exploratory nature of the study instead.*

*(Dörnyei, 2007, p. 74).*

## 2.3 Theoretical approach and literature used for the first article

As the first step in the research through semi-structured research interviews was completed, the search for literature which could assist in the analysis and interpretation of the results revealed the relative paucity of studies on the use of audio conferencing (voice chat) which could be directly compared to the Institute learning environment. The main exception was the work of researchers and language teachers such as Kötter (2001), Hampel (2004, 2006), Hauk (2004) and Rosell-Aguilar (2005, 2006, 2007) at the UK's Open University (OU) as described in chapter 1. The OU language researchers generally favour the sociocultural approach since, for the above-mentioned reasons it fits better with the complexity of understanding distance language learning. Articles by Hampel (2006) and Rosell-Aguilar (2005, 2006) were particularly helpful as a starting point for understanding the importance of the influence of task design in determining interaction patterns. There were, however, significant differences between the audiographic learning contexts these articles referred to and the technically simpler audio conferencing which the Institute uses. In addition, the OU Tutors are language teachers trained in instructional methods as opposed to the conversation facilitators at the Institute who are native speakers, not trained EFL teachers. Therefore, it was necessary to pursue a deeper understanding of the fundamentals of task design so as to fully grasp the abstracted theory. The material for this purpose was mainly taken from Ellis (2003), and Samuda and Bygate (2008).

As indicated, the intention of the initial research was to investigate the effects of

both task design and the CFs' skills in facilitating patterns of interaction conducive to learning. While the OU studies on task design were helpful for the former, there was no comparable assistance available in the form of previous online studies to aid the understanding of the conversational process itself. To the best of my knowledge, no other large-scale longitudinal studies of audio conferencing with structured conversations in institutional settings have been attempted before (discounting the small-scale short-term studies reported in the articles in the present study). I resorted to SLA literature on teaching English conversation in more conventional settings (classrooms) to learn about the theoretical background for language learning through conversational interaction. Much of this literature was, however, unsuitable because language classrooms are usually controlled by language teachers, who normally engage in what can be called "instructional conversation". This is different from the kind of more informal interaction which most CFs and Institute students sometimes or often engage in. The alternative in language classrooms is often that peers (students) talk together in pairs or small groups, which is again different from talking with native speakers which is the situation for the Institute conversations.

The researcher who appeared to transcend the limitations inherent in the analysis of interactions found in many classroom-based studies was Leo Van Lier, whose work attempts to raise the discussion to a higher plane whereby theoretical ideas and abstractions can be meaningfully transferred to other contexts. Van Lier's book and concentrated discussion on the use of conversation in the classroom (1988), and his work towards process-based curricula (1996) stand out through their originality and creativity. His discussions of the dilemmas, paradoxes and contradictions connected to the use of the normal IRF (Initiate - Response- Feedback) language classroom pattern were particularly instructive, as was his introduction of the construct of contingency in conversation, as described in the first article. Other useful literature included the influential study by Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) showing how "experts" can assist language learners in different ways according to the learners' stages of development (see Appendix C). This was particularly useful in providing a concrete foundation for the understanding of how learning may be assisted in the zone of proximal development.

## 2.4 Theoretical approach and literature for the second article

The second article was based on the interpretation of the results of two open questions in a broad student survey, undertaken through the process of content analysis which Dörnyei (2007, p. 243) describes in detail. The results of the analysis indicated the need for a discussion of central and critical areas of SLA theory relating to controversial questions about the teaching of grammar, how a "focus on form" can best be achieved in task design, and the efficacy of different forms of correctional feedback for language learning.

Some helpful literature was available in the form of compilations of studies on the growing practice of internet-mediated telecollaborative exchanges (O'Dowd (Ed.), 2007; Belz & Thorne (Ed.), 2005), where students who are both native speakers of one language and learners of another language team up and assist each other in language learning. Some of these exchanges concentrate on different ways that "focus on form" and correctional feedback can be put into practice (e.g. Ware & Cañado, 2007). Even though these exchanges generally use written chat rather than audio conferencing, the fact that they include native speakers in more informal situations increased their relevance to the present study. Nonetheless, as the second article explains, CMC with written chat is quite different from audio conferencing through CMC. This means that the results of these written chat studies are not necessarily any more transferable to the present study than the results of classroom studies on "focus on form". The main challenge which the interpretation of the results of the second article presented was, however, not the transferability of earlier cognitive studies. Instead, it was with the lack of research using a sociocultural approach in this particular area of SLA (focus on form and correctional feedback). This meant that it was necessary to consider whether research from within the cognitive paradigm could justifiably be used within the present study which was based on the sociocultural approach.

## 2.5 The sociocultural approach and the cognitive paradigm

As mentioned above, during the past two decades, the great majority of SLA studies which had a "focus on form", have been conducted using quantitative methods and a cognitive approach. It was difficult to find recent relevant and online studies which used the sociocultural approach and focused on the effects of form focus and correctional feedback on accuracy and language learning. The main exceptions were a study by Ros i Solé and Truman (2005) using a sociocultural approach in the analysis of an OU Tutor survey of methods of corrective feedback, and another study by Zourou (2008) who used the same approach, including a carefully explained adaptation of a typology of corrective feedback originally proposed by Lyster and Ranta (1997) in an influential study using the cognitive approach.

Another example of the adoption of concepts normally used within the cognitive paradigm is in an online study of text chat and "focus on form" through correctional feedback by Lee (2008), which claims to use a sociocultural perspective. In this study, the researcher first uses quantitative methods to assess the effectiveness of different task types in promoting interaction while disregarding the variables in the sociocultural context. In other words, the results would not necessarily be repeated in a different learning environment. The study therefore seems inconsistent since it uses the cognitive SLA approach to the quantitative analysis of this part of the data without paying attention to variables in the sociocultural context, or explicitly acknowledging that the results are only valid in this particular context. This appears in reality to be more of a socio-cognitive approach and an example of what Kinginger (2002, cited in McCarthy & O'Keefe 2004, p. 7) warns against as:

*the incorporation of Vygotskian notions such as scaffolding and the ZPD into existing practices (...) in ways that the notions simply become a justification for current practices (e.g. the input-output hypotheses (...) teacher feedback moves, etc.) rather than a genuine re-examination of the role of social interaction in language development.*

Though the sociocultural paradigm based on Vygotsky's ideas also stresses that language learning is a result of interaction, many proponents seem to place less

emphasis on the individual cognitive aspects of language negotiation, and more importance on the "*social and cultural situatedness of learner activity*" (Kerr, 2006, p. 5). However, Thorne (2000, p. 221, in Lantolf (Ed.)) notes the danger of making "*strict distinctions between individual cognition and socio-historical and socio-cultural contexts*", since "*what is usually labelled cognition can be understood as part of sociocultural practices*". In other words, there is no reason why concepts such as "recasts" and "negotiation of meaning" which appear predominantly in cognitively-based studies should not be used in sociocultural studies as long as the use of the concepts is carefully explained. The present study thus aimed to join in recent research which "*has begun to re-examine language learning and fault correction as a sociocultural phenomenon*" (Ros i Solé & Truman, 2005, p. 300). It includes concepts of different types of corrective feedback (such as recasts and reformulation), but without subscribing to the cognitive premises upon which many of the studies of these phenomena are based.

To conclude this explanation of the theoretical approach used in the study, and before presenting the research aims in more detail, I would like to provide a longer citation from O'Rourke (2005, p. 2), who argues for the need for a greater degree of flexibility between SLA paradigms. I have used O'Rourke's argument as a justification for some of the reductionism which inevitably occurred in the content analysis of the results in the second article:

*The sociocultural view has unquestionably been useful in drawing attention to the complex nature of humans as sociocultural actors and technological settings as artefacts and as mediators, rather than determiners, of action and interaction. But I am less convinced by the methodological argument, specifically the deprecation of conventional interactional analysis, and indeed of reductionism generally. Space forbids close examination of these issues, but it is worth emphasizing that pedagogical environments be they classrooms, computer programs, or communications media must have distinctive, if indirect, effects on interaction since they have distinctive properties. They are flexible and they evolve, but at any given historical moment they have relatively*

*identifiable contours. They are not infinitely negotiable. Continuity of form, indeed, is arguably the source of their peculiar power in cultural evolution (Tomasello, 1999): individual users, and successive generations, can adapt the wheel to its multiplicity of sociocultural uses precisely because they do not have to re-invent it. As with physical tools, so with technologies and pedagogical practices. Thus, any sociocultural analysis, be it 'microgenetic' or otherwise, needs to presuppose certain fixed properties of an environment, even if it does not explicitly draw them into any given interpretation. Though these properties are far from being determiners of behavior in any simple sense, they do influence it, at the very least through setting limits on possible choices. Just as it can be worthwhile to investigate the situated action of learners in the absence of focused consideration of environmental properties, so, too, it can be fruitful to investigate the influence of sociocultural tools and environment without close attention to, for example, construction of learner roles. Both enterprises are forms of legitimate reductionism.*

To sum up, I would place the current thesis in a research lacunae situated at a crossing point between the sociocultural/ethnographic/action research approach represented by Leo Van Lier (1988, 1996, 2000, 2001), the pragmatic approach to online language learning represented here by Breffini O'Rourke (2005, 2007), and the accumulated knowledge of more traditional SLA approaches represented by Rod Ellis (1997, 2003). In other words, as long as the researcher's approach is explicitly specified and is consistently applied, I believe that findings and concepts from one research paradigm can conceivably and justifiably be used, at least as thought-provoking background material, in research within another paradigm.

## 2.6 Research aims

The thesis as a whole seeks to investigate:

- *how and to what extent CFs and students consider that the design of the Institute's topic-based conversation assignments provides an adequate*

*foundation and sufficient stimuli to assist the development of dialogues and patterns of interaction which facilitate language learning.*

- *which pedagogical and technical skills Conversation Facilitators need to develop in order to allow them to facilitate dialogues and patterns of interaction which promote language learning,*
- *how and to what extent students consider that their CFs are able to assist their learning through the pedagogical and technical skills they possess, and in what ways they consider that CFs could better assist learning*

We now move on to examine the methodology and methods which were used in attempting to provide answers to these questions.

## 3.0 Methodology and methods

This chapter presents the action research paradigm for the articles in the present study. The reasons for the choice of research paradigm and its essential features are outlined, issues of knowledge and validity are discussed, and the different qualitative methods used in the articles are presented. In doing so I lean heavily on the experience of Kathryn Herr and Gary Andersen in their book: "The Action Research Dissertation" (2005). The end of the chapter is a more personal account of some of the difficulties encountered in attempting to follow an untraditional methodology while simultaneously seeking to write conventional research articles.

### 3.1 Rationale for the use of action research

The choice of action research (hereafter referred to as AR) as a methodological approach was a natural one since at the time I started on this thesis, I was already deeply involved with work as the Institute's main conversation administrator and conversation course designer. I needed to do systematic research on the project in order to be able to effectively monitor the progress of the Institute conversations and to be able to make suitable improvements in the design of the conversation assignments and training of the conversation facilitators (CFs). A flexible research paradigm was needed in order to be able to manage, implement and respond to ongoing changes in the organization. This need for flexibility meant that, as indicated earlier, I did not know beforehand which methods and which theory would be used. Both emerged gradually as a dialectic was established between results and theory. As Dick (2002, p. 159) explains, in AR:

*it is not just the interpretation -- the understanding -- that emerges slowly from the situation. The same applies for choosing methodology. You can begin action research by asking initially fuzzy questions using initially fuzzy methods, thereby gaining initially fuzzy answers. You may then use those initially fuzzy answers to refine your methods as you proceed.*

The coordinator of the Institute EFL program was also explicitly in favour of the AR approach and there was encouragement in the literature relating to the kind of online (distance) learning that the Institute was delivering:

*Action research is highly appropriate to the development of e-learning, where experience suggests that significant modifications are required to the traditional paradigm (...).changes imply not only alterations to course models but also development of new attitudes.*

(Baptista Nunes & McPherson, 2002, cited in Salmon, 2003, p. 28)

I was, however, aware that the use of AR could be controversial, and that the "messiness" of the process (Herr & Andersen, 2005, p. 78) as well as the different type of criteria for judging validity could make my position as a Master's student using a non-traditional approach rather vulnerable. It was therefore important "*to find faculty as open to learning with you as they are to teaching you*". (Maguire, 1993, p. 173, cited in Herr & Andersen, 2005, p. 49). Fortunately, I have been supported every step of the way throughout the process. As it turned out, even though I was pursuing AR, the two articles which form the focal points of the thesis ended up being written using a traditional qualitative approach, as parts of the AR cycle.

### 3.2 Historical background for action research

When the term action research first appeared in a publication (Lewin 1946), it was used in a scientific sense, referring to small gradual steps of action, research and intervention (changes) aimed at improvement. According to Sanford (1981, p. 174 cited in Van Lier, 1988, p. 68), AR as originally proposed by Lewin consisted of "*analysis, fact-finding, conceptualization, planning, execution, more fact-finding or evaluation – and then a repetition of this whole circle of activities; indeed a spiral of such circles*". Even though Lewin has been generally credited with introducing the term AR in the 1946 article, he was simply reporting on an approach already being used by a friend of his, John Collier. He had been Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1933-1945 and had already recognized the need for "*developing an approach to generating action- oriented knowledge that requires collaboration between*

*researcher, practitioner, and client'* (Susman & Evered, 1978, p. 582). However, while Lewin used the term in a neutral sense politically, Collier's approach was more radical, and related to research into and treatment of the Native American (Indian) community, emphasizing the goals of achieving social change and a more just social order through AR. Even though there is a clear difference between Lewin and Collier's use of the term, both approaches are likely to be controversial because they both deal with changing the status quo. For example, the use of AR in a business environment may lead to the demand for implementation of changes which may be resisted by different parties due to entrenched interests.

AR has since then come to be used in a wide variety of settings, ranging from large corporations to situations focusing on the goal of achieving progressive social change in local communities. Though associated with organizational learning, it may also be used on small-scale projects, for example involving individual teachers wishing to reflect on and improve their own practice. However, to qualify as research, such projects must however employ a certain academic rigour.

As indicated, AR normally consists of cycles of action and research involving interventions to try to make change and improvements. The interventions are a part of the cycle consisting of a plan which is initially put into action, followed by observation and research, reflection, evaluation and the subsequent implementation of changes. Thus AR is both action and research, with different degrees of emphasis depending on the circumstances. It can be broadly defined as "*a family of research methodologies that pursue the dual outcomes of action and research*" (Dick 2002, p. 159). There are therefore different approaches within the paradigm, but the approach used in the present study was participative action research (hereafter referred to as PAR), whereby the researcher-practitioner is deeply involved (embedded) and engaged in the organization, working with and for other participants.

### 3.3 Positionality: Insider-outsider continuum

The position of the researcher using PAR is different from that of the academic researcher using quantitative methods as an "outsider" with a "*more distanced approach to research settings*" (Herr & Andersen, 2005, p. 3), seeking to avoid "contaminating" the research environment, and certainly not acting as an agent of change. There are however approaches in qualitative research which also involve various forms or degrees of intervention, including ethnography, as well as critical and feminist research. Many academics also have experience as "insiders" before they become academics, and some applied researchers are also involved in research as "participants". It is furthermore quite conceivable that researchers can hold different "positions" at the same time in different forms of research. A continuum can thus be imagined with the "insider" (action researcher) at one end and the "outsider" (traditional researcher) at the other end, with multiple positions in between. The concept of positionality suggests that different kinds of researchers need to make different kinds of efforts in order to pursue their research:

*Academics (outsiders) want to understand what it is like to be an insider without "going native" and losing the outsider's perspective. Practitioners (insiders) already know what it is like to be an "insider" but because they are "native" to the setting they must work to see the taken-for-granted aspects of their practice from an outsider's perspective"*

(Andersen, Herr & Nielsen, 1994, cited in Herr & Andersen, 2005, p. 47).

The position of the researcher may have implications for the kind of knowledge which the research process produces, though as the following section explains, one type of knowledge is not necessarily more objective than another.

### 3.4 Scientific rigour, knowledge and objectivity

Action research can present certain dilemmas for academia because of the kind of knowledge it is concerned with. While academic knowledge is normally research-

driven and most commonly recognizes formal knowledge, action research is data-driven and is mostly concerned with practical knowledge even though it may also produce formal knowledge. It can, however, be difficult to make claims of transferability for practical knowledge (i.e. outcomes of changes which are made in action research). This has led some academics (e.g. Elliot, 1991, cited in Van Lier 1988, p. 220; Richardson, 1994, cited in Herr & Andersen, 2005, p. 52) to argue that a dualism of knowledge should be established, to show what is formal knowledge and what is practical knowledge. However, the underlying implication of such a distinction is that formal academic knowledge is somehow more "objective" than practical knowledge, a claim which Habermas effectively refuted by showing that all knowledge is linked to the researcher's interests:

*"Because knowledge is generated through the interest of the mind, knowledge and interest are forever linked"*

(Habermas, 1971, cited in Herr & Andersen, 2005, p. 27)

Thus, while formal knowledge and practical knowledge may be different, neither can claim to be more "objective" or "scientific" than the other. The pursuit of rigour should be equally as important in AR as it is in more traditional forms of research. Heron (1996, cited in Herr & Andersen, 2005, p. 59) suggests that in order to counter any tendency towards "*uncritical subjectivity*" when doing action research, validity issues need to be carefully addressed, as in the following section.

### 3.5 Criteria for validity

In the assessment of the value of traditional quantitative research, validity is defined (e.g. Kirk & Miller, 1986) in terms of internal validity (i.e. the truth value or trustworthiness of the data) and external validity (the generalizability of the results). In qualitative research, with regard to internal validity, different criteria are used:

*In qualitative research, internal validity is addressed by means of contextualization; thick description; holistic, inductive analysis; triangulation;*

*prolonged engagement; ecological validity of tasks; and a recognition of the complex and dynamic interactions that may exist among factors; as well as the need for the credibility or trustworthiness of observations and interpretations.*

(Duff, 2006, p. 77)

With regard to external validity, while qualitative research "*does seek to provide generalizations at an abstract conceptual or theoretical level*" (Duff, 2006, p. 77), it does not make claims for generalizability in the same way as quantitative research. However, certain "softer" constructs have been suggested in order to capture the possibility of connections or congruence between contexts. For example, things may be "inferred", but this inference runs short of generalization. Stake (2000, cited in Duff, 2006, p. 76) refers to "naturalistic generalization" as the process of learning from others' experiences, while the term "transferability" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, cited in Duff 2006, p. 76) or comparability are other constructs which can be compared to generalizability. These are in general more pliable concepts which indicate that both differences as well as similarities may serve to:

*sharpen and enrich people's understandings of how general principles operate within a field beyond what the notion of transferability suggests (...), rather than seeking "the correct interpretation," they would aim to broaden the repertoire of possible interpretations and narratives of human experience. Qualitative research, in this view, provides access to rich data about others' experience that can facilitate understandings of one's own as well as others' contexts and lives, both through similarities and differences across settings or cases.*

(Duff, 2006, p. 77)

The qualitative criteria identified by Duff to judge the internal and external validity of qualitative research may also be used in relation to action research when qualitative methods are used, though Herr and Andersen suggest that extra criteria may also be needed. Specifically, they identify the need for a kind of "outcome validity" in order to judge the extent to which changes which are enacted as a result of research

successfully lead to the resolution of problems which have been identified. This concept of "outcome validity" can be seen as a form of internal validity, similar to that of trustworthiness. Herr and Andersen also suggest that in AR, an additional criterion which they term "democratic validity" may be needed, referring to "*the extent to which the research is done in collaboration with all parties who have a stake in the problem*" (Herr & Andersen, 2005, p. 56). The different kinds of qualitative methods used within the AR framework in the present thesis are now presented

### 3.6 The choice of qualitative methods

The research in the first article used interviews with CFs while the second article used a broad student survey to elicit data through both open and closed questions. In addition to these two methods, the researcher-practitioner had access to a wide range of other formal and informal research data in his capacity as conversation administrator. These multiple sources of data provided different forms of triangulation (Duff, 2006; Dörnyei, 2007), shedding light on the research phenomenon under investigation from different perspectives. This triangulation helped to guarantee the validity of the study. Further discussion of issues of validity is presented below, in the discussion and in the two articles.

The interviews in the first article were semi-structured (see Kvale, 1996), with six initial questions designed as the starting point opening up into more flexible exchanges. In order to avoid missing valuable information due to a rigid reliance on the preconceived questions, these questions were used as an initial guide (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 173), but the researcher-practitioner was willing to change the questions and "go with the flow" depending on how the interviews developed. Further details of the procedures and samples are described in the first article. The second article was based on a student survey, more specifically a questionnaire administered to students in summer-autumn 2008, comprising both open and closed questions. Extra efforts were made to ensure as high a response rate as possible, to counter the possibility of invalidity which would have arisen with a low response (Robson, 2002, p. 231). It

included two open questions asking students to respond to the following two open questions:

1. What are the most useful ways your Conversation facilitator helps you to learn English ?
2. What could your Conversation facilitator do better to help you with learning English ?

The students' responses to these two questions formed the most important data for the second article. They were analysed and interpreted through the process of content analysis which is now recognized as a qualitative method, though its roots are in the quantitative paradigm:

*it originates from a quantitative analytical method of examining written texts that involves the counting of instances of words, phrases or grammatical structures that fall into specific categories. Because qualitative data is typically textual, content analysis has been transferred to the domain of qualitative research with one fundamental change: unlike their preconceived quantitative counterparts, the qualitative categories used in content analysis are not predetermined but are derived inductively from the data analyzed.*

(Dörnyei, 2007, p. 243)

Thus, even though the study used descriptive quantitative data, it did not use statistical analysis of the data, which is generally reckoned to be the ‘‘bottom line’’ which divides qualitative and quantitative research.

Mackey and Gass (2005, p. 96) identify two potential problems in the use of open questions in surveys and questionnaires. The first problem is that participants may have difficulty expressing themselves adequately in a foreign language. For this reason, the students were asked to respond using their mother tongue (Persian). Their responses were then very carefully translated in the autumn 2008 by the Institute's (bilingual) conversation administrator, before being subjected to content analysis. A

second potential problem with open questions is if hypothetical questions are asked, the responses may be rather unreliable, since participants may have difficulties imagining the situation. The second open survey question was to some degree hypothetical, but it was clear, unambiguous and very closely related to the reality which the students' experience. As such it did not require any great leap of imagination. The Institute survey was anonymous and students were asked to be frank. The results, including various critical student comments confirmed that there was no attempt to "flatter" the EFL administration, so that the danger of faulty sampling (Robson 2002, p. 231) does not appear to have been a problem.

As mentioned above, the study as a whole used triangulation of methods and the researcher-practitioner's prolonged engagement within the organization as a means to safeguard the validity. Access over time to other Institute questionnaires for students as well as separate questionnaires for CFs and recordings of conversations provided extra data some of which are summarized in the discussion (Chapter 5) and in the Appendices. In addition, the researcher-practitioner has been in regular contact over time with other Institute EFL administrators and teachers, as well as the CFs and students, all of whom have had interests in the research producing valid results. This ongoing "cross-checking" of progress and suggestions greatly reduced the danger of the researcher-practitioner losing touch with the "outsider's" perspective.

### 3.7 My role, and the development of the research process

In the final section in this chapter, I explain some of the difficulties encountered in using an untraditional research paradigm while writing conventional research articles. This section contributes in a small way to a better understanding of what an AR process can entail. It is an attempt to illustrate my belief that, despite the difficulties involved, action research is a methodology which should be encouraged. Blichfeldt and Andersen (2006, p. 1) suggest that if a wider audience for action research is to be

attracted, in order to make it a more discussable research practice, four major areas need to be addressed:

*(a) increasing transparency of action research processes*

*(b) declaring frameworks brought into action research projects*

*(c) discussing analytical generalisation and transferability of findings*

*(d) defining appropriate forms of accumulation of results from action research projects.*

I touch on these themes in the following narrative, and also in the discussion in chapter 5 which outlines the main results of the AR process.

My position at the Institute was initially as conversation facilitator (CF) on the EFL pilot project (2006), then as recruiter and trainer of CFs and as conversation administrator (2007-2009), and then as conversation designer (2007 → ). When I started the present study, I did not know that it would end up being an article-based thesis. I was therefore unaware of the challenges I would face, and in particular, the dilemmas posed by trying to combine writing articles and pursuing action research. Normally, anyone writing an action research thesis might take copious and continuous notes while working with the project. They might then write up the thesis at the end of the research when their engagement with the project was ended. In contrast, I ended up trying to write the first article while still very much involved with the project (between summer 2007 and spring 2009). This meant that I did not have sufficient time or opportunity to detach myself, reflect over the research, or engage with relevant literature. It was only from spring 2009 onwards when I gradually started to withdraw from the practical administration of the project that I started to gain sufficient time and perspective to complete the first article. This lack of time and perspective for reflection was only part of the problem. In the end, the major difficulty turned out to be the challenge of attempting to "pack" a complete action research cycle on such a complex and dynamic learning context into a single article.

Action research theoretically involves continuing cycles of action – research – evaluation – intervention. In practice, these cycles are not discretely divided up. They can overlap and other unexpected events can intervene (because the research is a part of "real life"). The research situation is thus dynamic and is not "controlled". In this respect, Van Lier's comments (1996, p. 34) tally with the kind of difficulties that I experienced.

*the cyclical nature of action research is rarely straightforward. A colleague might ask me 'what cycle are you on now, observation, reflection or what?' and I could not give an answer. This might suggest that my project was a mess and I was not following proper action research procedures. I might have answered, 'A little bit of everything I guess' and this would have been closer to the truth. The steps and cycles do not happen in sequential, successive fashion, I think, but rather they are simultaneous strands that are braided together as one goes along. I might think about planning while observing, reflect while planning, revise my plan while acting, and so on.*

As mentioned, in addition to researching the learning context, I was responsible for the day to day running of the conversation administration until I was able to partially withdraw from some of the practical responsibilities. This was a demanding situation in relation to the extra difficulties created by the knowledge that any possible articles I wrote would be likely to be judged using traditional criteria for validity, This dilemma is acknowledged by Argyris and Schon (1991, cited in Herr & Andersen 2005, p. 5), in their description of the "double burden" of action (improvement of practice) and research (creating valid knowledge about practice), which "*sets up a conflict between the rigor and the relevance of the research*". This potential conflict became clearer to me as I attempted to write the second article.

In the first article I wrote about only one stage of the action research cycle, but when I came to start writing the second article, I felt that in order to justify the use of action research for the study, I needed to try to show how a whole cycle was enacted. This involved describing the learning context where changes were going to be

implemented, explaining which research showed and justified the need for the implementation of changes, and explaining the evaluation of the results of the implementation of the changes. The problem was how to do this in a relatively short (8,500 word) article using qualitative methods the presentation of which tend to take up more space as a result of the "thick" description or triangulation needed to validate the researcher's perspective. My initial attempt to work on the full cycle was also complicated by changes in the format of the conversation preparations caused by events at the Institute which were not under my control. These changes meant that the validity of the implications of the research from the first article was partially compromised since the design of the conversation preparations had been changed (the goalposts had been shifted).

In the attempt to pursue sufficiently rigorous research, my first attempt at the second article thus resulted in the kind of messy product which Van Lier hints at (1996, p. 34). It involved four different sets of data (analysis of a student survey, transcripts from conversation recordings and analysis of two separate CF questionnaires). While the student survey alone eventually provided the material for the second article, extracts of the conversation transcripts and summaries of the findings of the CF questionnaires are now included in the Appendices because there was no room for them in the second article. Not surprisingly, the first draft of this second article was greatly lacking in coherence. Apart from the complications in describing the whole cycle of change, the difficulties were compounded by my continued practical engagement with the project and the fact that the first article still needed to be regularly revised in order to be accepted for publication. This revision interfered with the progress of the second article because some of the material originally intended for the second article had to be transferred to the first article. On top of these complications, I had not had sufficient time to reflect adequately on the material for the second article and engage with the literature.

The result of these challenges was that I finally felt obliged to reduce the complexity of the second article and thereby the plan to include a whole cycle of research within the article. Instead, just like the first article, I ended up by only using

one set of research data (the student survey), effectively again writing a conventional research article using qualitative methods (content analysis). While there is nothing wrong with such articles, it was disappointing not to be able to show that the research produced in these two articles did in fact lead to some changes being made in the Institute conversations which have since been implemented through the use of new types of conversation (role plays, story-based assignments and more student-centred topics, as well as the introduction of certain vocabulary within some assignments), and that these changes have been positively evaluated by CFs through the use of questionnaires. In addition, there was no space to include extracts of transcripts of conversations which would, I believe, have given the reader of the second article a better taste for the flavour of the project. I therefore include some of these extracts in Appendix C.

In the following chapter we will examine the content of the articles themselves, first through the presentation of summaries of the results of the two separate articles (Chapter 4), followed by the discussion of the research results as a whole, including issues of validity.

## **4.0 Summaries of results of the two research articles**

The following summaries of the results and implications of the two research articles show that the use of different qualitative methods revealed major similarities between CFs' and students' experiences and viewpoints in relation to the Institute's online conversations. There were, however, some important differences and new findings, especially with regard to the importance which many students attach to correctional feedback. Before reading the summaries, it is also important to know that during the year which elapsed between the two pieces of research (summer 2007 for the CF interviews, and summer-autumn 2008 for the student survey), a significant change took place in the design of the conversation assignments from autumn 2007. This was the decision to change the preparations for conversations from a purely mental format (with optional note-taking by students), to a written format, whereby students were expected to write answers to the assignment questions before the conversations took place. This change was not made as a result of research on the conversations and was not under the researcher-practitioner's control. Instead, it was the result of broader changes affecting the Institute's whole EFL course design, decided by the Institute EFL administration as a whole. The summary of the second article shows that this change appeared to have a significant effect on some students' views on the way that some conversations developed.

### **4.1 Article 1: Teaching Oral English Online – Through Skype (VOIP)**

The first article, based on interviews with eight CFs, found that the design of the conversation assignments to a large degree influence the patterns of interaction which develop. The question and answer format provides a "map" or mental "schemata". Using the metaphor of the map, we can say that the participants can decide to what extent they wish to stay on the main street (assignment questions), take detours down back streets (follow-up and related questions), pop into interesting attractions they find

on the way (chit chat, humour) and at some stage return to the main road. The flexibility to be able to proceed in this way depends, however, on the technical connections, the language level of the students, and the skills of the CFs in assisting their students to develop confidence and fluency, through their patience, prompting and listening skills and through the use of the written chat to assist comprehension and introduce new vocabulary. The degree of abstraction of the conversation topics and questions also influences the students' participation because if students find a topic sufficiently interesting they may be able to overcome linguistic limitations and still find ways or make extra efforts to communicate with the assistance of the CF or other students.

These results implied that CFs with more developed pedagogical and technical skills were usually able to find ways to assist students, especially if the technical connections allowed small groups of students to participate together, since the social interaction could be exploited to increase the level of participation and maintain the flow of conversations. Those CFs who attempted or were forced to talk with weaker students on a one to one basis, struggled to move beyond very simple IRF patterns (Initiation-Response-Feedback). They used simple closed questions, and often had to struggle to maintain the conversation. Therefore, for the lower level course, there is a need to introduce different forms of assignments which provide more linguistic stimuli (useful words and expressions) and which do not rely solely on the question and answer format. This means that the possibility of using picture story forms or other visual stimuli needs to be considered and weighed against the technical obstacles in the Institute's fragile technical learning environment. For stronger students on the middle level course, different kinds of assignments such as role-plays and story-based assignments as well as more student-centred topics need to be considered. When the interviews for the CFs were undertaken, the third Institute EFL course for upper intermediate students had not yet started, so the recommendations from this first study related only to the lower-intermediate and intermediate level courses.

## 4.2 Article 2: Students' perceptions of learning through online conversations with native speakers

While the first article focused primarily on how CFs assist students develop fluency, the results of the second article focused on the interpretation of a student survey (see Appendix D). This indicated that many students are very concerned about developing accuracy as well as fluency through the conversations. Two open survey questions asked students in what ways CFs assisted their learning and how they felt that the CFs could better assist them. The responses showed that CFs encouragement and support was fundamental in creating an environment in which students felt relaxed enough to dare to talk and learn, despite (or rather because of) their mistakes. Students indicated that CFs' pedagogical skills in the form of variation in the manner of questioning, changes in topic according to students' interests and moods, and the use of language appropriate to students' language levels all contributed to learning. Students explained how CFs helped them through the introduction, exemplification and explanation of new words and meanings, and through their correction of students' mistakes or errors. CFs technical skills in the form of facility with the written chat often supported and reinforced the interaction, especially in cases of non-comprehension.

The analysis of the students' responses to the open survey questions also revealed that many students' appreciate the different ways in which CFs correct and assist them in their understanding of errors and mistakes. While 30% of students responding to the survey identified corrective feedback as their CFs most important contribution to their learning, another 20% indicated that they would like their CFs to focus more attention on the correction or highlighting of their inaccuracies in speech, and in correcting mistakes in their written conversation preparations. This wish for a greater explicit focus on accuracy stands in contrast to the present advice which the Institute gives to CFs, advising them to concentrate on the promotion of fluency and to provide implicit rather than explicit correction. Separate analysis of other Institute research material in the form of questionnaire feedback, student interviews and conversation extracts indicate that one of the main reasons why many students appear to regard the conversations as a suitable forum for a focus on accuracy is that they

cannot always understand the written feedback they receive from their tutors on their asynchronous written assignments. In comparison, whilst the synchronous conversations give them the opportunity to receive immediate feedback and enter into a dialogue with the language expert (CF) until understanding is assured. The information from the student survey implies that the Institute needs to guide CFs in ways in which they can meet students' aspirations for a greater "focus on form" in the conversations, without detracting from the primary aim of promoting fluency. This can be done for weaker students by introducing some focus on new words and expressions in the conversation assignments, and for more advanced students, by encouraging CFs to enter into dialogue with students about the extent to which the individual student would like to spend time discussing errors and mistakes, getting assistance in the form of exemplification and explanation.

Furthermore, it appears that the design of the conversation assignments, the requirement for written preparation provides a useful foundation for some weaker or middle-level students who may benefit from the structured question and answer format. For others, the design of the assignments tends to lead to rather rigid patterns of interaction, since a number of CFs are not able to easily guide the conversation beyond the initial questions. They fail to use sufficient variation to ensure that there are elements of spontaneity and surprise which combat routine and contribute to the creation of learning opportunities. In addition, the student survey showed that a significant number of students were not particularly enthusiastic about the course-linked topics for the conversations, and wished to see more interesting (student-centred) topics, or different approaches to stimulating discussion such as student presentations, the systematic introduction of useful and interesting words and phrases, and more "free" discussion. These suggestions are probably particularly suitable for stronger students. As with the results of the first article, the implication is that there is a need for a wider variety of conversation assignments, such as role-plays, story or text based assignments, more student-centred topics, and possibly a greater element of choice in the choice conversation assignments. Some of the written preparations could be replaced by asking students to read texts in preparation, and for stronger students, a

written, metalinguistic reflection could be required after the conversations, focusing on new words which had been introduced and language which had been discussed.

This overview of the results and implications of the two articles completed the first stage of the action research cycle. The next stage involved the implementation of the changes which both articles indicated would be beneficial for learning; the introduction of new kinds of conversation assignments and the introduction of extra input in the form of vocabulary in some assignments. These changes were introduced in the autumn semester of 2008.

## 5.0 Discussion

This chapter starts with a short summary of the results of the research presented in the two articles, and is followed by a discussion of these results. A brief summary of the action research process is then presented in the form of a chronological table of actions and research, as a necessary preliminary to the discussion of the validity of the methods and methodology used in the thesis.

As the first stage in an action research cycle, this thesis investigated how online conversations promote oral proficiency as seen through the perspectives of both language learners (undergraduate students), and native-speaking conversation facilitators (CFs). The aim was to investigate:

- *how and to what extent CFs and students consider that the design of the Institute's topic-based conversation assignments provides an adequate foundation and sufficient stimuli to assist the development of dialogues and patterns of interaction which facilitate language learning.*
- *which pedagogical and technical skills Conversation Facilitators need to develop in order to allow them to facilitate dialogues and patterns of interaction which promote language learning,*
- *how and to what extent students consider that their CFs are able to assist their learning through the pedagogical and technical skills they possess, and in what ways they consider that CFs could better assist learning*

### 5.1 Summary of results in relation to the research statement

The findings show that there is a need to introduce a much greater variety of conversation assignments on all of the Institute EFL courses. Student survey responses indicate that the current question and answer format of conversation assignments can lead to conversations becoming too routine and predictable. A significant number of

students thought that their CFs could better assist them by being more flexible and skilful in their use of the conversation assignment questions, and by initiating or allowing the introduction of a greater variety of topics for discussion. Some students suggested that the more regular introduction of new words and expressions in conversations could enhance learning. Evidence from the CF interviews show that new assignments need to be differentiated according to the language levels of the students on the different courses. For the lower level course, extra stimuli need to be provided, for example, in the form of picture stories, which implies that students will need to bring printed resource materials with them to the online conversations. For the intermediate and upper-intermediate students who already possess sufficient linguistic resources to interact more easily, the greater variety of conversation assignments should include more student-centred tasks and topics, and a greater element of choice in order to promote more student initiative. This implies that the topics for conversation assignments should not always have to match the topics in the written course material.

The research results indicate that both CFs and students understand that where internet connections are poor and unreliable, there is a special need for participants to build up warm, trusting, supportive relationships in order to reduce anxiety and compensate for the lack of sensory stimuli and paralinguistic clues. CF and student contact between conversations was considered an important means of contributing to the building of good relationships. Students regard the CFs' manner of support, through their encouragement and patience as crucial for creating an atmosphere where learning can take place. CFs' facility with the use of the written chat is also a critical factor, both for establishing and retaining contact when audio channels fail, but also as a support tool enabling the introduction, exemplification and explanation of new words and meanings. The CFs' sensitive use of language, prompt and elicitation, including the use of closed or more open questions according to students' language capacities, is essential in maintaining the dialogue within the zone of proximate development, where learning can take place. The CFs' flexibility in moving between the role of language expert and friend, and their willingness to encourage a wide range of topics, including student-initiated topics, is necessary for the development of interaction patterns

conducive to learning. While the Institute has guided the CFs to focus primarily on the promotion of fluency, students survey responses indicate that the direct, explicit correction of mistakes and errors is greatly appreciated. A significant number of students would like a greater focus on error correction. This may be especially true for the higher-level courses where some students are ready to be challenged more through increased attention to the development of accuracy.

## 5.2 Discussion of the results in relation to the research statement

Modern, online distant language learning courses need to be planned to give proper emphasis to the oral dimension of language learning. This entails that conversations or oral tutorials are integrated in the course design as a whole which needs to pay specific attention to the affordances (constraints and possibilities) in the online environment. Among these are the qualities of the different participants' internet connections, and, for synchronous interaction, the number of participants who can join in at the same time. In addition, the design of oral activities needs to take into consideration the language levels of the students, differentiating task design according to the students' different capacities. The training and experience of the language experts (be they qualified EFL teachers, trainee language teachers or well-educated native speakers), also need to be considered carefully, in particular their pedagogical and technical skills. The following discussion examines these factors in more detail.

### 5.2.1 Technical considerations and contact

As mentioned, the Institute conversations take place under a great variety of technical conditions. While some students have access to reasonably high-speed ADSL connections and are able to bypass government restrictions on the use of Skype, others are living in isolated villages where they are the only person with a computer and have to travel to friends' houses to get access to the most basic form of internet. While some CFs are able to conduct enjoyable, friendly and social discussions with groups of 5-6 students, all of whom have good internet connections, other CFs and students struggle

to accomplish the most basic conversations. They are sometimes reduced to the use of the written chat, or on occasion only one participant at a time can hear the other. Under this great variety of conditions, in order to ensure fairness for all participants, the design of the conversation assignments and the grading and assessment of conversations needs to be done according to the principle of the “lowest common denominator”. This means that the design of the conversation assignments needs to remain simple, or as Hampel (2006, p.111) explains:

*we have to ensure that tasks are appropriate to the medium used and that we develop tasks that take into account the affordances (i.e. the constraints and possibilities for making meaning) of the modes available.*

Given that students regularly experience difficulty in obtaining a reliable audio connection, it is important that students and CFs develop well-refined skills in the use of the written chat. Fortunately, in Iran, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, young people are in general extremely active and proficient internet users, even though their computers by western standards may not be the most modern. Thus, most students are adept at using written chat and are used to facing and overcoming technical difficulties. This means that it may rather be the CFs, often in their 50s, 60s or 70s, who need to pay most attention to developing their written chat skills, so that they are able to find ways to sustain the communication with their students. The regular use of the Institute course site messaging service to maintain informal contact is also an important way to support and compensate for otherwise poor internet connections. The regularity of different forms of interaction between conversations is thus considered important in building trust and encouraging students to invest in learning since:

*knowledge that an encounter online will be sustained over the long term, is a key feature of virtual interactions that can systematically affect interlocutors by making them more inclined to invest extra time and effort at cultivating relationships online.*

(Ortega, 2009, p. 245, in Mackey & Polio (Ed.)).

## 5.2.2 The design of online conversation assignments and CFs' facilitation skills

The research presented in the two articles has also shown how the design of the conversation assignments can set the agenda for the conversations. Both the CF interviews and student survey responses confirmed that the question and answer format affects the progression of the conversations and the patterns of interaction. It is also clear that task design needs to be differentiated according to the language level of students, and that the inclusion of learner-centred material is likely to contribute to increased motivation and participation among students. The Institute's original decision to focus primarily on developing fluency through the conversations led to the choice of topic-based conversations. This was primarily because the alternative of using task-based assignments based on information exchange was considered too difficult due to technical and logistical hindrances (see first article). As a result of the research, there is now recognition that the intrinsic motivation of the students and the CFs based on their wish to communicate with each other, is not always strong enough to provide sufficient impetus to propel conversations forward. In other words, the social connections in themselves do not necessarily provide adequate stimulation and there is often a need for extra stimuli to be provided from outside. While CFs with well-developed pedagogical experience or life skills may be able to promote interaction on the basis of common interests and conversational skills, others need more external stimulus (pressure) in the form of texts, vocabulary and appropriate forms of linguistic input. Bygate and Samuda (2009, p. 93, in Mackey & Polio (Ed.)) explain this situation as follows:

*here we come up against the tension between pedagogic interaction, which by definition must involve some pressure ( Dewey 1910) and non-pedagogic social interaction in which pressure is not a necessary element*

In relation to these terms, the conversations are typically situated in between ‘‘pedagogic interaction’’ and ‘‘non-pedagogic social interaction’’. In other words, there is a difference between ordinary everyday forms of ‘‘conversation’’, which occur as a part of other forms of talk, and ‘‘instructional conversation’’, which is usually structured according to the IRF (Initiative – Response – Feedback) mode, and is

normally initiated and controlled by the language expert. The need to balance conversational and instructional modes of interaction is a challenge for the CFs, just as it can be for qualified EFL teachers. Yet, according to Van Lier (1996, p. 165),

*true conversational teaching must break out of the IRF mould if it is to allow students to develop their own voice, to explore and invest in their own agenda and to learn to choose and plan their own trains of thought and action*

As sociocultural theory, on which this study is based, places great emphasis on the importance of learners' agency and choice if learning is to be mediated between students and CFs, then there is a need for the student to feel empowered and take control of his or her own learning. This happens in collaboration with CFs whose task it is to assist the student towards self-regulation. If conversations are restricted to a rigid IRF mode and controlled by the CF, the student can easily become bored and passive. Therefore, while IRF represents planning, routine, stability and the instructional mode, the freer more creative conversational mode may be a result of the well-planned conversation which is allowed to open up as a result of the CF's careful development of symmetrical (equal power) relationships over time, encouraging students to feel able to take initiatives during interaction. Finding a balance between planning and improvisation, routine and innovation, stability and variety (Van Lier, 1996, p. 201), is necessary in order to promote and allow surprise and spontaneity. One student emphasized when explaining the need to avoid boring and routine question and answer sessions: "*students must love English first*" (if they are going to learn).

### 5.2.3 Planning and preparations

SLA theory indicates that some forms of preparations are likely to be beneficial for conversations since "*pre-task planning has been widely shown to result in greater fluency*" (Samuda & Bygate, 2008, p.113). However, the interpretation of the results of the student survey in the second article shows that the written preparations for the topic-based assignment questions may be a double-edged sword, since they easily lead to a concentration on the specific prepared assignment questions which can make a

freer conversation more difficult to develop. This is because many students want to know if what they have written in preparation is correct English. When CFs and students concentrate too much attention on the prepared answers and original topic questions, the potential spontaneity may be drained out of the topic. In order to avoid this, there is a need for new kinds of conversation assignment such as role-plays and story-based assignments with preparations which do not necessarily involve the students having to prepare written answers to questions. In an online environment where, unlike in audiographic conferencing the provision of visual stimuli is limited due to poor internet connections, the conversation preparations present a unique opportunity to provide the extra input and mental "back-up" which may help to stimulate the dialogue when the interaction becomes static. Therefore, consideration of the optimal type of preparation will be a particularly important feature in task design for oral interaction in low bandwidth language learning environments.

#### 5.2.4 Fluency, accuracy and correction

The research results from the second article indicate that many students appreciate CFs who put emphasis on correctional feedback, and a considerable number of students wanted CFs to do more explicit correction of mistakes and errors. SLA theory indicates that a greater emphasis on the development of accuracy should be given as students gradually achieve higher levels of proficiency and are able to pay attention to more details of their language production: *"the need for a focus on form arises (...) when learners have acquired some communicative ability and when they run the risk of fossilizing"* (Ellis, 2003, p.237). Long (2001, p. 184, in Candlin & Mercer (Ed.)) claims that such a focus on form may offer the following advantages: *"It speeds up the rate of learning, it affects acquisition processes in ways possibly beneficial to long-term accuracy, it appears to raise the ultimate level of attainment"*.

The challenge for CFs will be to put into practice a more explicit incidental focus on form without detracting from the development of their students' development of fluency. There is not necessarily any contradiction between the two goals, but as Felix (2005, p.5) notes:

*constant corrections of grammar or pronunciation (...) seriously interrupt communication and fluency (...) In each learning event it is important to establish the goal to be achieved, and participating students should ideally participate in the negotiation of this.*

Therefore, the way that a focus on form should be achieved in the Institute environment will in part depend on the degree to which individual CFs are able to engage in open dialogue with their students about students' preferences and wishes regarding the manner and degree of correctional feedback. SLA research (Ellis et al 2002) shows that when students have more control over how and when correctional feedback occurs, there is more likelihood that learning will be mediated. Experience from telecollaborative online exchanges involving written chat (Ware & Cañado 2007, p. 118, in O'Dowd (Ed.)) also indicate that learners should be actively involved with making decisions over what kind of correctional feedback they receive. Such feedback should of course be explicitly but sensitively delivered, though restricted to a limited number of commonly occurring mistakes or errors.

This concludes the discussion of the research results presented in the two articles. These results represented the completion of the first stage in the action research cycle. In order to place the results in their proper perspective, an overview of the way in which the research results were implemented and evaluated within the action research process is now provided, followed by a discussion of the validity of both the methods and methodology used in the study.

### 5.3 Summary of the action research process

Table 1 summarizes the action research cycle starting with the research in the articles.

2007 - 2008	<b>RESEARCH DONE</b> CF Interviews ( <b>summer 2007</b> ). Article 1; Student survey ( <b>summer 2008</b> ). Article 2
2008	<b>CHANGES MADE (autumn 2008)</b> Introduction of new conversation assignments, role-plays, story-based, assignments, more student-centred topics and more student choice. Introduction of new vocabulary

	in some conversation assignments.
2009	<b>NEW RESEARCH (spring 2009)</b>  Evaluatory CF questionnaires on (1) new conversation assignments and the use of new vocabulary and on (2) how conversations develop (the process) with students on the different courses. (See Appendices A and B ). Also (3) Conversation recordings (See appendix C).
2009	<b>CHANGES MADE (summer 2009)</b>  Increased student choice on conversation assignments on higher courses. Introduction of functional phrases in some lower course conversation assignments.
2010	<b>CHANGES PENDING (2010 – 2011)</b>  Introduction of more explicit form focus in higher course conversation assignments. Changes in advice and guidance to CFs in relation to giving more explicit correction. Introduction of picture story assignments on the lower level course.

**Table 1: Representation of research and actions over time.**

As can be seen from Table 1, row 1, the first two pieces of research in the form of the CF interviews and student survey were undertaken in 2007 and 2008. The overview in Table 1 shows how some of the recommended changes were implemented (see row 2, **CHANGES MADE (autumn 2008)**). The follow-up research (see row 3, **NEW RESEARCH (spring 2009)**), is illustrated in the Appendices through overviews of the results of two CF questionnaires (Appendix A and B), evaluating the effectiveness of the changes, and possible needs for further changes and through the analysis of transcripts of conversation recordings (Appendix C), designed to give more qualitative information. This new research in 2009, together with the research in the articles provided the basis for further changes (row 4, **CHANGES MADE (summer 2009)**) and intended changes (row 5, **CHANGES PENDING (2010 – 2011)**).

As explained in Chapter 3 (methodology and methods) the criteria needed to judge the validity of action research must necessarily be different from that used to assess more traditional research, since the practical outcomes as well as the research need to be evaluated. We begin therefore begin by looking at the validity of the way

the qualitative research was conducted before moving on to the validity of the research process as a whole.

## 5.6 Validity of the qualitative approach

Different researchers of EFL methodologies (e.g. Duff, 2006, Dörnyei, 2007, Mackey & Cass, 2007) agree that among the ways in which validity can be enhanced in qualitative studies, the most commonly cited guarantors are “thick” or “rich” contextual description, prolonged engagement in the field and persistent observation, and the triangulation of data and methods providing different perspectives which can all contribute to safeguarding internal validity. While these approaches may go a long way towards securing the credibility of any qualitative study, there are still other threats to the quality of research as identified in Maxwell's taxonomy of validity (1992, cited in Dörnyei, 2007, p. 59). The two most important are first the question of how reliably the data has been coded (descriptive validity), and second, the problem of “anecdotalism” (interpretive validity) whereby the researcher needs to convince the audience that the examples presented in the data really represent a critical investigation and are not simply chosen to support the researcher's subjective stance.

The validity of the present study is based on triangulation, focusing on the research phenomenon from different points of view to try to reduce the possible bias which only one or two perspectives might provide. This variety of qualitative methods and perspectives was initially in the form of CF interviews and a student survey, then by analysis of CF questionnaires and conversation recordings. In addition, informal interviews and communication with students, CFs, tutors and members of the Institute EFL administration provided further possibilities for dialectical feedback, disconfirming or confirming the research. These more informal channels of communication were connected to the second safeguard to the internal validity: The practitioner-researcher's deep and long-term engagement in the Institute EFL project in the capacity of lead conversation administrator and course designer. This prolonged engagement has given access to a wide range of informal research material including literally thousands of e-mail exchanges and conversations with those involved with the

project in different capacities. The third safeguard is through some of the detailed (rich) description of aspects of the research situation, such as that given in the interviews in the first article.

Furthermore, the additional threats to internal validity described above (issues of descriptive and interpretive validity) have been countered by asking other members of the Institute EFL administrative team to check the coding of the data independently and compare the results (notably for the student survey). There has also been "peer" and "member" checking through the researcher-practitioner's ongoing discussions with other participants on the project and the hearing of critical views from CFs and students who become aware of shortcomings in the design of conversation assignments.

As regards the question of external validity, and as noted in the chapter on methodology, in qualitative research there is not normally any attempt to produce universally generalisable results. Nonetheless, the results may indirectly contribute to generalization through the development of theory which is derived from:

*situations studied which helps to make sense of other situations. In other words even if the particulars of a general case do not generalize, the main ideas and the process observed might. This is why a single specially selected case can be illuminating"*

(Dörnyei 2007, p. 59)

Some contributions towards the generalizing of theory are mentioned in the concluding sections of the two articles. However, as noted in the chapter on methodology, in AR, there is generally less possibility of transferring results to other contexts because the cyclical process involving the implementation of research outcomes through intervention and changes means that results are necessarily more restricted to a particular local context. In terms of the special criteria for measuring the validity of AR mentioned in Chapter 3 (outcome validity and democratic validity), the changes which have been made in the conversation assignments (see Table 1) appear

to have been positively received both by students and CFs, judging by the feedback in the questionnaires and other more informal sources. The changes therefore appear to support both outcome and democratic validity. Nonetheless, Table 1 also shows that some of the changes which the research in the articles implied were necessary have not yet been enacted. This is because implementation of these changes is not under the sole control of the researcher-practitioner, since they are connected to the design of the course as a whole. One example would be the linking of the written course topics to the topics of the conversation assignments, another the inclusion of target vocabulary words from the written course in conversation assignments, and a third the decision as to whether to encourage a more explicit focus on language form in the conversations). To the extent that the implementation of these changes has been delayed, there is a lack of outcome validity, but they probably will soon be enacted, since it is a matter of timing and prioritizing change relative to other EFL Institute goals.

## 6.0 Conclusions

This chapter starts with an evaluation of some of the general implications of the research results in relation to the skills and qualities needed for good conversation facilitation and appropriate task design in low-bandwidth online environments. This is followed by an outline of the specific implications concerning the need for changes at the Institute. Finally, the results are assessed in relation to the possible use of native speakers in other contexts and need for increased synchronous interaction in distance language learning in general.

### 6.1 Conversation facilitation and task design in low-bandwidth environments

The Institute experience has provided evidence and indications of what kind of task design, and which conversation facilitation skills are likely to assist language learning in low-bandwidth environments which do not allow for audiographic or audiovisual exchanges. In the absence of the stimulation provided by multimodal images or graphics, conversation participants must resort to other forms of stimuli. By using creativity and inner resources and by exploiting the limited outer resources which are available to the full, this apparent disadvantage can potentially be turned to an advantage for those using a combination of simple voice and written chat. Choosing relevant topics is also important and it would seem that every individual has a multitude of life experiences which can be shared if an atmosphere of trust, relaxation and mutual confidence can be created.

For CFs in the Institute online environment, attempting to communicate with weaker language students presents the greatest challenge. In this situation, the experience of the CFs interviewed in the first article showed that it is helpful to have two or more students on the line together, since, as Van Lier notes (1996, p. 147):

*"Social interaction is the "engine" that drives the learning process".* The social atmosphere can as mentioned be exploited through the use of warmth, humour and not least the written chat, so that a good relaxed learning environment is created. Indeed, CFs who are flexible and establish a good rapport and dialogue with their students can gradually empower them to influence the direction and content of conversations. Good CFs can also find ways to adapt conversation assignments in appropriate ways, according to their students' needs and interests. These CFs will probably find a way to conduct conversations in such a way that their students will progress, independently of the design of the assignments. However, for less experienced or skilled conversation facilitators, good assignment or task design can make a great difference to the way the interaction develops.

All the CFs who were interviewed, and nearly all of the students' survey responses indicate that it is useful to have some kind of preliminary structure for the conversations. A few students indicated that they would prefer no prior planning, but these were probably quite advanced language speakers. They may well have been reacting to their CFs' overly strict adherence to topic questions and assignments which they found boring and repetitive. For the majority of learners, however, some kind of initial assignment or task provides a kind of safety net or map which can be used and returned to when more spontaneous interaction dries up. The use of topic-based discussion questions can be productive as long as language learners find the topic sufficiently interesting, and are able to summon up suitable language from their reserves of passive vocabulary in order to be able to formulate utterances relevant or connected to the subject. The Institute experience shows that the use of the written chat can be extremely valuable in this regard. By providing necessary lexical items, language experts can prompt and assist learners who get stuck in mid-sentence, and who hesitate and stumble as they try to produce longer speech runs. For weaker learners, it is their lack of basic vocabulary and lack of practice in oral communication which present the main initial hurdles. Therefore, initial tasks need to include useful words and expressions for everyday use on subjects familiar to learners. In the absence of multimodal stimuli, both learners and language experts need to spend time preparing for conversations. In this way they can bring with them some of the

language which they need in the form of notes. The CF interviews also showed that when participants exchange files with pictures and information during or between conversations, a new stimulus can be added which provides new material to talk about as well as building nourishing relationships between conversation partners. Therefore any institution organizing synchronous online interaction needs to provide additional resources in the form of audio recordings, interesting internet addresses as well as language materials such as games, idioms, useful vocabulary and expressions which learners and facilitators can themselves easily access on the course website. Language learners should also be encouraged to bring along materials which they are particularly interested in, such as music, poems, other written material, technical artefacts or even food. Conversation partners can talk about these extra stimuli, so that students can learn new vocabulary on subjects which interest them.

Although this study has focused most attention on the difficulties facing weaker language students, it is important to remember the different kinds of challenges in trying to help more advanced students develop further. Once language learners reach a certain level, they are generally able to communicate basic information and express their opinions on a variety of subjects. They can also find ways to say things by avoiding more difficult or unknown words or expressions. At this stage, they may need to be pushed in a different way. Conversations may need a more specific language focus, whereby metalinguistic discussion can focus on different ways of expressing more complex language. This may require introducing different kinds of text as preparation, with more demanding and abstract topics being introduced.

## 6.2 Implications for changes in assignment design and guidance for CFs

At present, the Institute's topic-based conversation assignments use a question and answer format and students are required to write answers to the assignment questions before conversations take place. The results of the student survey as well as other research material available to the researcher-practitioner indicate that the present

topic-based assignments should utilize more student-centred topics. In addition, the requirement for written preparations should be removed so the expectation that the conversation will focus narrowly on the initial assignment questions can be altered. However, students should still be required to prepare mentally, for example, by reading a text and by being given some questions to consider. Both students and CFs should be told that the intention is not necessarily that the conversation should focus on precisely these questions, but instead, that the questions are intended to help the participants think about the topic. The results of the student survey also imply that many CFs and students would benefit from a greater variety of conversation assignments such as role-plays, story and text-based assignments, and student presentations. It is also possible to use recorded audio material with or without accompanying texts which students can be required to listen to between conversations. In new conversation assignments, preselected lexical items including common words, expressions and functional phrases suitable for use in conversations at appropriate levels can be embedded in texts used for preparations.

If the Institute EFL administration wishes to include a more explicit focus on accuracy in some conversations, perhaps for more advanced students, then some conversation assignments using the present topic-based question and answer format could continue to be used with written preparations. However, instead of focusing on students' written errors at the start of the conversation, correctional feedback could be given towards the end of conversations in conjunction with the use of the written chat, or the students' written preparations could be discussed after and between the conversations. Some CFs have already been doing this by e-mail. In this way, the conversations themselves would not need to dwell excessively on the initial questions, and a freer, more dynamic interaction can be encouraged to develop. Thus, an increased focus on accuracy towards the end of the conversations need not be at the cost of the development of fluency during the main conversation.

In general, CFs should be advised to correct more explicitly than at present, but they should also be advised to consult frankly and openly with their students on a regular basis as to the desired manner and degree of correctional feedback, and how

this might best be achieved in each individual case. If students are eager to focus more on an instructive kind of conversation, other kinds of assignments could be designed, requesting students to give examples of language problems they face in their written work. In this case, there would need to be cooperation between CFs and writing tutors. CFs would need to be given clear guidance as to how to deal with student requests for focus on their written mistakes. With more advanced students, this might be in the form metalinguistic discussion, illustrated by examples. However, since the CFs are not trained language instructors, it will be best to avoid attempts at grammatical explanations. There will be a need for quality control and possibility further didactic training for the CFs who engage in such a new role.

### 6.3 Implications for using native speakers in online interaction

The Institute experience also has general implications for the use of native speakers for online oral interaction. It appears that conversation courses are often used as "add-ons" (Thornbury & Slade 2007) to instructional-based language courses. The Institute experience shows that native speakers can make significant contributions both to learner fluency and accuracy, whether as a friend or in a more pedagogical role. This means that educational institutions responsible for distance language learning may need to consider new options when deciding what kind of language experts should have responsibility for course delivery.

At present, most universities delivering fully online language courses employ the same language teachers for asynchronous and limited synchronous interaction, (though some courses have no synchronous element). At the UK's Open University for instance, qualified experienced language tutors are responsible both for the assessment and correction of asynchronous written assignments as well as the provision of synchronous online tutorials. At Norwegian institutions providing distance language learning including synchronous oral interaction (Østfold College, Bergen University and NTNU Trondheim), the same qualified language instructors are responsible for

both synchronous meetings and asynchronous written work. Similarly, at the University of California, where Blake et al. (2008) teach the first year language course, "Spanish without walls", the main oral interaction is the responsibility of the language tutor who also looks after the other parts of the course. The question which might be raised here is if it would be possible to supplement the language instructors' efforts using native speakers in a telecollaborative setting.

As described in the opening chapter in this thesis, the present study shows how distance language learning can be organized to help students develop their oral proficiency skills is through the kind of telecollaborative projects described in the opening chapter in this thesis. The advantage of this approach is that both partners in such "tandem" projects are "equals" in the sense of each partner being both a native speakers and a learner of the other participant's language. This is quite a different scenario from that described in the previous paragraph, where the new language learner is dependent on the educational institution's language teacher for oral interaction. Where such telecollaborative projects can be organized, all parties stand to benefit. Another alternative to the dependence on the language teacher is offered by Tudini's (2003, 2007) experiments in encouraging language learners to attend informal chat rooms with native speakers. This way of organizing language learning has the appeal of being free and easy to organize. However the coincidental and unstructured nature of the interaction means that it can hardly be presented as a formal part of a distance language-learning course.

What then of the possibility of employing native speakers to converse with language learners as a formal part of language learning courses, be they through full distance learning, classroom based or a hybrid? There are four main factors which would need to be considered: The first is training and quality control. Next is organization and administration, followed by economic constraints. Last there may be opposition from teachers and the language learning community.

Clearly, any recruitment of native speakers of the target language would need to be selective. Those chosen would need to be given a minimum of training and would

need to be supervised. Furthermore, quality control can relatively easily be organized through the recordings of conversations and through regular evaluative feedback from learners. However, the recruitment, training and supervision of the native speakers would put demands on the organization which would require resources which could otherwise be used to pay qualified teachers to provide the service instead.

Nevertheless, if the educational institution is based in an affluent country, it is probable that the costs of paying qualified local language teachers will be much higher than those of employing native speakers from poorer developing countries to assist with the teaching of oral conversation online. Nevertheless, the main stumbling block to the idea of employing native speakers to provide the bulk of the online oral interaction is likely to be from local language teachers who feel that their jobs are being taken from them, and from institutions that are slow to change and adapt. There could, however, be an alternative role for some of the qualified language teachers in training, supervising and collaborating with the native speakers. Some will also contend that language learners will not learn adequately from native speakers with only a minimum of language training. The Institute experience, however, indicates otherwise. Naturally, trained language teachers should be in a better position to explain grammatical rules and correction of written work, and they would still be expected to do this, both asynchronously and in a limited number of synchronous tutorials. Using the Institute model, the division between the language teacher and the native speakers would be such that the teacher would perform a more instructional role, emphasizing accuracy, while the native speaker's main responsibility would be to promote fluency.

## 6.4 Concluding remarks

The present study has investigated a unique online language learning environment which was created out of necessity in order to provide educational opportunities for a discriminated group of young people in Iran. There are, however, many millions of other people in the world, primarily in developing countries, who might benefit from receiving access to a similar language learning program. By making a virtue out of

necessity, the Institute experience shows what may be possible in less developed countries as the inexorable spread of technology reaches all sections of world society. As the pressure of the Iranian authorities has forced the Institute to adapt its methods of delivery, new potential solutions have been improvised. For example, due to interference, restrictions on the availability of faster internet, and the banning of Skype, only low-bandwidth internet is viable for many students. The Institute has therefore adapted its software to this low bandwidth. This kind of internet is also available through smart phones (i.e. mobile phones with internet access) which can be equipped with loudspeakers and microphones. Such smart phones can potentially be used for language tutorials for groups of learners who gather together. This is not an option in the Institute where students are widely spread, but it could be possible for people living in villages in developing countries, especially in remoter regions. It might also offer language learning opportunities for women and disabled people who may be marginalized in relation to mainstream educational opportunities. Therefore, while most universities in developing countries would probably not consider using conversations for language learning when bandwidth connections are as poor as they are at the Institute, the research may be particularly relevant in relation to the teaching of languages through distance learning in less favourable circumstances.

The Institute experience shows that the synchronous aspect of online learning in a distant learning language course should not be integrated as an afterthought in course design, but should rather be the first thought from which the rest of the course design should follow. Synchronous interaction provides learners with a different quality of communication compared with asynchronous written feedback. Synchronous interaction can empower language learners through their capacity to enter into dialogue about topics which are difficult to understand through purely written exchanges.

In distance language learning, the requirements of extra self-discipline and time management, autonomy and the ability to study in isolation often lead to higher drop-out rates than in partially or fully face-to-face teaching courses. If traditional approaches to distance learning are radically revamped to fit the needs and

possibilities of the twenty-first century, high drop-out rates could become a thing of the past. For example, by introducing biweekly online conversations with native speakers in addition to less frequent tutorials with fully qualified teachers, such courses could dramatically increase in popularity. However, such synchronous interaction needs to be especially carefully planned within the framework of the whole course in order to make participants “*more inclined to invest extra time and effort at cultivating relationships online*” in “*in 'anticipation of future interaction*” (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2008, cited in Ortega 2009 in Mackey & Polio (Ed.)). At the Institute, the students have not voluntarily chosen distance learning, it is the only form of higher education available to them. Therefore, the conversations, which represent the students’ only opportunity to engage in synchronous “real-time” language learning, may carry an extra significance. Nonetheless, in more ordinary circumstances, the importance of the availability of real-time talk may be an under-rated factor in promoting language learning.

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## APPENDIX A

### CF questionnaire (1) 2009

- A. On the introduction of new conversation assignments: role-plays
- B. On the introduction of story-based conversation assignments
- C. On the introduction of target vocabulary words in conversation assignments

#### A. On Role Plays

CFs assessment of the use of role-plays in conversations	Number of responses
Very positive	6 CFs
Positive	7 CFs
OK	3 CFs
Negative	1 CF
Very negative	2 CFs

Examples of very positive comments include: *"Role play worked out very well"*, *"Role plays were great tools to make the students communicate with each other"*, *"These were the best lessons"*. Samples of positive comments are: *"The students and I enjoyed these lessons"*, *"Role play was popular in my group"*, and *"I want to see more of this"*. An example of an "ok" comment was: *"role-playing was fine, nothing to write home about"*. The one "negative" comment was *"it was difficult to engage all the students"* while one very negative comment was: *"the role plays did not work out at all"*.

The comments of the six CFs who were not in the "positive category" indicate that they all experienced problems because they attempted to rigidly follow the students' preparation texts or because the students did not understand the instructions for the assignment, having particular difficulty with the words "role-play". Students were asked to write a small sample of a role-play before the conversation to try to get them to prepare mentally. It seems that the CFs who had little success simply stuck to what the students had written instead of creating fresh scenarios for or with their students. Responses also indicated that most of the CFs who were least positive to the role play assignments were originally brought up in the Iranian culture and were not very familiar with the concept of role playing in educational contexts.

The positive comments reflect the fact that the role-plays led to increased interaction and conversation, especially between students. It led to *"a fun learning experience"* and *"an easy way to add humour into the conversation"*. Some CFs commented that the role plays "provided a natural venue for developing students conversation skills which *"tweaked the students' imaginations"*, that *"role-plays makes language learning easier"* and that *"the students have a chance to really put their new vocabulary into action in an interactive environment"*. Another CF said that *"I know most of my students looked forward to role playing(...)although this requires that the CF engage them at all times"*. Even though the majority of CFs were positive, the consensus seemed to be that two role-plays per semester was enough.

## **B. On story-based conversation assignments**

As the following examples show, there was a variety of responses to the introduction of story-based assignments. The majority of the CFs who responded to the questionnaire were positive, while the negative responses indicated that the language content of the story may sometimes have been at the wrong level, or the instructions unclear. The following are samples of responses:

*I actually like the story telling. I can tell from experience that it makes learning a language easier and more fun. I think they enjoyed it.*

*The students and I enjoyed these lessons. Maybe one more next semester.*

*For the EFL 101 the moral stories were difficult to comprehend.*

*The story assignments are something else again. I think the story assignments were wonderful.*

*I think this was a worthwhile addition although 2 of my 8 students misunderstood the story assignments and just rewrote and re-read the stories provided in the curriculum.*

*Few of my students understood what was required for the story assignments*

*I believe both assignments were beneficial.*

*I would like to see more stories. I think it's good for understanding more of a culture.*

*I found story telling encourages interaction and conversation among the students, and they seemed to be enjoying it also!*

### **C. On the introduction of target vocabulary words**

The CFs were in general very positive to the introduction of designated new words to the conversations, commenting that "*Introducing words is a great idea*", "*I think it was very useful*" and "*I would like to see more of those*". Several CFs agreed with this latter comment, expressing the wish for more words and more of this kind of exercise. However, six of the nineteen CFs admitted to not following up on the words which were underlined in the conversation assignment questions, though more than one of them "*regretted*" that this was something he had "*not specifically focused on*". Among those CFs who did make sure that their students used and practiced the words, one commented that "*I liked having vocabularies that we could rely on for that specific conversation. It elevates the level of the conversation*". However, two other CFs were not so positive to the use of words taken from the course, recommending instead that the students themselves should be asked to choose five or ten words which they wanted to learn the meaning of and bring them to each conversation. One of these CFs was "*sure*" that his students would not remember the course words after the conversation, while another noted that students "*tend to contextually interpret the meaning of the words*" so that they do not necessarily learn the proper meaning of the word.

## **APPENDIX B**

**CF questionnaire (2) 2009**

**Differentiating between conversation facilitation on the three Institute EFL courses**

In this questionnaire, CFs were asked a number of questions about the conversation facilitation process. The following short summaries show some of the distinctions between having conversations with students on different courses as expressed by their CFs. This was particularly valuable information since the 2008 student survey did not differentiate students' views according to which course they were taking.

### **Interaction with new lower intermediate students on EFL101:**

The questionnaire comments from the CFs working with the lower-intermediate students indicated that most of these CFs used a large amount of their conversation time making sure that students had really understood the original written assignment questions. Ensuring that students fully understand the original assignment questions seems to occupy at least as much time as attempts at follow-up questions. It is generally the first time that students on EFL101 have talked with native speakers. Some of them are shy and some are struggling to master the technical environment. Therefore, their CFs emphasize the importance of building relationships and confidence, being "*friendly and personal*", getting "*a feel for the mood each student is in*" and not least, using humour: "*Make it dull and of course they won't come...*". Some CFs wrote that identifying students' interests can bring good results.

### **Interaction with students on the intermediate level course (EFL102)**

The questionnaire responses from the CFs on the intermediate course (EFL102 CFs) indicate that their students are able to start answering questions in more detail than those on EFL101. The CFs more routinely use follow-up questions and prompts, also asking students to exemplify their answers. However, many students still appear to be

rather vulnerable and can easily misunderstand if the CF moves beyond relatively simple language.

### **Interaction with students on the upper intermediate students (EFL103)**

The upper intermediate students on EFL103 are generally accustomed to the Institute conversations, having passed through EFL101 and EFL102. They have usually achieved a degree of fluency that allows much more dynamic exchanges than on EFL101. The EFL103 CFs say that they use the original topic questions and answers mostly as "*a starting point*" or "*jumping off point*". Different CFs' comments then mention getting students to "*clarify*", "*elaborate*", "*expand*", "*paraphrase*" and "*exemplify*" and suggest that these methods get students to "*think spontaneously*". CFs' comments indicate that considerably less time is spent on comprehension and basic language repair as compared to the lower level courses.

### **Dealing with mixed level students**

Another challenge facing CFs across all courses is dealing with students with widely mixed abilities. CFs indicate that there is great variety in the amount of interaction in different groups. Maintaining a balance in participation from different students is reported as a challenge. A number of CFs express that they are not as successful in getting students to interact between themselves as much as they would like.

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Examples of transcripts of conversation extracts**

**Example 1** (Lower intermediate student)

**CF** what we want to talk about is ...uhm...what you think of the course compared to previous online courses you have taken (extra clear intonation + slightly slower than normal speech)

**Student** uh...about EFL..ok ? ( rising intonation indicates question )

**CF** yes

**Student** yes...er...I think..er ..this term ..is...erm.mmm....more difficult... err ...than ... previous term....because...err..erm...this term....in this term...I have to work ..err...many assignments ..and err...but and I haven't enough time for reading CD, reading and listening CD.. but err..previous ...err.. term I have erm... I had more time for reading and listening CD ....because I err.. had.. err less...err assignments of this term

**CF** ok.....ok By the way, you said that very well your grammar was excellent... I could tell

that ..I...er... you were making sure your grammar was correct. That was very good

**Student** Thanks.

**Example 2** (Intermediate student)

**CF** Now the next question... is.. what are some of the consequences of online learning

compared to face to face ? ...

**Student** Er... I think some of the consequences er... are one... I can study in my home... and the other... I can save my time more... uhm... I think... they are the consequences

**CF** OK

**Student** But... but I think if we had... we have a class er... it was... er better...it feels better

**CF** It would be better

**Student** Yes... it would be better... and we can solve my problem

**CF** I agree with you... er... studying online allows you to study at home, but when you are in class, you can get answers to your questions right away

**Student** Right erway or right away ?

**CF** Right away ... both of them are the same ...right (CF spells word on written chat)

**Example 3:** (Upper intermediate student).

Conversation with technical interruptions: The time is shown in ten second intervals:

Time

00 (**Student**) ... in Tehran everyday so the population changes to twenty millions... more than

10 twenty millions...we have got ...uh...those numbers of ...uh...buses and underground 20 trains and taxis ...they're... very very lower and less than the number of the people so

30 they have to use their own personal cars to go to work...and I think they

(5 second loss of contact ) ...buses are not very good so they prefer to go with their

40 personal cars and using many times in the traffic jams ...and ...erm...those things...

50 (**CF**) ... I see er...do many people use the public transport system at all? 1.00 (5 second loss of contact – Student sends chat message to indicate loss of sound)

(**CF**) ...uh ok I'll write it for you...but I was asking do many people use public transport ?

(*CF writes the bolded question on chat simultaneously*)

1.10 (**Student**) ...because your voice is so weak...um

(**CF**) ...alright I'll try ( *speaking louder*) to um....

1.20 (silence while CF tries to make technical adjustment )

1.30 ...right the question was do many people use public transport?

1.40 (**Student**) ... actually..... yes they do ...yes for example if you want to use underground trains

1.50 at for example ...at seven ...seven in the morning ...you will see that the crowd

(5 second loss of contact)

2.00 actually there so many people who use the tran...public transportation transport

2.10 but the number of those trains... buses is not as much as it should be... this is the

2.20 reason that many people use their own cars

(CF) so do you think if there were more bu.. ( *line is temporarily broken...*)

## Appendix D

### **Student survey – Summer 2008**

A total of 216 students responded, but not all students answered all the questions.

#### OPEN QUESTIONS

***1. What are the most useful ways your Conversation teacher helps you to learn***

***English?***

***2. What could your Conversation teacher do better to help you with learning***

***English?***

#### CLOSED QUESTIONS

**3. Do you think you learn more from the Conversation classes when you prepare by writing Conversation Forums? (Conversation assignment preparations)**

A. Yes, doing Conversation Forums **usually** helps me learn more from the Conversation classes. 48.1% (= 104 students)

B. Doing Conversation Forums **sometimes** helps me learn more from the Conversation classes. 33.3% (= 72 students )

C. No, doing Conversation Forums **doesn't usually** help me learn more from the Conversation classes. 18.5% (= 40 students)

**4. How do you feel about the Conversation classes:**

A. I like them very much. I learn a lot. 55.6% (120 students)

B. They are quite good. It is useful experience. 30.6% (66 students)

C. They are not good. I learn almost nothing. 6.9% (15 students)

D. I cannot make a judgement yet 6.9% (15 students)

**5. Do you find the subjects (topics) for the Conversations:**

A. Interesting 19.4% (42 students)

B. A little interesting 69.0% (149 students)

C. Not interesting 11.6% (25 students)

**6. If you could choose some of the subjects (topics) for the Conversations, which subjects (topics) would you choose to talk about?**

(The numbers in the results below refer to the total number of students who made the suggestion: e.g. 13 students wanted to talk about social/societal issues.)

Social/societal issues 13; Current affairs 12; Cultural differences 10; Honesty, moral, peace, unity, uplifting themes, religion 10; Daily life topics and challenges 8; Qualities of good university, BIHE 8; Dreams, wishes, memories, childhood 6; Housework, cooking, practical matters 6; Personal relationships, marriage 6; Language learning, communication skills 6; Online learning, related challenges 5; Major areas of study 5; Science Technology 5; Youth issues 5; Future challenges 4 ; Art, music 4; Sport 4; more debatable topics 3; Generation differences 2; Travel 2; Various 6

**7. How helpful do you feel your Conversation teacher is on this course?**

- A. Very helpful 51.9% (112 students)
- B. Helpful 6.5% (14 students)
- C. A little helpful 32.9% (71 students)
- D. Not helpful at all 4.2% (9 students)
- E. I'm not sure 4.6% (10 students)

# **ARTICLE 1**

## Teaching Oral English Online - Through Skype (VOIP)

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### **Abstract**

*This article presents an action research study focusing on the online teaching of English conversation using VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) in an unusual and challenging international online context. Information elicited from interviews with eight Conversation Facilitators shows how conversation assignments need to be designed in order to facilitate interaction patterns conducive to language learning. A range of skills and qualities likely to lead to "best practice" emerge from two interviews which are analysed in more detail. Some implications for the use of audio conferencing for the development of oral proficiency in foreign language teaching are also suggested.*

### **Introduction:**

This study focuses on the teaching of English conversation to undergraduate students in Iran whereby native speakers of English function as Conversation Facilitators (CFs) using audio conferencing (Skype) to talk with small groups of students or converse one-to-one. Semi-structured interviews with eight CFs aimed to find out more about how the conversations were being conducted as well as investigating the extent to which the task design was providing an adequate basis and stimuli for the dialogues.

The article starts with a literature review of studies conducted over the past decade in the field of synchronous audio and audiographic Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). A short description of CMC activity currently under way within foreign language teaching contexts in Norway precedes a summary of the online context for the present study and the specification of the research questions. This is followed by an explanation of the rationale for the design of the conversation assignments and for the approach adopted to the analysis of the patterns of interaction found in the conversations as described in the interviews which form the main research material. An outline of the method adopted in the study is followed by a descriptive analysis of the research findings, divided into three parts: first some general findings followed by the analysis of two separate courses in which the CFs hold conversations. The discussion of the findings ends with recommendations for improving task design and practice, some of which have implications for foreign language teaching using audio conferencing in other online contexts.

### **Literature review**

The past decade has witnessed an increasing number of studies on the use of audio (voice chat with the possibility of written chat), or audiographic conferencing (voice chat with multimodal possibilities including: "symbol manipulation tools such as whiteboards and concept maps" (Kenning 2010, p.4), for foreign language learning. In the past five years, in addition to studies published in journals such as CALL, ReCALL, CALICO, and Language Learning and Technology, books (Lamy & Hampel 2007), and compilations (Belz and Thorne 2005; O'Dowd 2007; Thomas 2008; Zhang et al 2008) on online language learning have appeared with substantial sections on the use of audio and audiographic conferencing.

Research on synchronous CMC involves a variety of languages including Spanish (Volle 2005; Lee 2008), Italian (Tudini 2003), French (Lamy 2004; Hauck 2007) as well as English which is the subject of particular interest in different Asian countries including Taiwan (Chang 2007), China (Barrett 2008), Japan (Tsukamoto, Nuspliger & Senzaki 2009), Malaysia (Maclean 2009) and Vietnam (Hong 2006) as well as in Arabic-speaking countries (Mahfous & Ihmeideh 2009).

These studies involve audio or audiographic exchange over internet, either between students and language teachers (Hampel & Hauck 2004, Rosell-Aguilar 2005, 2006), between students and native speakers (Tudini 2003; Chang 2007; Tsukamoto, Nuspliger & Senzaki 2008; Barrett 2008; Lee 2008; Mahfous & Ihmeideh 2009), between peers (Chang 2007; Yilmaz & Granena 2010), or as "tandem" or "tridem" exchanges (Hauck 2007; O'Dowd & Waire 2008), where students on both sides of the exchange are learning each others' language and take turns assisting one another.

This stream of new research reflects a variety of different approaches, aspects of which are all relevant to the present study: There is an increasing emphasis on the importance of task design (Kötter 2001; Rosell-Aguilar 2005; Lafford & Lafford 2005; O'Dowd & Waire 2009; Yilmaz & Granenu 2010), and a growing awareness that students attempting to improve their oral language proficiency through synchronous CMC face technical challenges which can have consequences for learning outcomes (Lamy 2004), with two recent studies focusing on the anxiety which can be induced by such exchanges (Felix 2004; Arcos, Coleman & Hampel 2009). Last but not least, there is a recognition that the difference between using simple audio (for example Skype, [www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com), see Appendix A for screenshot) and audiographic conferencing (see for example: Elluminate: [www.illuminate.com](http://www.illuminate.com), see Appendix A) has implications for functionality, task design and practice (Kenning, 2010).

### ***Synchronous CMC in Norway***

At the time of writing, at least three different Norwegian institutions of higher education include audio or audiographic conferencing in foreign language learning for distance learners. Østfold College uses Elluminate for the teaching of oral French to low to upper-intermediate students. At Bergen University Spanish is taught to beginners and more advanced students using Adobe Net meeting as the audiographic platform, while The Norwegian University of Science of Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim uses Skype to teach oral Spanish and French to lower-intermediate and beginner students. In addition, many Norwegian schools participate in EU-funded and other language development projects using audio exchanges. In the future, the trend of using synchronous CMC to help develop learners' oral proficiency is likely to accelerate. Therefore, this paper can be seen as relevant to practitioners, planners and policy-makers in the field.

### ***The online context for this study***

In the present study, audio conferencing (Skype) is used by volunteer Conversation Facilitators (CFs) around the world to teach oral English to university undergraduates in Iran who are not permitted to attend ordinary universities. The university offering the courses is the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (hereafter referred to as "the Institute". See [www.bihe.org](http://www.bihe.org)).

Poor internet connections limit the practical design of conversation assignments since the average student's bandwidth cannot support multimedia graphics in addition to audio. Therefore, the CFs and students utilise written Skype chat as a supplement to VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol).

The conversations are part of a comprehensive series of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses being taught fully online with no face-to-face contact. The courses have been designed and developed in the broad tradition of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), in which meaningful content and real world relevance are the main focus (Candlin & Mercer, 2001; Savignon 2002).

At the time of this study, the Institute had two EFL courses which included conversations, with lower-intermediate (EFL101) and intermediate students (EFL102). Each course has a specially created CD using Flash technology, divided into sections for reading, writing, grammar and listening. Some of the sections have multiple-choice automated exercises. Each course lasts 16-20 weeks and course content is built up on a main theme which is further divided into modules with sub-topics. The content of the conversation assignments is closely linked to these sub-topics (see Appendix B for overview of the themes and sub-topics for EFL101 and EFL102).

The courses are taught by qualified EFL teachers who correct students' written assignments, and by native or near-native bilingual speakers (Persian-English) who function as CFs. This division is a result of the Institute EFL teachers generally not having time to do conversations as well as correct written work. In general the CFs have little or no contact with the EFL teachers. Although issues arising from this division of labour between the EFL teachers and the CFs do have important consequences, discussing these is beyond the scope of the present study.

After an initial interview, new CFs study training materials (see appendix C for excerpts) and attend a group training conducted through Skype. These CFs are then assigned experienced CFs as mentors for their first semester.

All CFs are also required to have high-speed internet connections which partially compensate for the students' poor or very poor connections. The length and quality of the Skype calls vary greatly. Some last only 20 minutes, while others continue for two hours. Conversations are often interrupted by technical problems due to the state of telecommunications and the political situation in Iran.

When using Skype, the CFs tend to decide themselves how many students to talk to at one time. Those CFs who are more technically adept or who have students with better connections try to use Skype with two, three, four or even more students. The CFs who have less experience or facility with technology tend to talk one-to-one, though bad lines can sometimes also force technically-savvy CFs to do individualized conversations.

### ***Definition and goal of the Institute conversations***

In the Institute conversations, the term "conversation" is used as a kind of catch-all, covering a very wide variety of usage and requiring a range of interactive skills. Informal conversation can develop into more or less formal discussion and vice versa. The Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR 2001) classifies conversation separately from both informal

and formal discussion, but in the BIHE conversations, all of these categories are classed as conversation.

The goal of the Institute conversations is to increase students' oral proficiency defined in terms of fluency, accuracy and complexity (Skehan 1996). Since the Institute CFs are not EFL teachers, the Institute decided to focus primarily on trying to increase students' fluency, broadly defined in terms of building students' abilities to talk in chunks without excessive support.

Last, because the Institute EFL courses were new, it was vital to find out how the conversations were progressing, and what improvements were needed. Hence the present study which focuses on the following two research questions:

1. *How and to what extent do the Institute's topic-based conversation assignment questions provide an adequate foundation and sufficient stimuli to assist the development of dialogues and patterns of interaction which facilitate language learning?*
2. *Which pedagogical and technical skills do Conversation Facilitators need to develop in order to allow them to facilitate dialogues and patterns of interaction which promote language learning?*

## **THEORETICAL APPROACH**

### ***Task Design and ZPD***

Vygotsky's concept of 'zones of proximal development' ( ZPD) is key to an understanding of the Institute's students' progress since they, as language learners, are only able to notice language problems, repair errors and progress towards self-regulation with the assistance of more knowledgeable others if the language they encounter is on an appropriate level relative to their socially mediated ZPD. (See for example the description of the levels below, consistent with, and above the learner's ZPD described in Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994, p.470). It is the design of the Institute conversation tasks, and the skills of the CFs which largely determine the extent to which conversations are mediated within the students' ZPDs.

### ***Communicative language teaching, task design and the negotiation of meaning***

Within Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the value of using tasks for communicative activities has gained widespread acceptance (Pica 1994; ; Doughty & Long 2003). Definitions of what constitutes a task in CLT vary, but there is agreement that the concept broadly refers to meaningful activities, relating to real-life, having definite outcomes (Nunan 2005, pp.2-3; Skehan in Nunan 2005; Clapper, in Rossell-Aguilar, 2005, p.3). Such tasks may be convergent (Duff 1986, in Ur 1996, p.5) and therefore strongly structured leading to a definite outcome (eg completing a jigsaw task) or they may be more weakly structured, divergent and open-ended.

An influential study by Pica et al (1993), suggested that in convergent tasks where learners are 'pushed' to produce language where information exchange is mandatory, the subsequent collaborative negotiating of meaning may lead to efficient language learning through the participants noticing new words or language forms. This attractive idea lead to a

large number of 'negotiation for meaning studies' being undertaken within the growing tradition of task-based language teaching (TBLT). However, these studies have had a "*rather narrow focus*" (Samuda & Bygate 2008, p.117).

### ***The choice of topic-based questions as initial stimuli in the Institute online context***

One of the reasons why the need for a convergent task outcome has been emphasized in TBLT seems to be a belief that language students in institutionalised settings will not be motivated to continue with tasks unless there is the incentive of reaching a final goal. In other words, if participants are given more open-ended tasks, they will not necessarily continue the dialogue.

This kind of extrinsic goal-orientated motivation was not deemed necessary at the Institute where the participation of volunteer native speakers who strongly empathise with the students due to the discrimination they are suffering, together with the excitement for the students of their first meeting with native speakers, represents an unusually strong intrinsic motivation on both sides. Indeed, student questionnaire responses prior to the present study asked for more and longer conversations, while CFs have reported conversations which sometimes last for two or three hours. Feedback, including quantitative questionnaire data indicate that participants enjoy the conversations for their own sake, especially the informal chit-chat.

Another reason why more open tasks were preferred in the Institute context was because of logistical and technical hindrances. It is difficult for CFs to organize students in pairs or small groups since one or more students may have problems with their internet connection. This means that CFs need to be very flexible. In this situation it is not advisable for CFs to spend a lot of time in advance trying, for example, to organize a jigsaw task where different students hold different kinds of information which should be shared. As Hampel (2006, p.111) notes:

*we have to ensure that tasks are appropriate to the medium used and that we develop tasks that take into account the affordances ( ie the constraints and possibilities for making meaning) of the modes available."*

Task design was also limited by students' poor internet connections which meant that audiographic conferencing was not possible. To avoid the danger of technical breakdown or overload, it was felt that the conversation assignments should be simplified to avoid students having to attempt to switch computer screens as the conversations progressed. This decision meant that any materials which students were to use would have to be sent and studied before the conversations so that students would not be expected to have materials on the screen in front of them while attempting to converse. They would simply have the Skype screen in front of them with the possibility of written chat.

Despite these practical limitations, the Institute still wanted to give the students some simple materials to prepare in advance since "*pre-task planning has been widely shown to result in greater fluency*" (Samuda & Bygate 2008, p.113). As a result of all these considerations, a set of relatively simple, topic-related questions were created as the initial stimuli for the conversations. The rationale was that the students would mentally prepare answers to these questions which would form a kind of safety net, guaranteeing an initial information exchange and serving as a starting point, branching off to the development of informal conversation about participants' families, their daily lives, interests and concerns. By

these means it was hoped that CFs and students would develop strong personal relationships, which would reinforce learning and fluency in a positive dynamic spiral. The task was thus conceived of as a resource or support, rather than as the pedagogical driving force.

O'Dowd and Waire (2009, p.176) have noted that the potential pitfall of such informal discussion tasks can be that the exchange may proceed "*without processing*" or "*without challenging input*". The Institute conversation task designers hoped that these dangers would be countered by the progression and stimulus of the personalised informal interaction outlined above, gradually leading to the natural introduction and exploration of fresh input and ideas of mutual interest drawing on the participants' human experience and the exploitation of the native speakers' expertise.

Therefore, the first research question in the present study sought to investigate the adequacy of this task design, constrained as it was by technical hindrances and limitations in the online context.

### ***The CFs' role in enabling optimal patterns of interaction***

An emphasis on the importance of the individual's orientation, motives and goals in determining their level of participation in learning activities is part of the sociocultural approach underlying the present study. The individual learner's engagement is expressed in their role as an actor who is always "*co-constructing the activity they engage in, in accordance with their own socio-history and locally-determined goals*" (Ellis 2000, in Hampel 2006, p.109).

Conversations, which connect thoughts and utterances in a meaningful context, can simultaneously open up for the 'unexpected', and contain the seeds of what Van Lier describes as "*contingency*", which he claims "*lies at the core of the Vygotskian sociocognitive interface*" (Van Lier, 1996, p.169). In simple terms, contingency promotes the unexpected and prevents stagnation.

One of the most important conditions and consequences of enabling such "contingent" interaction to occur is the encouragement of student activity and initiative. The extent to which the Institute's students' initiative and activity could be encouraged was therefore assumed to be a key influence on the patterns of interaction in the conversations.

As indicated above, CFs and students are encouraged to become friends. CFs do not need to hold a professional distance to their students. This implies that there is a greater potential for open symmetrical dialogue, which is "*genuinely co-constructed*" in the Institute setting (Gibbons, 2006, p.114), as compared to what is possible in a normal institutionalized setting. This may make it easier for conversations to go beyond the most common classroom mode of interaction: 'IRF' (Initiation (I), Response (R), Feedback (F)) mode.

Even though instructional forms of IRF can undoubtedly be useful and necessary, especially for lower level language learners, excessive use of IRF may give students little influence over topic development.

The aim of the second research question in this study was therefore to investigate which patterns of interaction were evidenced in the conversations and to what extent they appeared to be conducive to language learning. The analysis of the interviews investigated to

what extent CFs reverted to traditional IRF patterns and to what extent the roles the CFs chose allowed for more equal power relations freeing up a greater degree of student initiative.

## **METHOD**

### ***Participants: CFs' backgrounds***

The Conversation Facilitators (CFs) live in several different countries. They are either native speakers of English or have been living in English-speaking countries for many years and are equally divided between men and women with an average age in the late 40s. The interviews were done with CFs from two different courses: EFL101 and EFL102, four from each course. The EFL101 course is aimed at lower-intermediate students, EFL102 is for intermediate level.

### ***Design and validity***

In the first part of the present study the role of the researcher is as 'researcher-practitioner' or 'action-researcher' deeply involved within the organization, seeking to find ways to improve the conversations.

The study uses a qualitative method: semi-structured interviews with eight CFs designed to provide a greater depth of knowledge and insight than is otherwise available to the researcher. A form of triangulation is needed to enhance the validity of the study. This means including evidence from two other viewpoints in addition to the perspectives of the interviews. This different evidence can serve to partially substantiate, or negate the interview findings (Cresswell & Miller 2000; Robson 2002; Richards 2003). One such viewpoint is available to the researcher through his role as Institute administrator for the conversations, with daily access to large amounts of written and oral communication with CFs and students in the form of e-mails, course-site messages and the researcher's frequent informal discussions with CFs and students. Another perspective is provided by the analysis of written evaluation questionnaires from both students and CFs. These however will form the subject matter of the second article in this study together with micro-analysis of transcripts from conversation recordings.

In addition to the different forms of evidence described above, a kind of pragmatic validation lies inherent in the close contact between the action-researcher and the other Institute EFL administrators and teachers, as well as the CFs and students, all of whom are regularly consulted and have vested interests in the research producing valid results. This regular ongoing "cross-checking" of progress and suggestions largely eliminates the danger that the action-researcher will become so subjectively involved with one narrow focus that he loses the "outsider's" detached perspective.

### ***Procedure***

The interviews were semi-structured, with six initial questions (see Appendix D) as the starting point opening up into more flexible exchanges. Each interview was conducted over Skype in the period 30<sup>th</sup> June to 20<sup>th</sup> July 2007. The interviews lasted between 30 – 90 minutes. The conversations were recorded in note form during each individual conversation and then written up in full, including the quotations presented in the findings.

The interviews were coded, categorized and analysed according to two main meaningful dimensions. First, similarities and differences in respondents' answers were identified. Second, the material was grouped according to central ideas and themes identified in the relevant theory as outlined above. This led to the development of concepts for discussion, which are "increasingly abstracted from, but consistent with individual accounts" (Blee & Taylor, p.111 in Klandermas & Staggborg (Ed.) 2002).

## **FINDINGS**

The findings from the interviews are divided into three sections: first some general findings applying to all CFs, second the findings specifically relating to the EFL102 CFs, and third the findings for the EFL101 CFs. The latter section includes data from two interviews which are presented in-depth because they represented examples of "best practice".

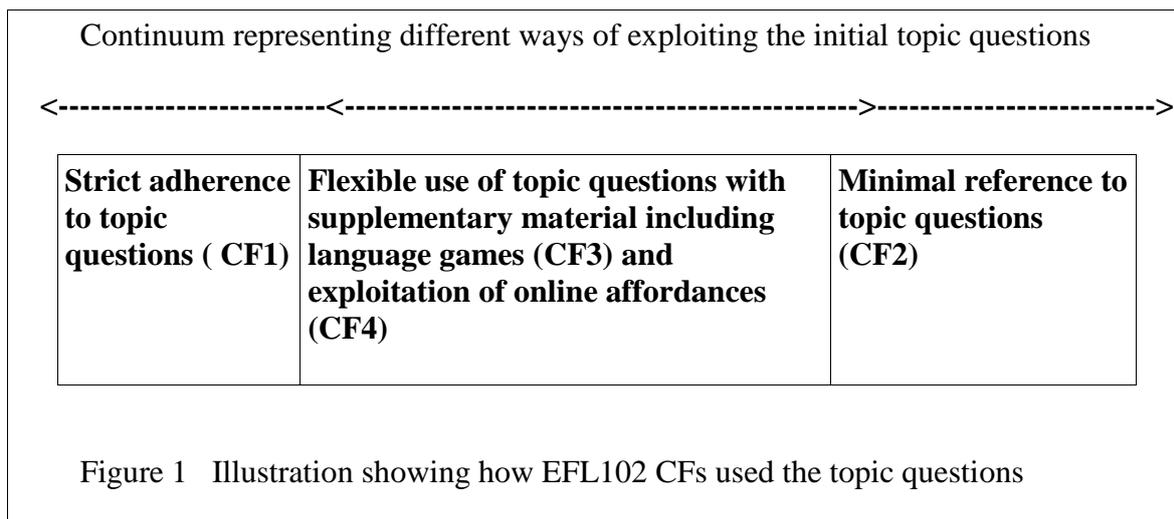
### **General findings for all CFs**

There was agreement among all the CFs who were interviewed that it was useful to have some basic questions (language and content 'input') to help start the conversations because, in the words of different CFs, these can provide a "*map*", "*framework*" or "*mental schemata*" for the conversations. The CFs also agreed that it was important that the students are prepared by thinking about the assignment questions, since this made them look up difficult words and think about the topics in advance of the conversations.

However, there were notable differences in the ways in which the different CFs used the conversation assignment questions during the conversations. These variations were to some extent due to differences in the content of the course materials between the two courses: EFL101 (aimed at lower-intermediate level students) and EFL102 (intermediate level students): The theme of the lower course (EFL101) is more practical, focusing on sub-topics which are simpler and more familiar compared with the more academic sub-topics on EFL102 (see appendix B for details of themes and sub-topics).

### **Findings for EFL102 CFs**

The responses from those volunteers serving on the higher course (EFL102) indicated that the relatively more advanced subject matter for the EFL102 conversation assignments created a challenge to make discussions on the course material linguistically accessible. The way the EFL102 CFs responded to this challenge is illustrated in the continuum in Figure 1:



The left side of the continuum represents one of the CFs (CF1) who reported sticking firmly to the initial task questions in the belief that students needed to get used to talking about academic-style assignments, even though it became apparent that the topics did not always attract students' interest. This decision seems to have led the CF to resort to more rigid types of "IRF" as the mode of interaction remained formal. The other end (right side) of the continuum represents another EFL102 CF (CF2) who started off by trying to conduct the conversations without any formal structure ("*I'll talk about anything...peanut butter.....*"), effectively ignoring the topic questions if she could get her students to talk about other things. This CF reported that the dialogue stayed far away from the original topic questions with the result that her students may have been wondering why they should have bothered preparing the topic questions at all.

In the middle of the continuum, the two other EFL102 CFs (CF3 and CF4) were able to use the assignment questions more flexibly. One of them (CF3) found that the EFL102 topics "*struck a chord with the students due to the spiritual content of the questions*". (The significance of this remark in the specific context of this study is more fully explained in the discussion section). CF3 also used language games with his students. It appears that this CF may have had some students who were above the normal intermediate level.

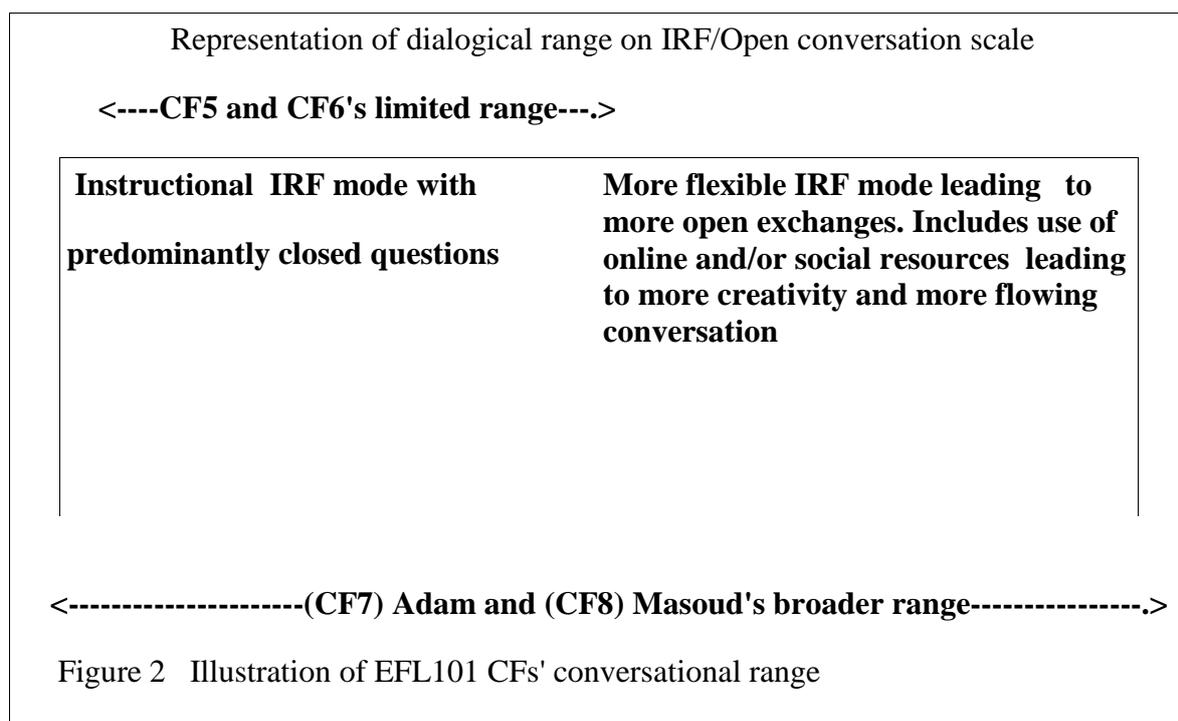
The fourth CF (CF4), who was highly computer literate, made active and extensive use of online affordances (available sources of additional stimuli) to enrich the learning environment and provide new challenging input in the form of materials and internet links of interest which he sent to his students between and during conversations through the Institute course site messaging system and through the Skype written chat-box and file-sending facility. It seems clear that CF4's students greatly appreciated these services. By bringing in these extra resources, this CF created flexibility and alternatives to rigidly following the assignment questions. He was able to switch from the topic questions if the conversation started to stagnate or comprehension became difficult, using other materials or more everyday chit-chat, before returning to the initial topic at a later stage.

### Findings for EFL101 CFs:

Due to technical difficulties (line breaks), two of the EFL101 CFs (CF5 and CF6) faced the challenge of holding one-to-one conversations with weak students. Despite great patience and excellent listening skills, CF5 struggled to promote a dialogue, being forced to rely on closed-

ended questions and short responses because his students were shy and lacked sufficient vocabulary and comprehension skills. CF6, who was bilingual, was also unable to progress beyond short answer responses. She resorted to translation and Persian.

These two EFL101CFs who tried to talk with only one student at a time, were only able to engage in limited exchanges in English, having to rely on repeated prompting and simple closed questions. It was not possible for CF5 and CF6 to open up and develop the dialogue. In contrast, the other two EFL101 CFs (CF7 and CF8) were able to operate over a much broader dialogical range as represented in the IRF/open scale in Figure 2:



### Examples of best practice: in-depth analysis of two EFL101 CFs: Adam and Masoud

The findings from the interviews with CF7 (hereafter referred to as Adam) and CF8 (referred to as Masoud), are in the following presented in further detail as examples of best practice:

#### Adam

Adam is a 28-year-old Australian who came to live in Norway 3 years ago. He has well-developed communication skills, is trained in Public speaking and has worked in customer relations. He has excellent PC skills and his own professional website and has been using Skype for several years. Adam preferred to hold the conversations with at least two EFL101 students on the line at a time, consciously helping to bring together students who didn't know each other.

For Adam, a young person with well-developed PC skills and Skype experience, it was natural to integrate the use of the Skype chat-box into the conversation experience. He says that he "*finds the chat a very good support tool*". While some CFs restrict the written 'chat' to a minimum because it is not "conversation" in the strict oral sense, Adam senses no conflict between the written 'chat' aspect and the oral conversation. Instead he attempts to exploit the 'hybrid' nature of the discourse by using the chat-box not only to overcome breaks

in the conversation caused by the students' weak internet connections, but also to consciously overcome cultural differences, find common ground and thereby develop 'intersubjectivity' (mutual engagement) between himself and the students and between the students themselves.

Adam describes how he used the written chat facility in three different ways: first, to make use of linguistic resources, second to bring into play social resources, third to encourage creativity.

He uses the chat mainly to support correction or resolve misunderstanding or negotiate meaning. If there is doubt about a word or even a whole question, he might write the word or question in the 'chat' at the same time as he says it. For example, when a student misunderstood the difference between "*rarely*" and "*really*", he wrote the word "*rarely*" in the chat and explained its meaning. He will often write words in the 'chat' if they seem unfamiliar for the students. In fact he uses the chat much as a teacher might use a blackboard, or more appropriately, a whiteboard.

Second, Adam uses the chat to help create friendships and "*break the ice*": He provides links to his personal photos because he says the students "*want to know about our lives*" (ie. the CFs' lives), therefore he says "*it is important to personalize the relationship*". Once Adam knows which field of study his students have, as well as their main interests and hobbies, he will try to find and send the student relevant internet links, including information or links about what is happening in Australia or Norway (Adam's adopted homeland) relating to the students' fields of interest.

Third, Adam has used the 'chat' to bring variety and creativity to the conversations. He describes how he played a game with the students to illustrate the difference between "*chat English*" and the kind of formal English, which the students need to produce in their academic written assignments. As examples he used the abbreviated forms "*u*" (you), "*2*" (to), "*coz*" (because) and "*wanna*" (want to). In this way he raised the students' awareness of this important issue.

Partly through his facility with the use of the chat, and also through his naturally open personality, Adam seems to maintain his students' attention and encourage them to 'open up'. In this way, he draws closer to them and can engage with them in other more creative activities. He says he prefers "*creative*" conversation assignments, explaining that students best learn language when they have to "*think on their feet*". He gives as an example the only EFL101 assignment which asked students to use specific vocabulary words in relation to a topic. He got his students to use the new words, deliberately "*getting them to make mistakes so they learn*" (!) ... "*because often your greatest learning is when you make a mistake*". Adam's sense of fun and the importance he attaches to humour in learning, combined with sensitivity allows him to do things others might avoid. "*Exercises in 'tripping people up a bit' can help them to learn*".... he adds.

When discussing possible types of conversation assignment, Adam asserts that "*true learning would happen if they (the CFs) had to ask questions on the spot*" (rather than use the pre-prepared questions in the present conversation assignments). However, he also acknowledges that students don't always feel "comfortable" entering "*unknown territory*", that they "*want to feel quite safe*" and that they "*want to get it right*". Therefore, despite his conviction of the "ideal" of students having to "*think on their feet*", Adam admits that he usually toes a pragmatic line, "*sticking to the questions*", because he "*doesn't want to stress the students out*".

## Masoud

Masoud was just over 50 years old when this interview was conducted. Born of Iranian parents, he came to England as a youth. He worked as a school teacher for many years, though not generally as an English teacher, so he had a great deal of experience in managing classrooms. Masoud worked for several years with students with special learning difficulties and developed an extraordinary ability to listen beyond words. He was very comfortable teaching conversation over Skype.

Like Adam, Masoud always tried to talk with two or more students at a time, emphasizing the importance of encouraging a group dynamic. His personal interests included singing and playing guitar, both of which he introduced during the conversations. Masoud had a very deep understanding of how to develop the conversations in order to engage the students and ensure meaningful interaction. Though he knew Persian, Masoud deliberately did not use it in the conversations.

Masoud repeatedly emphasized the "*paramount importance of building good relationships with the students*". He felt that the conversations were worthwhile "*as long as the students feel empowered and elated*". This conscious emphasis on "*empowering*" students, combined with Masoud's pedagogical knowledge, skills and experience seemed to allow him to find means by which to cross the 'switch-over' point, which Van Lier identifies as the critical move from IRF mode to more open learner discourse (in Candlin and Mercer (Ed.), 2001).

With reference to the general findings and the role of the conversation assignment questions in shaping the interactive pattern of the conversation, Masoud insisted that the initial questions need to be used "*flexibly*", not "*rigidly*". When he first started doing the conversations, he says that students would come to the conversations with prepared written answers which they would read from. Since Masoud felt that this was not appropriate to "*conversation mode*", he stopped giving the assignment questions to the students in their original written form. Instead, he introduced the conversation with a "*kind of preamble*" or general "*chit-chat*" focusing around the topic to be discussed, gradually "*easing*" the students into the conversation. He then rephrased the original questions, forming new questions which "*go off at tangents and angles*" to the original assignment questions. Masoud says that the result is that the students do not prepare their answers as much as before, but that they do still think about them because they know that they will be expected to contribute to the discourse without necessarily answering the original questions.

As an experienced teacher, he recognizes the importance of the CF thinking about the topic in advance in order to be able to "*keep the conversation going*". He suggests two possible approaches to a topic, either going from the whole to the parts or from the parts to the whole. He says that he prefers the former approach "*in conjunction with a personal experiential level, going to deeper layers*". For example, in the conversation about transport in EFL101 (see appendix E), he started by asking the students about the different types of transport they used, followed by more probing analytical questions.

Masoud spent a lot of time assisting weaker students. He explained that it is important that students are not asked in an "*intimidating*" fashion, but rather in conversation mode. He emphasized that the CF needs to "*walk*" with the students at the level they are at. Thus, weaker students need to be given more 'closed' questions, "*including yes and no*" questions, to build their confidence, while "*the range of questions can gradually be expanded*".

## DISCUSSION

Moving on from the individual styles represented by Masoud and Adam, the findings as related to the research questions can be summarized as follows: The design of the conversation assignments sets the agenda for the conversations. The question and answer format and the level of abstraction of the different topics affect the progression of the conversations and the patterns of interaction which are also influenced by the number of student participants (one-to-one or small group). Finally, particularly successful CFs use ingenuity, pedagogical experience, technical skills and perseverance to try to overcome technical and linguistic obstacles.

The following discussion addresses the challenges of providing the weaker EFL101 students with appropriately-designed conversation assignments, the need to change some of the topics and tasks for the EFL102 conversations, and the implications of the study for audio conferencing in other online contexts.

### *The challenge of task design for weaker students using audio conferencing*

Rosell-Aguilar (2005, p.8) points out that beginning foreign language learners "*require a larger number of stimuli and more structured activities to extract the little language they can produce*". This was a particular challenge for the two EFL101 CFs who attempted to converse one-to-one with weaker students. These students were not able to put together simple sentences without substantial support. Rosell-Aguilar (ibid.) further suggests that socio-cultural factors "*may not affect the co-construction of the activity as much as has been argued*".

The Institute had hoped that the unique sociocultural factors in the Institute conversation situation, consisting of the presence of highly-motivated volunteer native speakers and eager students, might be sufficient to override the obstacles for CFs attempting to communicate with students with low oral proficiency. However, the interviews left no doubt that the two EFL101 CFs who tried to talk with weaker students one-to-one were unable to move beyond simple close-ended questions which their students could only give very short answers to, and sometimes could not understand at all. Furthermore, these two CFs were not proficient with Skype and did not make significant use of the course site messaging system between conversations, so they were unable to make use of the online affordances. Their conversations sessions with weak students and frequently broken internet connections seem to have been very demanding for all the participants.

On the other hand, the small groups of EFL101 students with whom Masoud and Adam facilitated relatively successful conversations with, were also weaker lower-intermediate students. It appears that Adam and Masoud succeeded because, as interaction progressed, their approaches generated contingency as they were able to provide new challenging input at appropriate levels relative to their students' ZPDs. One of the keys which seems to have unlocked these students communicative abilities, encouraging them to take risks and make mistakes appears to have been the social stimuli and support which the other students in their pairs or small groups provided, in combination with Masoud's pedagogical

experience and Adam's skilful use of the online affordances. In other words, these CFs seem to have collaborated with their students to genuinely co-construct their conversations.

### ***Bypassing technical obstacles: two alternatives to the present task design for weaker students***

One of the most difficult challenges which has arisen as a result of the findings in the Institute context, is how to develop and improve conversational tasks with weaker students who sometimes have difficulty understanding questions and can usually only give short answers.

One possibility is to break with the policy of not expecting students to bring printed material with them to the conversations. Those students with better connections can switch screen, from the Skype screen to a file where they have copied simple preparatory material from the course site, while students with poorer connections would need to print out the task materials and bring them to the conversations. Tasks could then be designed by for example using simple drawings, pictures or picture stories together with common words and expressions, and students could converse with these in front of them. These would provide an extra stimuli which CFs could exploit in the form of questioning and prompts possibly linked to simple tasks like "fill in the blank", or asking students to create sentences or short narratives, with the CFs providing extra lexical items or correction through a combination of written chat and conversation. This could provide an alternative by slowly building weaker students' oral fluency.

A second possibility is to provide weaker students with simplified story books with listening CD which are cheap and available in Iran. Practising listening and reading could provide the preparation for the conversations for weaker students which might then consist of CFs asking questions about what the students had listened to, with a progression of increasingly difficult questions starting with closed questions testing comprehension and then moving to more open-ended discussion of content. The questions could also be sent to students in advance of the conversations and they could make preparatory notes, print out the questions or copy them to a simple file which they could view while the conversation progressed.

### ***The need to change the topics and tasks for some of the EFL102 assignments.***

The overall impression left by the interviews with the CFs on EFL102, was that the subject matter of the conversation assignments was sometimes too abstract and too far removed from students' 'day to day' reality. In practice, this meant that the level of language required for discussion of some subjects was beyond the ZPD level at which students could be assisted towards self-regulation. Therefore, for some students and CFs, these tasks will have progressed "without processing" (O'Dowd & Waire 2009, p.176), either because the input was too challenging or because the material was not sufficiently interesting for the students to motivate continued discussion on the topic.

The varied responses of the EFL102 CFs showed that the skill and flexibility of the CFs in staying 'on topic' or moving to other subjects was a crucial factor in maintaining students' motivation. On some topics, the spiritually orientated subject matter seemed to act as a significant motivational factor for some CFs and students, sourcing their common faith and causing them to make extra efforts to communicate their opinions on subjects which touched them deeply, despite the apparent inaccessibility of some of the language for these topics. This means that even though certain conversations do appear to successfully tap into the

Institute participants' socioculturally-determined goals and orientation, there still seems to be a need to introduce more learner-centered topics and a greater variety of tasks on EFL102. The choice of new topics should reflect students' interests and everyday lives rather than being tied to the EFL102 course sub-topics. There are normally two conversations on each module, so one of these could still be tied to the module sub-topic while the other conversation task on the module would no longer need to be connected to the course material.

Different tasks to combine with or replace some of the present topic-based discussions could include simple role plays or narrative retelling, student presentations, debates or language games using lexical items including idioms which often promote humour as they cross cultures.

### ***Fs' technical skills and the exploitation of online affordances***

The interviews showed that the CFs' approaches to the conversations are based on their personal skills and personalities. However, whatever the CFs' personal backgrounds may be, their chances of having successful conversations will be improved if they develop their computer skills and take advantage of online affordances.

For example, the EFL101 CF Adam and another technically proficient EFL102 CF (CF4) were able to use the online environment to connect physical and cognitive links and threads, thereby facilitating "*contingent*" talk, where "*utterances are constructed on the spot*" (Van Lier, p.99, in Candlin & Mercer, 2001). As Adam pointed out: "a true conversation is sort of spontaneous".

Adam and the particularly computer literate CF understood that what happens before and after conversations, can be as important as what happens in the conversations themselves. In other words, by communicating regularly with students between conversations and providing them with messages of support as well as stimuli in the form of materials and internet links which matched their interests, these CFs were able to provide extra stimuli which allowed and promoted the unexpected and spontaneous in their conversations.

### ***CFs' pedagogical skills and the promotion of student activity and initiative***

Next, the interview with Masoud showed how it is possible for CFs to progress beyond a rigid IRF mode, even with weak students. By encouraging students to listen to each other he consciously "*avoided directing the conversation all the time*", rather seeking "*a circular conversation*", and trying to "*get the students to accept him as a participant on a level with them*". Masoud sought the role of moderator in a truly symmetrical dialogue. In this way he said that he did not have to "*interfere*" as the conversation progressed. This sometimes led to the students "*babbling away*" (in English). At this stage, Masoud explained that he sometimes "*couldn't stop them*".

Masoud's descriptions are signs of the 'flow' which Csikszentmihalyi (2008) writes about in his book about optimal psychological experiences. This is perhaps the hallmark and ultimate sign of success for any CF, if one accepts the crucial role of student orientation, engagement and participation as pre-conditions for learning. In this way, Masoud showed what was possible. As he remarked, it is not "*his*" conversation, "*it's the students'.....or rather it's a partnership*". These words illustrate the fundamental humility which underlies Masoud's approach, but beyond that humility is an attention to detail in planning which other CFs would do well to emulate.

Even though the CF's role is as a facilitator and not a formal teacher, as in teaching, good facilitation requires thorough preparation. This means that the CFs need to consider the topic or assignment in advance, thinking about possible directions the conversation could take, and jotting down notes or possible questions. With experience, such planning and mental reconnaissance can stimulate the development of more spontaneous interaction once conversations are underway.

Of further interest in understanding the practical steps Masoud took to promote symmetry and *"true dialogue"*, was his attitude towards silences. Whereas one of the other CFs stated that *"the silences had her tearing her hair out"*, Masoud stated that he was *"not afraid of silences though some may be embarrassed"*. He reasoned that silences are normal in most conversations allowing people time to think. So if there is a *"long extended silence"* it would not necessarily be Masoud who broke it. He maintained that there is no need to *"push"* the conversation, *"it will take its own turns"*. This is interesting because it seems to be in stark contrast to the proposition that language 'negotiation' should be as frequent as possible in order to maximize learning opportunities. In reality, creating learning opportunities cannot be induced in such a mechanical way.

The interviews indicate that when CFs *"walk"* with their students at whatever level they are at, framing alternatively open or closed questions as appropriate while maintaining support and scaffolding, only gradually widening the frame as students develop confidence, signs of self-regulation and fluency will start to appear.

#### ***The socio-affective foundation for the conversations:***

To sum up, in the majority of cases, these online conversations are the EFL101 student's first meetings with a native speaker. The fragility and vulnerability of these first meetings with CFs with different national and cultural backgrounds can be compounded by technical difficulties and background expectations framed through students' experiences in an authoritarian education system. This makes some students very shy and nervous. Above all, they need to be constantly encouraged.

Under these circumstances, patience, perseverance, humility, empathy, flexibility, a good sense of humour and a range of other personal qualities are required from the CFs in order to nurture students to overcome initial shyness and feel relaxed enough to participate fully. Trust and confidence is the key, which seems to unlock the students' willingness to take chances, to activate previously passive lexical capacity and to thereby potentially expand the zones of proximal development to be mediated.

According to the interviews, the CFs who appeared to be most successful all seemed to place considerable emphasis on, where possible, bringing students together socially and assisting them in getting to know one another. The Institute students are generally very grateful for the opportunities to get to know other students in this way since one of the major problems they are facing is social isolation. The importance of the persistence of the CFs in facilitating such social interaction by overcoming technical obstacles can hardly be overestimated.

## CONCLUSION

### *Implications for foreign language teaching and further research*

In answer to the first research question, it is clear that while the most proficient CFs manage well with the present topic-based questions, there is a need to introduce new tasks for weaker students though this implies that students will need to bring printed resource materials with them to the online conversations. For the intermediate students who already possess sufficient linguistic resources to interact more easily, increased task variety and more student-centered topics can offer relief for struggling CFs and students.

In answer to the second research question, the interview findings have provided good indications of the kind of technical and pedagogical skills which can promote language learning in the Institute environment. Changes and improvements in the task designs indicated above should make it easier for less pedagogically experienced CFs to interact with students at the appropriate level for learning.

In Norway, as in the rest of the world, there is increasing use of both audio and audiographic conferencing to promote oral proficiency for foreign language learners. This trend is likely to continue, a development which Norwegian language teachers will need to exploit to the full. The present study underlines the importance of carefully designing tasks appropriate to the specific sociocultural context and in relation to the technical affordances.

This means that in an audio conferencing environment, if learners (and teachers) can be encouraged to interact socially and collaborate, the resultant linguistic stimuli drawn from the participants' inner resources may be used to partially compensate for a lack of outer sensory stimuli.

Though the Institute context is unique, the importance of identifying and harnessing learners' motivations according to the sociocultural circumstances is common to all online learning contexts. Similarly, the consciously planned development of learners' and teachers' technical proficiency and support thereof is a key factor.

Even though this study has concentrated on the promotion of fluency without any specific focus on language form, accuracy or complexity, there is little doubt that most CFs, in their capacity of being well-educated native speakers, do have the capacity to teach specific lexical items and simple grammar. Bilingual CFs also potentially possess special knowledge concerning the differences between English and Persian which they may usefully be able to impart to students. Therefore, important questions for further research on the Institute EFL programme concern the way and extent to which CFs can or should function as language teachers and to what extent such a role might conflict with or complement that of CF. These issues will form the research questions for the second part of this study and have relevance to other language teaching institutions where native speakers participate in audio exchanges. Examples would be in tandem or tridem telecollaborative exchanges which are growing in popularity worldwide.

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## APPENDICES

**Appendix A:** Screenshots of Skype and Elluminate

**Appendix B:** Overview of BIHE EFL101 and EFL102 course themes and sub-topics

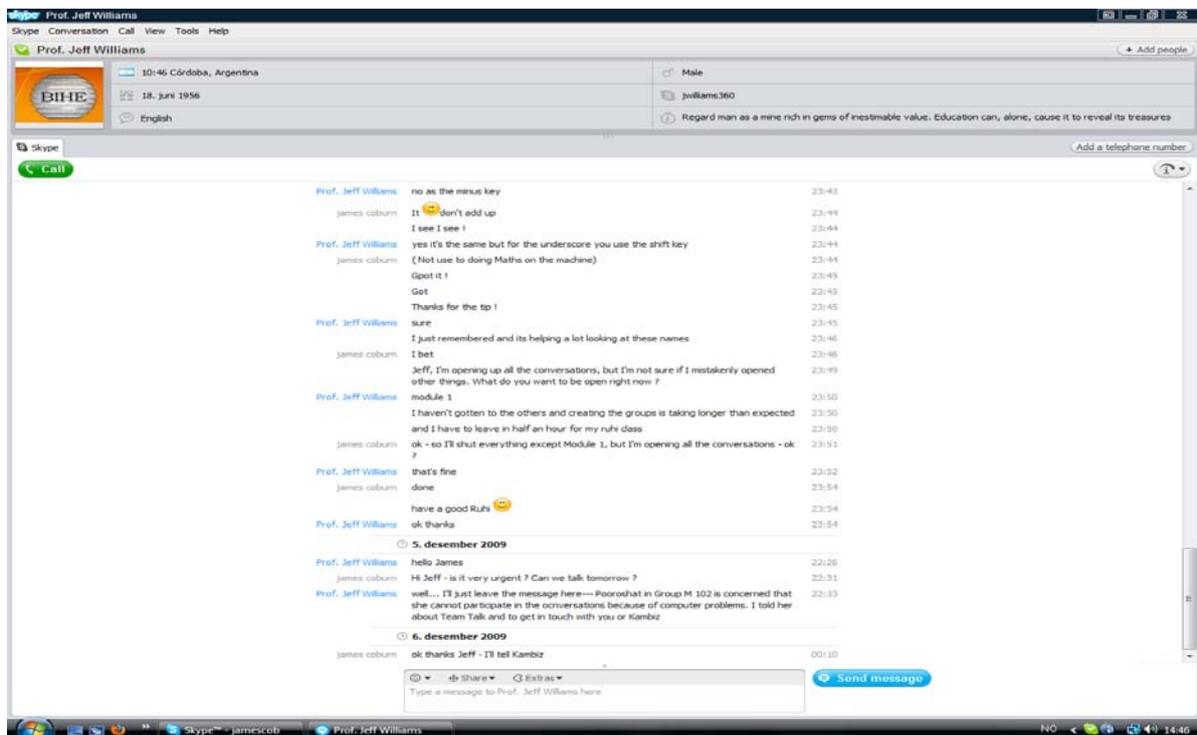
**Appendix C:** Excerpts from the CF Training document

**Appendix D:** Initial questions for the semi-structured interviews

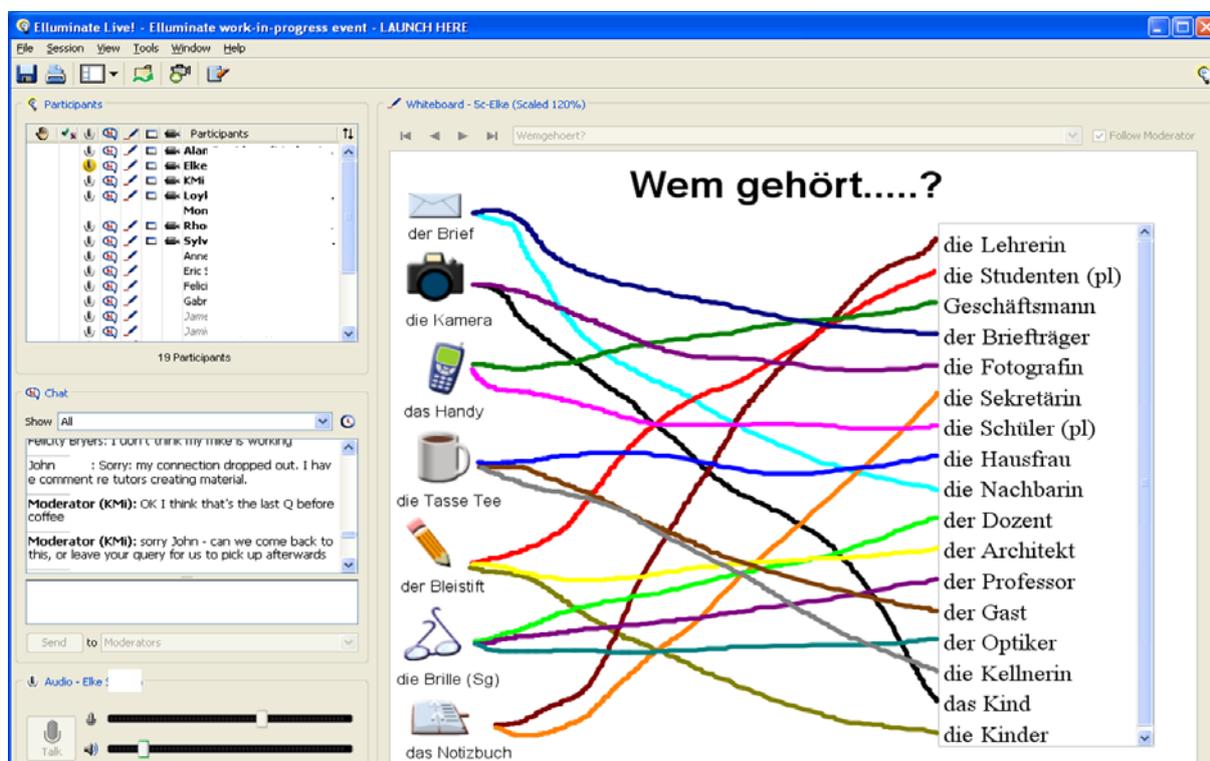
**Appendix E:** Examples of conversation assignment questions

### Appendix A

**Screenshot of Skype:** used for simple audio conferencing with text chat



**Screenshot of Elluminate:** used for audiographic conferencing with whiteboard, symbol manipulation tools, audio conferencing and text chat. Sample from Open University German course.



## Appendix B:

### Overview of BIHE EFL 101 and EFL102 courses and sub-topics

course	theme	modules	content
EFL101	New university student	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Getting to Know You</li> <li>2. Academic Achievement</li> <li>3. Health</li> <li>4. Traveling</li> <li>5. Global Challenges</li> <li>6. The Arts</li> </ol>	Practical
EFL102	Peace Message	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is Peace Possible ?</li> <li>2. The Human Spirit</li> <li>3. Moral Character</li> <li>4. Human Potential</li> <li>5. Material-Spiritual balance</li> <li>6. Unity in Diversity</li> </ol>	Moral-ethical

## **Appendix C:**

### **Excerpts from the CF Training document:**

- The CF will probably find it helpful to make notes and keep brief records of the conversations and the students' level of participation.
- The CFs should try to avoid talking to the students “one to one” because the interaction between students is very important.
- Ideally there should be three or even four students together, but two students at a time is also acceptable.
- The CF should become friends with the students. There should be mutual respect.

### **Encouraging active participation**

- Normally, the more the students talk the better it is.... It is natural that some students will talk more than others. If however, the CF notices that some students are silent or talk very little, she or he will need to try to encourage those students to say more. The CF should regularly acknowledge and encourage all the students' contributions. For weak students, the CF may need to prepare a range of very simple questions which the students can give short answers to. Gradually the range of questions can be widened as the weak student's confidence increases.

### ***Regarding correction:***

1. It is best to avoid correcting too much. As long as it is possible to understand what is said, the conversation should be allowed to flow. When using Skype, some corrections can be discreetly indicated using the written “chat” facility.... The key here is sensitivity to the individual student: some welcome correction, for others, it may easily break down their self-confidence.

## **Appendix D:**

### **Initial questions for the semi-structured interviews:**

1. How did you use the present conversation assignments?
2. How did the conversations develop?
3. What happened when students made mistakes, understanding broke down or new language

was introduced?

4 What do you think about the present conversation assignments?

5 What extra input did you provide in addition to the conversation assignments?

6. How did you use the skype chat?

## **Appendix E**

### **Examples of conversation assignment questions:**

An EFL101 Conversation Assignment

Travelling (from Module 4)

1. What means of transportation do you use when travelling in your country?
2. Which means of transportation is the safest in your country? Why?
3. Tell your tutor and classmates about one of your trips by train or plane.
4. What are the benefits of travelling by car?
5. What can be done to improve the safety of car travel between towns and cities?
6. How can you help a foreign visitor see the various parts of your country?

An EFL102 Conversation Assignment

Virtues (from Module 3)

- 1 Which qualities or virtues do you think are the most important?
2. Which qualities or virtues are the easiest to have or the most difficult to develop?
- 3 Are there qualities that you feel you were born with and have naturally?
- 4 Is there a quality that you have developed in the past? How did you do that?
- 5 What is a quality you need to develop? How do you think you can do it?

## **ARTICLE 2**

## STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE LEARNING THROUGH CONVERSATIONS WITH NATIVE SPEAKERS

James Coburn, University of Oslo

*This article presents part of an action research study focusing on the teaching of English conversation using Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) in a challenging online context. It examines undergraduate language students' perspectives of the different ways in which native speaker conversation facilitators (CFs) assist them in learning English during regular online conversations. Content analysis of a student survey is presented, showing that CFs enhance learning through affective support, flexibility and skill in questioning and topic variation, and through the effective use of written chat as a support tool. Interpretation of student responses reveals contradictions in the design of conversation assignment preparations resulting in some conversations being conducted in an overly rigid IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) mode, hindering opportunities for the development of fluency, and leading some students to expect a more explicit focus on accuracy than CFs are advised to provide. The subsequent need for changes in the design of conversation assignments and the advice given to CFs regarding the provision of corrective feedback are discussed in relation to current SLA theory. Finally, some implications for the design and provision of synchronous oral interaction in other distance language learning environments are outlined.*

### INTRODUCTION

The present article is part of an action research study focusing on how undergraduate students living in Iran who are denied access to higher education in their own country, learn English through Skype conversations enabled by computer mediated communication (CMC). The students attend the Bahai Institute for Higher Education (BIHE – hereafter referred to as the Institute, see [www.bihe.org](http://www.bihe.org)). The Institute has developed a series of fully online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses. On three of these courses aimed at the lower, medium and upper intermediate levels, Institute students converse regularly with native-speaking conversation facilitators (CFs) located in different parts of the world. While the first stage of this research study elicited views from CFs (Coburn 2010), this second stage investigates the conversations from the perspectives of the Iranian students. A student survey reveals students' perceptions of the different ways CFs assist them in learning English through conversations based on topic-based assignments involving written preparations. While the Institute advises CFs to concentrate their main efforts on promoting fluency in the conversations, the present study examines students' survey responses in order to be able to assess whether there may be a need to focus more explicit attention on assisting students to develop greater accuracy.

## **Developing oral proficiency through a combination of voice and written chat**

The following observations from Cunningham, Fägersten and Holmsten (2010, p. 12) illustrate the relevance of the current research for foreign language teaching through distance learning (DL):

Many universities have moved into the field of net-based teaching. But not all universities are willing to undertake language teaching online. One reason for this may be that they view net-based teaching as a primarily text-based activity. In such cases, net-based teaching is simply a 21st-century version of correspondence classes. This is clearly not suitable for modern language learning and teaching, nor indeed, arguably, for any modern learning activities. A modern communicative approach to language learning requires both synchronous channels and voice, although text-based and asynchronous communication channels are also necessary to develop written proficiency and to enable students to develop proficiency in less spontaneous forms of communication.

Though there is a paucity of large-scale longer term studies investigating the effectiveness of voice and written chat on the development of oral proficiency, a recent and potentially ground-breaking study by Blake, Wilson, Cetto and Pardo-Ballester (2008, pp. 123-124) involving more than three hundred first year students learning Spanish at the University of California showed that DL and hybrid students " *approximate oral proficiency outcomes similar to those of first-year students working in traditional classrooms*". In this study, the DL learners were required to interact online on a weekly basis with their language tutors in small groups using both text and voice chat. The students were also required to talk with their peers in the same way as often as possible. The present study is similar in that it is large-scale and based on longer term experiences of students who have been engaged in regular structured online oral interaction using simultaneous voice and written chat. However, in contrast to the study by Blake et al., native speakers rather than language tutors play the role of language expert, and the research investigates qualitative aspects of the development of oral proficiency.

In isolated use, there are significant differences between the two synchronous CMC genres, voice chat and written chat. In the former, there is normally only one dialogue whereas text chat may feature two or more simultaneous dialogues. Where voice chat is being used as the main pedagogical focus, the written chat can be an invaluable tool to assist understanding and correction, but undercurrents of written chat may also cause distraction. The advantage of voice chat is the presence of the human voice, allowing explicit hesitations and fillers such that partners can support one another using empathic utterances and pragmatic markers. This is not possible in the same way in text chat alone. Thus while text chat may offer an "*optimal learning environment in terms of the possibility of learners' noticing of errors, negotiations and modified output*" (Felix, 2004, p. 2), the social cues and voice presence which the audio genre allows can be a positive affective motivation for some learners (Thatcher, 2005, cited in Kern, 2006, p. 8).

Since the lack of physical presence has been linked to anxiety among some language learners (Felix 2004; Arcos, Coleman & Hampel 2009), a focus on the maintenance of mutual engagement (intersubjectivity) is of primary importance in audio conferencing. This corresponds with a general need to prioritize meaning before form, especially for weaker learners since they may not be capable of focusing on both communication and accuracy simultaneously. This has implications for the kind of correction and feedback which language "experts" should be instructed to give. Felix (2004, p. 5) points out the importance of both listening to learners' opinions and taking into account the particular context of learning when deciding the emphasis which should be given to correction relative to other phenomena:

Finding the right balance between allowing students to make errors in a safe and unthreatening setting and attending to reducing these errors has been the subject of much debate (Shield & Hewer, 1999, Felix, 2002; Shield & Hassan, 2003; Hauck & Hampel, 2004). In each learning event it is important to establish the goal to be achieved, and participating students should ideally participate in the negotiation of this (...) constant corrections of grammar or pronunciation (...) seriously interrupt communication and fluency.

In other words the type of corrective feedback offered to learners and the degree and focus on accuracy (or complexity) relative to fluency must depend on the characteristics of the specific learning context.

### **Theoretical approach**

The present study adopts a sociocultural approach, where learning is understood to be mediated in the zone of proximate development, and where learner agency, degree of participation, and critical features of the situated learning context are seen as particularly important factors influencing learning outcomes. Nonetheless, there is reference to concepts (e.g. focus on form) most commonly used in cognitive SLA studies investigating different types of corrective feedback in the classroom (Sheen 2004; Lyster 2005) or through text-based CMC (see Ortega 2009 for an overview). This is based on an understanding that *"aspects of what is usually labelled cognition may be usefully understood in part as sociocultural practices"* (Thorne, 2000, p. 221 in Lantolf (Ed.)). Furthermore, there is acceptance of O'Rourke's argument (2005, p. 435) that:

Just as it can be worthwhile to investigate the situated action of learners in the absence of focused consideration of environmental properties, so, too, it can be fruitful to investigate the influence of sociocultural tools and environment without close attention to, for example, construction of learner roles. Both enterprises are forms of legitimate reductionism.

For the purpose of the present action research study, a certain reductionism is indeed inevitable if research results are to provide the pragmatic means for useful pedagogical intervention.

## **Critical features of the Institute's online learning context**

The most critical feature in the Institute online conversations is the relative fragility of the internet connections. When connections are poor, there is a natural tendency to focus most attention on communicating meaning. The second feature of the Institute learning environment leading to a primary focus on meaning and fluency is the result of the Institute course design and subsequent use of human resources. Zourou (2008, p. 665) has pointed out the need for attention to "*whole course delivery*" in order to make the results of research on only one part of a course meaningful. This is particularly true in the Institute context since the conversations are only one part of the EFL courses which aim to teach English for academic purposes (EAP) in order to prepare students for further online academic study. The main part of the Institute EFL courses comprises written assignments based on material from specially created CDs. Due to time and resource constraints, there is a division so that qualified EFL teachers correct and grade the students' written assignments while native speaker CFs who are not qualified EFL teachers, conduct the conversations. The Institute written assignments consequently tend to have a greater focus on form, accuracy and correction, while the conversations are primarily aimed at developing fluency. The third factor pushing the Institute conversations towards an emphasis on fluency rather than accuracy is the design of the conversation assignments. Coburn (2010) discussed the reasons for the choice of topic-based as opposed to task-based conversation assignments. In brief, the rationale was based on practical and technical grounds (the fragile CMC environment), but also on the need for authenticity and the wish to fully exploit the skills offered by the native-speaking CFs.

## **Aims of the study**

One of the main aims of the present study was to investigate to what extent the Institute's primary emphasis on the promotion of fluency rather than accuracy accorded with students' wishes, since significant differences between guidance for CFs' and students' expectations in this respect might have negative effects on the learning environment. A second important aim was to investigate to what extent students' perspectives on learning through online conversations corroborated the results of the previous stage in the study (Coburn, 2010) which investigated the learning environment from the point of view of eight CFs. In order to elicit information which could shed light on these issues, the Institute conducted a broad student survey with the aim of answering the following research questions:

- *What types of CF assistance do students view as most important for learning?*
- *In what ways do students think CFs could better assist them?*

## **METHOD**

The student survey included two open questions directly related to the research questions above.

1. What are the most useful ways your Conversation facilitator helps you to learn English?
2. What could your Conversation facilitator do better to help you with learning English?

The analysis of students' responses to these open questions forms the main research material which is complemented by descriptive statistical data from responses to a number of closed questions in the survey (see Appendix A).

### **Procedure and sample**

The open questions were used to give students the opportunity to respond as freely as possible without being guided by the researcher-practitioner's concerns. The closed questions were used to give the essentially qualitative analysis of the research results additional perspective and validity. The survey was administered in the students' mother tongue (Persian). The responses were carefully translated. There were between 160-170 voluntary responses from a total of approximately 500 registered students. Content analysis (see Dörnyei, 2007, p. 243), was used to analyse and categorize students' responses to the two open survey questions. Five main categories emerged: 1. *CFs' use of corrective feedback*. 2. *CFs' conversation facilitation process skills*. 3. *CF's language facilitation skills*. 4. *CFs' affective support*. 5. *CFs' provision of resources*. These categories were used for both open questions. Approximately 20% of the responses to the second open survey question did not fit into any of the five main categories, and are not included in the results because they relate to suggestions for changes in the Institution's organizational constraints rather than in the CFs' actions. An example would be increasing the number and length of conversations, which is beyond the scope of the present study.

### **Validity**

The student survey was anonymous. The methodological triangulation in the study as a whole is within the qualitative tradition (Richards, 2003; Dörnyei, 2007), supplemented by descriptive quantitative data. Validity is safeguarded through the different perspectives provided by the students' survey responses, the results of earlier CF interviews (Coburn, 2010), the researcher-practitioner's access to recordings of conversations, large amounts of informal e-mails, course site comments, and informal conversations with students and CFs. The informed opinions of other Institute EFL faculty provided further peer checks.

### **Limitations of the study**

Due to technical limitations, students' survey responses were not divided according to which of the three EFL courses they were taking. It was therefore not possible to identify different patterns in students' responses relative to the individual courses.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the results for the first open question in which students were asked to write about the most important ways in which they perceived their CFs help them with language learning.

*What are the most useful ways your conversation facilitator helps you to learn English?*

<b>CATEGORIES and SUB-CATEGORIES of CF ASSISTANCE</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
1. <b>CF's use of corrective feedback:</b> collaborative negotiated correction, explicit or implicit correction, use of chat.	53
2. <b>CF's conversation process skills:</b> question variation, topic flexibility, equal partnership, good organization.	49
3. <b>CF's affective support:</b> encouragement, patience and empathy.	37
4. <b>CF's language facilitation skills:</b> ability to simplify, use slow, clear speech adapted to students' language levels, introduce and explain new words, supportive use of written chat.	28
5. <b>CF's provision of resources:</b> links and language resources.	5

Table 1: Students responses to first open survey question categorized through content analysis

The side headings in Table 1 describe the categories and sub-categories with the number of responses indicated on the right side of the table. It is important to reiterate that the categorization is necessarily reductionistic, since some student responses overlapped the different categories and were therefore placed in the category to which the student appeared to assign most emphasis. Category 1 reflects students' appreciation of CFs' assistance with correction (linked to accuracy). Categories 2 and 4 are more closely linked to CFs' abilities to promote more flowing conversation (fluency). The following interpretive summaries, illustrated by student responses, present in more detail the ways in which the students perceive that CFs assist their learning during the online conversations.

## **Students' appreciation of a focus on accuracy: CF's use of corrective feedback (Category 1)**

In this category it would seem that many CFs have found a good balance with regard to developing accuracy, allowing students to make mistakes, but correcting when necessary. Students appreciate this approach:

CF encourages me to speak even if I don't speak correctly.

CF uses mistakes only to make a teaching point.

Other responses suggest that the CFs' ways of correcting mistakes may be different, but can be equally effective. Thus while one student had a CF who "*corrected mistakes like a good friend*", another student asserted that the "*CF knows how to tell me when I have made a mistake and how to improve*", implying a more pedagogical approach. Some CFs and students appear to engage in communication which allow for the promotion of accuracy through the noticing and correction of errors and mistakes without unduly disturb the flow of conversation (fluency):

With the CF's guidance, I can identify and correct my mistakes while talking to the CF.

CF let's us talk to each other and corrects mistakes during conversations/discussions. I think this is very effective.

The importance of the thoroughness of CFs' explanation and exemplification is commented on in a number of responses, with the written chat facility often being used to support and reinforce correction. Students' perceptions of the benefits of explicit corrective feedback stand in contrast to the lack of mention of more implicit forms of feedback (i.e. recasting or reformulation). Only one single response explicitly indicated that the use of indirect correction was helpful.

CF does not highlight mistakes directly but uses correct forms in examples that alert us to our mistakes.

The lack of further mention of implicit feedback can plausibly be interpreted as a lack of awareness on the part of many students that CFs' recasts or reformulations of their utterances are intended as indirect forms of correction. However, as Loewen (2009) has pointed out, a misunderstanding of corrective intent does not necessarily imply that all such recasts and reformulations are wasted. This is because they can also often serve to clarify communication and prevent communication breakdown, which assists in the promotion of fluency. Although the promotion of fluency and accuracy can be seen as somewhat interdependent, the majority of student survey responses placed in the second and fourth categories in Table 1 appear to be primarily related to CFs' assistance in promoting fluency.

## **Focus on fluency: CFs' conversation process and language facilitation skills (Category 2, 4)**

While students have generally thought about the conversation topics in advance through their preparation of written answers to initial questions, survey responses indicate that CFs still need to work patiently and skilfully to promote interaction. This confirmed previous research (Coburn 2010) which showed that conversations often do not develop without persistent prompting, elicitation and reformulation of questions. Many survey responses indicated that the skill which students most appreciated in their CFs was precisely this, their ability to use varied questioning in relation to the initial assignment questions and use topic assignment questions flexibly. CFs do this by preparing alternative questions in advance, or by rephrasing the original questions on the spot:

CF dedicated a lot of time and asked many and varied questions.

CF asks extra questions that we have not prepared for in advance.

CF helps learning by asking questions about our situation and topics other than assignment questions.

CF found out that I didn't like preparing answers much and that I didn't rely on my posted answers. He asked me more questions if we had time and let me use my brain to come up with creative answers.

This variation and change from the original questions and topics acts as a kind of guarantee that the conversations do not get stuck in a mechanical routine in which students simply read up their prepared answers. It also means that CFs and students need to be attentive and be prepared for the unexpected. This sowing of the seeds of contingency (Van Lier, 1996), connecting up past and future utterances and helping to open up the dialogue, can lead to students needing CFs' assistance to communicate more spontaneous speech, or to overcome temporary non-comprehension as new language and meanings emerge. CFs who are able to consciously modify their language during such interaction to ensure comprehension, can more easily avoid frequent breakdowns, enabling them to depart from routine questions, beyond a simple IRF (Initiate- response- feedback) pattern. This may lead to the need for the CFs' timely introduction of new vocabulary as confirmed by students' responses:

Reminds us of more suitable words.

By using new words at the right time, the CF made learning faster and longer lasting.

As native speakers, CFs' facility with vocabulary is also useful through their ability to guess what students are trying to say when the students themselves cannot find the right word or phrase. Survey responses show that CFs often effectively (sometimes discretely), provide assistance to overcome communication breakdown through the use of the written chat:

CF helps by the use of the chat board for writing difficult words.

Typing new words and sentences on the chat board helps us.

The CFs' willingness to step out of the role of language "expert" and enter into conversation as an equal partner, on the students' terms, was a positive trait mentioned in several responses. This included the CFs who cooperated with students in finding and deciding new topics. A few students also praised their CFs for facilitating conversations so that they became more personal. Many survey responses clearly show the students greatly appreciate the support and encouragement which CFs provide. This is illustrated by student comments placed in the third category in Table 1.

### **CF's affective support for students (Category 3)**

Both CFs and students need a great deal of patience and persistence to deal with the generally slow and unreliable internet connections in the Institute CMC environment. CFs' abilities to make light of this burden and concentrate their attentions on communicating with their students was remarked on in several student responses. Despite the special circumstances which the Institute operates under, it is interesting to note that a relatively large number of student responses related to the importance of reducing anxiety which has been the subject of recent studies as mentioned above. The importance of the CFs' ability to put their students at ease in the fragile learning environment is shown in the following responses:

Speaks very gently and patiently. Above all we are good friends. The atmosphere is friendly so I don't feel embarrassed if when I make mistakes.

By establishing a sincere relationship, the CF made conversations easier.

The CF doesn't stress us that's why learning from him is interesting and generally stress free.

These comments round off the first part of the results. The second open question asked:

*What could your Conversation teacher do better to help you with learning English?*

The results are shown in Table 2.

<b>CATEGORY where STUDENTS think CFs could do better</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
1. <b>CF's use of corrective feedback:</b> wish for more explicit correction, highlighting of mistakes and written feedback.	37
2. <b>CF's conversation process facilitation skills:</b> wish for more topic variation, more variation in questioning and flexibility in relation to use of conversation assignments, better preparation.	35
3. <b>CF's language facilitation skills:</b> wish for improved ability to simplify, use slower, clearer speech, adapt to students' language levels, skilfully introduce and explain new language to overcome non-comprehension, associated use of written chat, bilingualism.	25
4. <b>CF's provision of input and resources:</b> wish for the introduction of new words and expressions, useful internet links.	16
5. <b>CF's affective support:</b> wish for more patience and warmth.	14

Table 2: Students responses to second open survey question categorized by content analysis

Just as with the results for the first open question, the highest number of responses emerged in the category of corrective feedback, but once again, this does not necessarily mean that in sum, more students are concerned with accuracy rather than fluency. Nonetheless, the relatively high number of students requesting more correction means that it is important to try to understand the thinking behind these responses. We therefore start by interpreting the data in this first category in Table 2:

**Students' wishes for a greater focus on accuracy (CF's use of corrective feedback):**

Though generally short, students' comments in this category clearly mark that they are looking for more direct explicit correction. Some are concerned that CFs allow too many mistakes to slip by without intervening:

CF should not ignore or be indifferent to mistakes.

An interesting feature of the responses in this category is that while some students use the word "correcting" (or derivatives), others use the word "highlighting" as in the following examples:

CF can help by highlighting our problems in conversation and written exercises.

CF should highlight mistakes in sentences and explain corrections.

In a survey of distant learners' attitudes to written correction, Hyland (2001, cited in Ros i Solé & Truman 2005, p.302) indicated that the use of the term "*highlighting*" may indicate a preference for a more collaborative approach to correction.

Students expressed a variety of opinions as to the timing of the feedback they thought would most benefit their learning: While one student wanted correction of the written conversation preparations to be given before the conversations so that he or she could make use of the written feedback in the conversation, other students were concerned that correction should be "*on the spot*" (during the conversations), and yet others asked for written corrections to be sent to them after the conversations. In contrast to the diversity of views concerning the optimal timing and manner of correctional feedback, there was agreement among a considerable number of students that Institute conversations can become less rigid and predictable. These views (category 2 in Table 1), represent some of the most important survey findings and are presented in the following overview.

### **Students' problems with lack of variation and spontaneity in conversations**

Some students request that CFs should avoid using the initial conversation assignment questions in their original forms (see Appendix B for examples of assignment questions).

CF should prepare questions in relation to conversation topics but don't ask assignment questions only.

Don't use the same questions as the assignment questions, students are already mentally prepared for these questions.

CFs should use questions from the questions.

These students appear to be frustrated by some CFs over-reliance on the original conversation assignment questions, leading to routinized or even mechanical exchanges and a lack of the dynamic and flow necessary to open up learning opportunities and promote increased fluency. However, as we will see in the discussion, these interaction patterns cannot necessarily be attributed to CFs' shortcomings and may well be a consequence of the conversation assignment design.

In addition to wishing for a more flexible approach to the original conversation assignment questions, students want to talk about other topics in addition to the set topics (which are generally related to the written EFL course topics). Clearly, some students felt that their CFs had not met this need adequately.

CF should introduce more interesting topics.

CF should not limit conversations to assignment topics, should expand the discussion/debate.

CF should talk with students about something new not just course material. For example how to study more efficiently or live happily.

This theme of the need for more topic variation and freer conversation was clearly expressed in other survey responses:

Conversations should be spontaneous. Spontaneity will help our learning more.

Need new approaches so conversation sessions are not repetitive and boring like a question and answer session.

Need creative discussions and debates without giving the questions in advance.

As indicated, these comments are not only relevant to CFs' skills and practices; they raise concerns about the design of the Institute conversations.

Finally, there were also a smaller number of students who experienced basic problems in understanding their CFs. These responses were grouped under the third category in Table 2 (CFs' language facilitation skills). They indicated that some CFs need to learn to simplify and slow down their speech to assist student comprehension in order to be able to mediate learning. One explanation for these problems is some CFs' lack of pedagogical training and experience, or lack of proficiency in using the written chat while talking or listening. Finally, in category 4, a number of students made suggestions that new words and expressions should be systematically introduced in conversations, while others asked for the provision of extra resources such as internet links, files or books. These requests for added linguistic input or stimulation complete the qualitative analysis of the survey results for the open questions.

As indicated above, in addition to the two open questions, the student survey also included some closed questions, the answers to which were quantified automatically (See Appendix A). A brief summary of students' responses to the closed questions is provided below in order to put the results of the responses to the open questions in better perspective and thereby gain a clearer sense of how urgent students' suggestions for improvements may be.

While 51% of students thought that their CF was "very helpful" and 7% "helpful", 31% categorized their CF as "a little helpful" and 4% as unhelpful (Appendix A, question 7). Next, 55% of students indicating that they "liked the conversations very much" and "learned a lot", while 31% found them a "useful experience" (question 4). These figures show that while a majority of students clearly enjoy the conversations and feel that they are learning from them, there is a significant minority who feel that there is considerable room for improvement. Students are in general only moderately enthusiastic about the topics for the conversation assignments (question 5), and half the students are not sure that doing conversation preparations necessarily helps them to learn more during conversations (question 3). These results again indicate that there may be just as much need for changes and improvements in the design of the conversation assignments as there is for improvement in CFs' skills. Before moving on to discuss these key issues, a summary of the results to the open questions is provided, answering the two research questions:

- *What types of CF assistance do students view as most important for learning?*
- *In what ways do students think CFs could better assist them?*

## **SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION**

The two research questions sought to investigate students' views of how CFs assist their learning, and how this assistance could be improved. The results show that students greatly appreciate the CFs' encouragement, patience and generally supportive manner. They perceive that the CFs' use of variation in questioning and willingness to discuss a wide range of topics creates conditions for the development of interaction patterns conducive to learning. Further, CFs assist learning through the introduction, exemplification and explanation of new words and meanings, and through the sensitive correction of students' mistakes or errors, including those occurring in pronunciation and in written conversation preparations. The repair of form and meaning facilitated by CFs is often supported by the use of the written chat. A relatively high number of students thought their CFs could better assist them by being more flexible with the conversation assignment questions and by initiating or allowing the introduction of a greater variety of topics, including more student-centred topics, so that conversations do not become too routine and predictable. Some students suggest that more regular introduction of new words or expressions in conversations would contribute to learning. A lesser number feel that their CFs need to use simpler language and slow down their speed of delivery according to students' receptive capacities. A significant number of students thought that more explicit correction or highlighting of mistakes would be helpful.

The students' views presented above confirm the results of interviews with CFs (Coburn, 2010, p.14) showing that flexibility in questioning, topic variation, appropriate use of the written chat facility, differentiation according to students' language capacities, and the ability to "*nurture students to overcome initial shyness and feel relaxed enough to participate fully*" are among the most important skills which CFs use to assist learning. The results of the student survey also confirm that there is "*a need to introduce more learner-centred topics and a greater variety*" in the conversation assignments. From the Institute's point of view, the most troubling finding in the student survey is the confirmation of apparent rigidity in the progression of significant numbers of conversations, while the most interesting new result is the importance that many students attach to the development of accuracy and their subsequent appreciation of and wish for more explicit correction. The following discussion seeks to unravel and explain some of the reasons underlying these students' perspectives on learning, by referring to relevant SLA theory and research in the field of task design and planning, both in synchronous CMC and traditional classroom contexts. The specific implications of the results for the Institute and the general implications of the research for the teaching of oral proficiency through online interaction are then presented.

## **Task design for online conversation with low bandwidth internet**

Tasks for oral online interaction need to be designed according to the limitations of the particular online environment. The Institute online environment does not, for example support the use of whiteboards, concept maps or symbol manipulation tools and therefore, certain kinds of tasks are ruled out. Though these kinds of audiographic affordances may in reality function as a double-edged sword and risking burdening language learners with cognitive overload and associated anxiety (Lamy & Hampel 2007, p. 80), they also offer the possibility of introducing much needed variety into online oral interaction. The main challenge facing the Institute in terms of task design is therefore to find ways, within the limitations of the low bandwidth online environment, to introduce extra input and variety so that interaction does not become boring and predictable. The results of the student survey indicate that the Institute's assumption that the provision of simple topic-based assignment questions would provide sufficient impetus to propel conversations forward, appears to have been somewhat naïve. Though there is a special relationship between the CF volunteers and the students they are supporting, it appears that the intrinsic motivation provided by these mutual interests is, at least in some cases, insufficient to guarantee the development of sufficiently stimulating interaction. As Samuda and Bygate (2009, p. 93 in Mackey & Polio (Ed.)) explain:

(...) here we come up against the tension between pedagogic interaction, which by definition must involve some pressure (Dewey 1910) and non-pedagogic social interaction in which pressure is not a necessary element.

The CFs and students in the Institute context may become friends, but even friends sometimes need outside stimulation in order to find something to talk about. There may therefore be a need for more pressure, or rather a different kind of pressure than that which the topic-based conversation assignments provide. In other words, while for experienced and flexible CFs, the assignment questions may be a sufficient basis, for others they do not appear to lead to an adequate dynamic. One of the main problems appears to be that the requirement of a written preparation seems to function like a straightjacket, hindering the development of fluency, while potentially promoting a focus on accuracy.

## **Effects of different kinds of planning and preparation on fluency and accuracy**

Two types of planning can be distinguished in relation to the development of oral proficiency: Online planning (i.e "ongoing" planning) and strategic planning Ellis (2003, p.133). Online planning gives learners time to reflect on their language use while interaction is in progress (as in interaction using written chat only), whereas strategic planning is done in advance of interaction. In a summary of research studies Ellis found that while strategic planning had a generally positive effect on fluency and sometimes had a positive effect on accuracy, online planning had a generally negative effect on fluency and a positive effect on accuracy. This means that the Institutes's current requirement of written preparations and primary emphasis on fluency rather than accuracy is in line with the research suggesting that such strategic planning

should lead to greater fluency. The preparations help students to consider the meaning of assignment questions before conversations, potentially freeing up cognitive capacity. There are, however, some unintended negative consequences of the written preparations which the student survey results have brought to light. These side-effects of the strategic planning amount to pressure on CFs and students to use online planning to focus on accuracy, which is not considered positive for the development of fluency. More specifically, the requirement of written preparations may lead to a natural tendency for both native speakers (CFs) and learners (students) to focus on mistakes in the students' written preparations and therefore restrict their initial interactions to the original topic questions and the students' responses to them. This apparently logical extension of the design of the conversation assignments contradicts two aspects of Institute guidance for CFs designed to promote fluency.

First, to avoid this the CFs are specifically advised to try to avoid using the original topic questions to start up conversations (after initial informal small-talk), but to rather introduce similar or related questions so that students do not simply read out or repeat their prepared answers, the use of which is "*not appropriate to 'conversation mode'*" (CF cited in Coburn 2010, p.10). As previously noted, too much focus on the original assignment questions is likely to lead to the interaction becoming routine and mechanical, stifling creativity and preventing the development of exchanges beyond a static IRF mode. Second, it is understandable that if students are required to write prepared answers before conversations, many of them want and expect their efforts to be explicitly discussed and corrected. However, the Institute's advice to the CFs is to offer implicit correction rather than collaborate with students in the discussion and negotiation of correct forms. This indicates a source of tension between CFs and students since it is natural for students to seek more explicit forms of corrective feedback to improve their accuracy when they have the unique opportunity to do so through synchronous conversation with native speakers. The Institute therefore needs to define the conversation learning goals more clearly and design conversation assignments and guidance for CFs accordingly, so that contradictions between conscious goals and unconscious side-effects of design are avoided. At present, a focus on accuracy which conflicts with the primary goal of promoting fluency arises unconsciously out of the design of the written preparations.

### **Ways of incorporating focus on form and accuracy within assignment design**

If the Institute wants a greater focus on form and accuracy, there are theoretically a number of ways that this can be achieved without detracting from the primary goal of fluency. Such a focus needs to be differentiated according to learners' language levels. For example, more advanced learners who are able to understand metalinguistic discussions in the target language need to be differentiated from beginners who are struggling simply to communicate meaning. Ellis (2003, p.237) proposes a graduated model (Figure 1):

LEVEL – beginner

intermediate

advanced

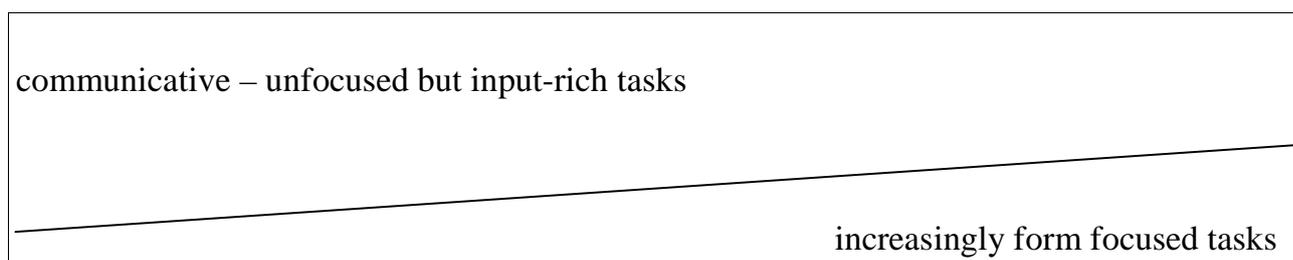


Figure 1 Model for gradually increasing amount of form focus as learner proficiency increases

In this model the amount of form-focused activities gradually increase (the diagonal line in figure 1) as learner proficiency moves from beginner to intermediate to advanced (The horizontal top line). Communicative, input-rich tasks are used almost exclusively with weaker students, while the proportion and level of complexity of form focus in the tasks gradually rises in line with learner proficiency. In the Institute context, this model suggests that adding extra linguistic input into the conversation assignments on the lower and middle level courses in the form of useful communicative vocabulary and expressions might be appropriate (and in accordance with some student suggestions), while a greater focus on grammatical or morphosyntactic form and accuracy might be introduced on the middle and upper courses. Given that the Institute online conversations are with native speakers who are not trained as language instructors, an incidental focus on form is more likely to be appropriate than a pre-selected form focus, with the possible exception of the introduction of preselected lexical items on the lower level courses. This means that any focus on form will generally be on learner-initiated errors and mistakes which are likely to increase learners' attention since the language will be within their zone of proximal development. This incidental focus on form could take place during conversations, or afterwards, in the form of reflection and written dialogue, followed up in subsequent conversations. The difficulty may however lie in persuading the language experts, in this case the CFs, to give sufficiently explicit correctional feedback.

### **Correctional feedback: Learner influence and choice**

SLA research shows that in a variety of EFL settings, language experts (instructors or native speakers) often appear somewhat reluctant to consistently use explicit oral correction strategies. For example, a classroom study by Sheen (2004, p.9) across different learning contexts showed that teachers prefer the "*non-threatening, mitigated, unobtrusive, implicit feedback type*". The tendency for this kind of cautious approach also extends to synchronous CMC learning environments: In a study of online telecollaboration, Ware and O'Dowd (2008, p. 49) found that native-speaking partners gave feedback on form only "*when explicitly required*". Ware and Cañado (2007, p. 118 in O'Dowd (Ed.)) point out the importance of student initiative in relation to correction and recommend that learners should be asked what kind of feedback they

prefer, that any feedback should be selective and limited to a small number of errors which occur regularly, and that language "experts" should not play down the importance of corrective feedback. This advice is however given in a specific context where there are normally two equal partners, both being experts (native speakers) and learners of the other's language. In other contexts, where there are less equal relations between partners, it may be difficult for the weaker part (normally the learner) to frankly and honestly express their wishes. For example, in the Institute context, one of the CFs who was interviewed who himself had a mixed Iranian-British cultural background, explained that due to socially and culturally engrained norms of politeness and respect for elders and authority, students might simply agree to whatever method of correctional feedback the CF suggested they employ. Given the sensitivities involved, the designers of oral language conversation courses need to try to find a balance between fluency and accuracy which the language experts will be able and willing to carry through in practice. To this end, instead of predetermining the entire design of conversation assignments in advance of any course, including the intended balance between fluency and accuracy, it may be wise to allow learners and language experts to exert influence over both the content of conversations and the manner of correction, so that the conversational syllabus is also "*driven by learning and interaction*" (Van Lier, 1996, p. 204).

## CONCLUSIONS

The specific implications of the results for the Institute, suggestions for further research, along with the general implications of the present study for the teaching of online oral proficiency are presented below.

With regard to conversation design and guidance given to CFs it seems clear that the Institute's requirement that students should write preparatory answers to topic-based assignment questions should be removed. Students should still be required to prepare, and it may be useful if students make notes and bring them to the conversations, but both CFs and students should know that topic questions are only intended to provide initial stimulation and ideas to get students to think about the topic. In the conversations themselves, CFs should consciously avoid sticking to the original questions, reformulating new questions which "*go off at tangents and angles*" (Coburn, 2010, p.10). In addition, a greater variety of assignments should be presented, including role-plays, story and text-based assignments drawing more upon student-centred topics along with student presentations. Extra linguistic input in the form of common words, expressions and functional phrases suitable for use in conversations at appropriate levels can be embedded in preparatory texts for conversations. The CFs should also be advised to be more explicit though still sensitive in giving correction. In doing so they should consult on an ongoing basis with their students as to the desired manner and degree of focus on accuracy, and how this might best be achieved.

Next, further research, both quantitative and qualitative, is needed on how voice and written chat can be used simultaneously to promote oral proficiency. More quantitative research such as that provided by Blake et al. (2008) can provide the hard evidence needed to overcome scepticism in the language learning community, while qualitative

research is needed to deepen understanding of how different factors affect the particular context of learning. Both kinds of research need to be differentiated according to learners' language levels to find out more about how tasks should be designed for learners with different capacities. One area of research that is much needed is the analysis and interpretation of transcripts of online conversation recordings. This may offer valuable data shedding light on different aspects of learning not yet been touched on by formal studies. These include exploring how different kinds of task design impact learning opportunities, how the provision of extra linguistic resources can be integrated into conversational work, how and to what extent conversation facilitators are able to move beyond simple IRF patterns to open up interaction and encourage more open, spontaneous exchanges, and how and to what extent a specific form focus can be incorporated into interaction without detracting from fluency.

Concerning the general implications for the design of oral interaction in distance language learning, the unique Institute experience can provide valuable lessons for course designers and language experts preparing for synchronous voice and written chat sessions. First, the affordances (limitations and possibilities) of any potential online environment need to be carefully considered. This includes the advantages and disadvantages of using audiographic tools vis-a-vis more simple applications like Skype, or smart phones equipped with microphones and speakers. Learners' and language experts' technical proficiency with the different options is one important factor affecting the decision. Another factor may be the language level of the learners. For example, weaker learners may benefit more from additional multimodal stimuli. On the other hand, the simplicity and familiarity of the combination of ordinary voice chat and written chat may be preferable.

Second, course goals, design, and delivery need to be worked out together as a coherent whole, so that the oral part of the course does not simply become an "add-on". In this planning stage, designers and administrators need to consider to what extent the teachers who are responsible for delivering the written part of the language course, which may be mostly or fully asynchronous, should also be responsible for delivering the synchronous oral instruction or conversation. It is certainly desirable that teachers responsible for written work also hold a certain minimum number of synchronous tutorials with their students. This would be to ensure students' understanding of corrective feedback and to provide the warmth and presence which distance language learners need from their tutors (see next point). However, due to the lack of trained language teachers, time constraints, not to mention the expense of employing highly trained personnel, it may be preferable for educational institutions to utilise the massive pool of native speakers who are gradually becoming available through global technological developments. This will naturally require a different form of organization and some basic training and quality control, but the Institute experience shows that this is possible. If teachers and native speakers should share the work of training learners' oral proficiency, course designers, then administrators will need to decide how the different actors will collaborate and how the different goals of fluency, accuracy and complexity should be balanced between the different sections of the course.

The third important factor to be considered in the planning of synchronous interaction is the role of the language expert. Rosell-Aguilar (2007) concludes that unusual importance should be attached to tutors' socio-affective skills in assisting students in the synchronous oral, language learning environment, beyond that of the pedagogical or didactic role of ordinary classroom teachers. This is as a result of the fragility of the learning environment which causes some learners considerable anxiety as they attempt to communicate in a foreign language in the absence of paralinguistic clues. As mentioned, there is also a practical need for writing tutors to enter into synchronous dialogue with learners to mediate learning by supporting and reinforcing understanding of difficulties arising in asynchronous written work. The Institute experience confirms that synchronous interaction contributes towards building trust and confidence between learner and language expert(s).

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## **Appendix A**

### **Student survey – Summer 2008**

A total of 216 students responded, but not all students answered all the questions.

#### OPEN QUESTIONS

*1. What are the most useful ways your Conversation teacher helps you to learn*

*English?*

*2. What could your Conversation teacher do better to help you with learning English?*

#### CLOSED QUESTIONS

**3. Do you think you learn more from the Conversation classes when you prepare by writing Conversation Forums? (Conversation assignment preparations)**

A. Yes, doing Conversation Forums **usually** helps me learn more from the Conversation classes.

48.1% (104)

B. Doing Conversation Forums **sometimes** helps me learn more from the Conversation classes.

33.3% (72)

C. No, doing Conversation Forums **doesn't usually** help me learn more from the Conversation classes.

18.5% (40)

**4. How do you feel about the Conversation classes:**

- A. I like them very much. I learn a lot. 55.6% (120)
- B. They are quite good. It is useful experience. 30.6% (66)
- C. They are not good. I learn almost nothing. 6.9% (15)
- D. I cannot make a judgement yet. 6.9% (15)

**5. Do you find the subjects (topics) for the Conversations:**

- A. Interesting. 19.4% (42)
- B. A little interesting. 69.0% (149)
- C. Not interesting. 11.6% (25)

**6. If you could choose some of the subjects (topics) for the Conversations, which subjects (topics) would you choose to talk about?**

(These results show the numbers of students who would like to have discussions on a particular topic. For example, 13 students would like more discussion of societal/social issues).

Social/societal issues 13; Current Affairs 12; Cultural differences 10; Honesty, moral, peace, unity, uplifting themes, religion 10; Daily life topics and challenges 8; Qualities of good university, BIHE 8; Dreams, wishes, memories, childhood 6; Housework, cooking, practical matters 6; Personal relationships, marriage 6; Language learning, communication skills 6; Online learning, related challenges 5; Major areas of study 5; Science Technology 5; Youth issues 5; Future challenges 4 ; Art, music 4; Sport 4; more debatable topics 3; Generation differences 2; Travel 2; Various 6

**7. How helpful do you feel your Conversation teacher is on this course?**

- A. Very helpful. 51.9% (112)
- B. Helpful. 6.5% (14)
- C. A little helpful. 32.9% (71)
- D. Not helpful at all. 4.2% (9)
- E. I'm not sure. 4.6% (10)

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Examples of conversation assignment questions:**

An EFL101 Conversation Assignment

Travelling (from Module 4)

1. What means of transportation do you use when travelling in your country?
2. Which means of transportation is the safest in your country? Why?
3. Tell your tutor and classmates about one of your trips by train or plane.
4. What are the benefits of travelling by car?
5. What can be done to improve the safety of car travel between towns and cities?
6. How can you help a foreign visitor see the various parts of your country?

An EFL102 Conversation Assignment

Virtues (from Module 3)

1. Which qualities or virtues do you think are the most important?
2. Which qualities or virtues are the easiest to have or the most difficult to develop?
3. Are there qualities that you feel you were born with and have naturally?
4. Is there a quality that you have developed in the past? How did you do that?
5. What is a quality you need to develop? How do you think you can do it?

