Distance Education for EFL Teachers: Perceptions of Learner Support[1]

Educación a Distancia para Docentes de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera: Percepciones sobre el Apoyo al Estudiante

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Abstract

This article reports the findings of a qualitative study exploring in-service EFL teachers' perceptions of the learner support resources provided to them while they were taking a teacher research distance course. Findings indicate that students valued videoconferencing technology because it facilitated interacting with adviser, peers and instructor to get academic assistance, a different perspective on their work, enthusiasm, and feedback, as well as opportunities to confront ideas and to share feelings. The course management system was perceived as highly beneficial to their learning because of the amount and variety of support resources, and the multidimensional learning it promoted. Results may help language teacher educators interested in enhancing the quality of research courses, Web-based course developers involved in providing learner support, and researchers engaged in teacher research and distance education.

Keywords: Teacher education; distance learning; foreign languages; higher education; teaching

Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio cualitativo que explora las percepciones de un grupo de docentes de inglés en servicio, sobre los recursos de apoyo en un curso de investigación a distancia. Los hallazgos indican que los estudiantes valoraron la tecnología de videoconferencia debido a que

157

ésta les permitió interactuar con el asesor, los compañeros, e instructor para obtener apoyo académico, conocer una perspectiva distinta sobre su trabajo, recibir retroalimentación, motivación, así como una oportunidad para debatir ideas y compartir sentimientos. Los docentes consideraron la plataforma de administración del curso sumamente beneficiosa para su aprendizaje debido a la cantidad y variedad de recursos de apoyo y el aprendizaje multidimensional que ésta fomentó. Los resultados pueden ser de utilidad para los formadores de profesores de inglés que deseen mejorar la calidad de sus cursos de investigación, los diseñadores de cursos en línea que quieran implementar apoyos para el aprendizaje, y para los investigadores interesados en desarrollar docentes investigadores y educación a distancia.

Palabras clave: Formación de profesores, educación a distancia, lenguas extranjeras, educación superior, enseñanza

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta os resultados de um estudo qualitativo que explora as percepções de um grupo de docentes de inglês em serviço, sobre os recursos de apoio em um curso de pesquisa a distância. As descobertas indicam que os estudantes valoraram a tecnologia de videoconferência pelo que a mesma lhes permitiu interagir com o assessor, os colegas e o instrutor, para obter apoio acadêmico, conhecer uma perspectiva diferente sobre o seu trabalho, receber retroalimentação e motivação, bem como uma oportunidade para debater ideias e compartilhar sentimentos. Os docentes consideraram a plataforma de administração do curso sumamente favorável para a sua aprendizagem, devido à quantidade e variedade de recursos de apoio e a aprendizagem multidimensional que a mesma fomentou. Os resultados podem ser de utilidade para os formadores de professores de inglês que desejem melhorar a qualidade dos seus cursos de pesquisa, os desenhistas de cursos em linha que queiram implementar apoios para a aprendizagem, e para os pesquisadores interessados em desenvolver docentes pesquisadores e educação a distância.

Palavras chave: Formação de professores, educação a distância, línguas estrangeiras, educação superior, ensino

Introduction

Distance education offers potential advantages for teacher training because it can help us satisfy the large demand of EFL teachers. It is economically efficient, and teachers can study when and where it is convenient for them. A crucial component of distance education is the learner support it offers (Farajollahi & Moenikia, 2010; McLoughlin, 2002; Oliver, 2001; Oliver & Herrington, 2003). Learner support focuses on providing learners with the assistance they need to achieve their desired outcomes. Tait (2003) defines learner support as the range of services and resources that facilitate and enhance distance learning.

Traditionally, learner support has been identified as being a completely different set of activities from those associated with course production. However, in the implementation of distance learning, this distinction does not always hold and the line between the two sets of activities has become more blurred (Thorpe, 2003). A distance course may consist of no more than a syllabus and a reading list, with the content being created through interaction between learners and course facilitator. On the other hand, a distance course may offer a range of aids that promote its effectiveness. The choice of what is offered depends on the values, educational philosophy, resources available, learner characteristics and needs, and type of course or program. Research can help us to continually reflect on the rationale for our distance education practice, as it evolves. An important question to ask in this case is whether learner support resources actually accomplish what we have designed them to do.

This study focused on the perceptions of 18 in-service Mexican EFL teachers of elementary, middle school and high-school, while they were taking a teacher research course that was part of a distance undergraduate program. The aim was to investigate their views on the learner support resources provided through a commercial course management system, and the extent to which they considered that distance education technologies had helped or not their learning.

The research questions that the study aimed to respond are the following:

159

1. What forms of learner support are more valued by the participants?

2. To what extent does videoconferencing technology facilitate their learning?

3. To what extent does videoconferencing technology hider their learning?

4.   To what extent does the course management system facilitate their learning?

5.   To what extent does the course management system hinder their learning?

Answers to these questions are expected to contribute to our knowledge about learner support, help language teacher educators enhance the quality of the distance courses they teach, and benefit distance course developers involved in providing learner support resources.

Literature Review

Distance Education and EFL Teachers

Distance education has been defined as "institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors" (Schlosser & Simonson, 2010, p. 1). An essential component of this definition is that some form of interactive telecommunications must be available for students to interact with each other, with the teacher, and with the learning resources. Telecommunication means communicating at a distance, which does not necessarily involve the use of electronic media, but can include other forms of non-electronic communication such as the postal system, telephone or fax.

The means by which education is accomplished in most distance programs are videoconferencing, Web-based communications, and audio-conference technologies, or any combination of electronic communication and course management tools. Instruction may be delivered with students and teachers communicating in real time (synchronously) or at different times (asynchronously), or a combination of the two. Videoconferencing technology brings together –synchronously, visually, and aurally- teachers and students otherwise separated geographically. The medium has many benefits: it provides remote access to expert input, which is academically advantageous for learners; it is economically efficient for institutions; and compared to other methods of distance education, it has benefits in terms of real-time interaction, immediacy, motivation and collaboration (Bates, 2005).

Videoconferencing technology as a teaching tool also presents challenges, mainly related to flexibility and pedagogy. A fundamental problem of videoconferencing is that when technology fails, there is no alternative that can be used immediately. Also, videoconference

160

technology restricts the autonomy of the learner. Unlike online courses which allow users to access materials whenever they wish, students need to be present at the videoconferencing site, at a set time, to access the class coming from another location. The quality of interaction in the videoconferencing medium can be another problem. Interaction through a screen is often of a social rather than a cognitive nature. Social interaction is considered essential to support learning but not enough to promote learning (Knipe & Lee, 2002).

Videoconferencing technology is generally combined with Web-based technologies such as course management platforms. One of those platforms is *Blackboard*, a commercial product for online course delivery commonly employed by colleges and universities. The course environment in *Blackboard* is designed by the instructor to include syllabus information, course content materials, discussion forums, blogs, and assignment instructions, with submission links, group projects, and e-mail. Tracking-data are collected by the course management system and a printable history of the data is available to the instructor throughout the course.

Mexico has a long history of distance education. The use of radio for adult literacy programs goes as early as 1934. At present, there are distance programs for primary, secondary and tertiary education. A study that involved 123 institutions of higher education in Mexico (ANUIES, 2000), indicates that 85% of the universities offer distance programs using satellite networks (42%), videoconferencing systems (26%), computers (24%) and radio (8%) to deliver courses. Information is transported through the use of IP (40%), ISDN (22%), Frame Relay and DIAL Up (13%), and cable (12%). This infrastructure has allowed the delivery of approximately 66 programs that contribute to improving the quality of courses (81%), diversifying learning environments (79%), increasing opportunities for disperse students (66%), reducing costs for students (58%), reducing class time (46%), reducing costs for the institutions (36%), and increasing enrollment (23%). Almost half of the students who attend those programs are at undergraduate level.

Distance education is particularly relevant in EFL teacher education in Mexico because of the scarcity and dispersion of qualified language teacher educators. Especially in the northeast corner of the country, universities face the challenge of professionalizing large numbers of teachers of English for primary, secondary, and tertiary education. To connect language teacher educators and student teachers, a distance undergraduate program was designed to deliver courses in six locations through the use of a multipoint IP videoconference system

161

and a Web-based course management system (*Blackboard*). This distance undergraduate program was the context of the study reported in this article.

Distance Education Research

Until recently, experimentation was the dominant mode of inquiry in distance education. Most studies in the field compared distance instruction to classroom education. Invariably, those studies showed no statistically significant difference between the two course formats on different measures of learning outcomes (Schulte, 2011). Researchers often asked the same basic question: Is distance education as good as, or better than, traditional education? The question assumed that traditional education was truly a superior modality. The studies were one-dimensional in their design focusing only on the delivery medium, neglecting the multidimensional aspects of teaching and learning. Another characteristic of early studies on distance learning is that they were rarely framed by a theory or based on concepts and constructs (Saba, 2000).

In the 1990's, researchers started to conduct rigorous studies based on theories of related fields. Cognitive speed theory (Fulford & Zang, 1993), social presence theory (Gunawardena, 1995), group development (McDonald & Gibson, 1998), and interaction (Chen & Willis, 1999) are examples of the theories and concepts investigated. In the new lines of research, methods such as surveys, interviews, conversation and discourse analysis were used to collect data from smaller samples. These studies disclosed the complexity of distance education and its diverse constituents.

In a review of research in distance education that examined 1,419 research articles and dissertation abstracts over a nine year period (1990 -1999), Berge and Mrozowski (2001) found that the ten content themes addressed, from higher to lower frequency, included the following: 1) design issues, 2) learner characteristics, 3) strategies to increase interactivity and active learning, 4) technology selection and adoption, 5) policy and management issues, 6) roles of participants, 7) operational issues, 8) learner support, 9) equity and accessibility, and 10) cost/benefit trade-offs. In terms of research methodologies, 74% of the articles and abstracts involved descriptive research, 8.57% used case study, 8.16% correlational research, and 7.35% experimental research. This study responds to the need for empirical evidence on the research area of learner support (Lee, 2003; Tait, 2003), and uses descriptive research methodology.

Learner Support

Learner support refers to the assistance or aids provided to students during the process of study to facilitate their learning process (Tait, 2003). McLoughlin and Marshall (2000) define learner support from a socio-cultural perspective as "the resources that learners can access in order to achieve learning outcomes and procedural scaffolds that support the communication process" (p. 1). The provision of learner support through Web-based technologies contributes to the effectiveness of distance education programs (Farajollahi & Moenikia, 2010; McLoughlin, 2002; Oliver, 2001; Oliver & Herrington, 2003).

McLoughlin and Oliver (1998) discuss the forms of scaffolding that are required to foster higher order thinking in distance education settings mediated by technology. They suggest that effective support needs to include encouragement of reflective thinking; social support for dialogue; and extension of ideas on emerging issues through the use of feedback from peers and mentors. These features, they argue, represent core elements of support for the learning processes in technology mediated environments. Different information and communication technology tools can be used to provide this support. Examples of technologies are: discussion forums, document exchange resources, databases for student work, printed guides, Web links, and audio and video materials.

Learner support is a useful concept for the design of distance learning Web environments if we consider that students perceive themselves as isolated when they do not have enough interaction (Stodel, Thompson, & MacDonald, 2006). This sense of isolation is connected to problems of attrition, instructional ineffectiveness, poor academic achievement, negative attitudes and overall, dissatisfaction with the learning experience (Park & Choi, 2009). Distance learners can easily feel isolated if they do not feel connected to the course, the program or the university, and they may even drop out of a course because they do not feel part of a community (Rovai, 2002).

There are infinite variations of learner support forms in distance education practice, depending on the technologies used, the type of course, and the characteristics of the learners and the instructor. Distance learners have become more diversified and demanding and course designers are struggling to better meet their needs. Unfortunately, there is a lack of empirical studies on the use of learner support and the uses of technology are largely based on practicalities rather than on research findings (Hannafin, Hill, Oliver, Glazer, & Sharma, 2003; Lee, 2003). Also, many of the studies on distance learning only look into the

163

points of view of faculty members teaching the courses or the course designers. While faculty-based studies are important for understanding the potential value of Web-based learning, the learners' perspectives are needed to build learner support systems in accordance to their needs (Hara & Kling, 2000).

The distance research course in which this study was developed included several learner support resources through the course management system (*Blackboard*). Students posted their drafts and finished papers to receive feedback comments from others. They were also able to participate in forums to discuss common concerns and to help each other. Participants also had the support of a resource area with research articles and books to interact with content related to their specific research interest. In order to communicate with the instructor or adviser, students were able to contact them via email.

Methodology

Research Design

This is a qualitative interpretive study. Interpretive description (Thorne, 2008) is an inductive analytic approach used to capture themes and patterns within subjective perceptions. This approach builds upon relatively small purposive samples, using interviews, participant observation or documentary analysis to articulate a coherent and meaningful account of the participants' experience. The product is a coherent conceptual description of the phenomenon that is being studied.

Most studies on learner support use surveys as the main data collection technique. Surveys are effective in providing information about the scale of particular phenomena and their importance across a population of learners. Thorp (1993), however, suggests that before doing quantitative survey research, qualitative studies are more indicated when the evaluators are becoming familiar with the different issues.

164

Participants

Participants of the study were 18 in-service teachers of English enrolled in a distance education research course, an instructor, and a research collaborator. The class included 24 student teachers, however, six of them did not return the letter of informed consent and therefore the information they provided was not considered in the analysis.

The group of participants was composed of 17 female and 1 male EFL teachers of elementary, middle and high-school. Their ages were between 24 and 52. They were native speakers of Spanish, in their final year of undergraduate studies. Their English language proficiency was varied; their ITP-TOEFL scores ranged from 480 to 610 points. Their teaching experience was of four years or more.

Although the EFL teachers were in service, they were, at that point, in the process of acquiring a teaching undergraduate degree. In México, until recently, elementary, middle and high-school language teachers, especially in private schools, only required communicating fluently in English. Working requirements for English language teachers are gradually changing and more teachers are entering higher education. Student teachers in this study were in six different university locations which they attended once a week for four hours.

The authors of this article were also participants of the study. The first author was the instructor of the course and also conducted the fieldwork. The second author, who was not part of the class but a research collaborator, acted as peer de-briefers. Peer debriefing is the process of exploring and discussing aspects of the inquiry that may otherwise remain implicit in the inquirers' mind. The task of the de-briefer was to probe the inquirer's bias, explore different meanings of the data and clarify interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Context

The distance undergraduate English Language Program included 36 courses on four areas of knowledge: a) English language and culture, b) language teaching pedagogy, c) pedagogic content, and d) research knowledge. This knowledge base was provided to the students via videoconference and a combination of email, telephone, fax and special mail delivery services. It was for the last of the three research courses that a course management platform was incorporated into the distance education program for the first time.

Teaching teachers how to inquire into their own teaching is a complex process because it involves not only introducing them to diverse research methods and techniques, but also discussing the assumptions of teacher research and how it is produced. Many teachers, for example, associate research with scientists, experiments and statistics (Borg, 2009). It takes a considerable amount of reading, writing and discussing about teacher research to accept that the goal of teacher research is to understand rather than to prove; that teaching and

165

researching are compatible activities; and that teachers' own thinking can be the focus of their inquiry.

The research courses were delivered through IP videoconferencing technology. Technology was used to give presentations, participate in discussion, group-building and decision-making activities. The Web course management system *Blackboard* was used to provide the students with two main sections: pre-designed learning activities and learner support. Learner support included a discussion forum for goal-oriented dialogue, a blog to express thoughts and reflections, a portfolio to display drafts and finished research products, and email to communicate with the instructor and peers. Learner support through *Blackboard* also included an area of full-text articles, books and other materials to read or print for offline independent learning. Each student teacher was also allocated an adviser as an additional source of academic support. Advisers were members of the academic staff of the program who taught other courses. Students selected their advisers and they could contact them by email to discuss research interests and problems. Each adviser could not have more than four advisees.

On the first day of the course, students were trained for one hour in the use of blackboard and the different learner support sources. The instructor gave a guided tour of the site while students took notes and asked questions.

Data Collection Instruments

Data for the study came from two sources: the transcripts of the participants' comments in the discussion forum and the transcripts of their comments on a blog. The research course lasted 15 weeks. In the third week, the participants signed an informed consent letter. In Weeks 7, 8 and 9, three open-ended questions were posted on the discussion forum to investigate: 1) support needs of students that had not been considered for the course, 2) advantages and challenges perceived in the use of videoconference technology to acquire research knowledge and skills and 3) advantages and challenges perceived in the use of *Blackboard* to learn how to develop classroom investigations. In Week 14, a blog was created for students to react to five comments that corresponded to the research questions of this study.

Six paragraph-length comments were obtained from each participant, making a total of 108 comments. Comments were printed from the *Blackboard* archives and assigned a number. Pseudonyms were given to each participant to protect their identity.

166

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analysis consisted in taking one piece of data (the comment of one participant) and comparing it with all others that could be similar or different, in order to develop conceptualizations of the possible relations between various pieces of data. The unit of analysis for this case was the comment or response to a question.

The procedure for data analysis was the following. First, the first author separated the comments for each of the three research questions. Then, for each question, each comment (either obtained from the discussion forum or the blog archives) was analyzed and compared with each of the rest of the comments. The cycle of comparison and reflection on "old" and "new" material was repeated several times. All similar comments or units of analysis were placed together and assigned a category. It was only when all units were assigned to one of the already existing categories that the first stage of the analysis ended. The first author then gave the list of categories and the comments to the de-briefer, who independently classified the comments into each of the categories.

The second stage of analysis consisted in comparing the analysis of the first author with the analysis of the second author. Agreement resulted in 87% of the cases. All discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached.

Results

What forms of learner support are more valued by the participants?

The three most valued forms of learner support were the adviser, the peers, and the instructor of the research course. Most student teachers placed the highest value on the interaction with their research advisers through email. They appreciated having someone to contact for specific questions related to their written work, or when encouragement, self-confidence or motivation was needed. The social and academic support was definitely a combination that distance learners needed to reduce their stress. The following comment made by Rachel is an example of how a number of participants perceived the support given by the adviser by email.

167

> What I have valued the most during the course is the help of my adviser. When I was struggling with the literature review and the collection of data, she suggested some readings that really helped me in conducting the study. At times she also gave me moral support to keep going until finishing the study. (Rachel, C-12)

Another benefit that the participants valued of the contact with advisers was the opportunity to analyze things from a different perspective. When the process of knowledge construction was interrupted for some reason, exposure to a different view helped the writing process retake its flow. A quote from Helen's response illustrates this view.

> My adviser's support has been the most valuable help. When I was working on my literature review, I ran out of ideas, I didn´t know how to continue or where to go. I tried to work on my own, I felt drained. Finally, I decided to contact my adviser and she gave me another point of view on my work. Everything changed. I was able then to see my paper from another perspective. Having an adviser that you can contact through email when you are stuck makes things so much easier. (Helen, C-5)

Some participants enjoyed the interest that some advisers showed in their research themes and activities. Positive attitudes and enthusiasm were highly appreciated by students. Martha made a comment related to this characteristic of her adviser.

> Well, my adviser was always prompt to help. Her comments were very sensible and full of constructive criticism. She sent me a lot of well selected literature reviews that helped me throughout all the stages of my study. I regard her as a scholar who enjoys what she does, and her enthusiasm shows through everything she does and says. (Martha, C-2)

Careful judgment and evaluation were also considered helpful by some of the participants when interacting with their advisers. Feedback and revision are necessary in academic work and some students were more aware of this than others. This is the case of Cynthia, who expressed the following opinion when commenting about the most valuable support she received during the course.

> I think the positive and negative comments of my adviser on my paper were most valuable. This has been very important to improve my work because I got a feel of the things that were not clear, or where I needed to add more detail. (Cynthia, C-6)

168

Maria's comment also pointed to the feedback provided by her adviser and the way it helped her in writing her report. The following was her point of view.

> My adviser, he gave me feedback and his suggestions improved enormously my work. His comments were very useful and helped me focus. He always had something extra for me to read to understand. He was the most important source of help. (Maria, C-14)

The second most valued support reported by the participants was their peers, both during the videoconference and on the discussion forums. Weekly whole-class discussions on different research topics and issues through videoconferencing technology opened opportunities to confirm or confront the thoughts and opinions the students had developed during the previous week as a result of the reading and writing activities done at home. Meeting with distant peers helped their understanding. This can be inferred from the response given by Sylvia.

> The help of my classmates was a very helpful support. In the videoconference sessions and when I asked something in the discussion forum. I listened or read their opinions and I could understand things differently. I think I would have felt very confused and desperate without other people´s ideas; I just wouldn´t have made it through the course. (Sylvia, C-9)

Ann also considered that the views expressed by peers during the videoconference classes gave her insights into different issues of research that seemed unclear at the start. She viewed peer support as a source of clarification, as it can be interpreted from the following comment.

> Peer support was most important for me. When I read at home, I sometimes got confused, as with *validity* and *reliability*, for example. When people talked about the terms, I learned a lot. I could ask them my doubts and I even took notes of things they said. Classmates gave me very opportunities to clarify my understanding. (Ann, C-18)

Other participants valued the support given by their peers in the blog, in which they expressed feelings and ideas. Talking about worries and problems can be a very good way of releasing some of the stress that builds up when distance students work alone. It works best when they have opportunities to talk to someone who is in a similar situation. Understanding and advice that distant learners provide to each other helped them feel less isolated. The following comment was made by Pat, who reported that the kind of support that she had valued the most was peer support.

> I got a lot of support from my fellow students. When I was frustrated because I didn´t know how to go about something, I shared my feelings on the blog and that made me feel better. Then I read Cynthia's comments and she was feeling the same. So I thought, it's not only me; it's normal, it's ok. (Pat, C-1)

169

Lastly, students placed a high value on the contact with the instructor. Although peer interaction and group cohesion that developed in their sites were considered important, interacting with the instructor seemed much more useful to them. Laura, who was not in the same site of the instructor, expressed her concerns. The following is what she wrote.

> For me the most important support was the instructor, although with the enormous inconvenience of having her at a distance, which doesn´t give a chance to develop in the affective sphere, and does not facilitate the clarification of doubts. We are a large group, with all the socio-cultural issues going on, a variety of opinions and a lot of doubts. (Laura, C- 17)

Rebecca, on the other hand, took her class in the same location as the instructor. The following is her comment.

> I feel that the most important support I had was the instructor of the course. Having her in the same location is of great help. We got a lot of support and the appropriate follow up to the activities. I don´t feel the same when the instructor is in another place. (Rebecca, C-13)

To what extent does videoconferencing technology facilitate their learning?

Perceptions of videoconferencing technology were mixed among participants. While some student teachers acknowledged its benefits in terms of real-time interaction and immediacy, others complained about the lack of contact with instructors in the remote sites. The strengths of videoconference technology mentioned were largely related to having questions answered by the instructor in real-time. This characteristic helped them learn course content. Many of the positive comments on videoconference technology point to the specific contents learned, as in the case of Pat. The following was her comment:

> Videoconferencing technology was good because through the transmission of the class, I learned about the characteristics of quality research, different research methods, how to design questionnaires and surveys, and the use of elicitation techniques. I could also clarify the doubts raised by the readings. The videoconference had its problems sometimes, like the blurred screen or when the audio disconnected. But this did not happen all the time. Videoconferencing is the only way to take this program and got used to it very quickly. Even to the problems. (Pat, C-19)

Other participants focused on the advantage of being able to interact with distant peers. This interaction provided exposure

170

to different perspectives on the topic in turn, and contributed to the construction of the participants' identity as researchers. The opinion given by Susan illustrates this point.

> Technology has highly contributed to my learning, because it has been an important means of communication with my teacher and my peers. The videoconferencing system helped me to solve doubts, to check my progress, and it gave me the opportunity to listen to and speak with my teacher/advisor directly to ask for support. During videoconference I have been able to listen to my peers' experiences and their comments have helped me to analyze their different styles of carrying out a study. This has facilitated my growth as researcher. In addition, through videoconference I have learned the theory about doing research. (Susan, C-25)

As in a face-to-face classroom, some students viewed in the videoconference environment opportunities to learn from the instructor, from other learners, and from the interactions between instructor and learners. This characteristic of videoconference was mentioned by Tom when he was asked, through the discussion forum, to express his thoughts and opinions about the ways in which videoconferencing had facilitated his learning.

> The doubts that may have emerged while working on the project at home were clarified during the videoconference sessions. There were times when something asked by someone from another site was my own doubt and was clarified with the teacher's answer. I learned hearing the questions made by others and the explanations that the teacher gave them. (Tom, C-26)

To what extent does videoconferencing technology hinder their learning?

The only perceived challenge of this technology to learning was the physical absence of the instructor in the remote sites. Students assumed that learning was better when there was face-to-face contact with the instructor, and while in a videoconference situation learning could occur, it was not full or complete. Students seemed to perceive that learning was not of the same quality when the instructor was not present. Having the instructor on a screen rather than in person discouraged them from making questions, which may have inhibited their learning. Rachel was in such case. The following was her opinion.

171

> I think that videoconferencing is not a hundred per cent effective because as student I sometimes felt frustrated by not having the teacher in front of me, to solve my problems and questions. I had to use the Internet to

communicate and many times teachers don't get the messages or they take too long to respond. I couldn't get to know how my study was going. Then I had to use the phone to ask and it became a bit complicated because of the professor's schedule and my own schedule. (Rachel, C-30)

To what extent does the course management system facilitate their learning?

The majority of the participants of the study perceived the course management platform as convenient and helpful. They liked having all the different components of the course concentrated in a single place. They recognized the value of the research articles organized by theme, the research methods books, the forums to discuss emergent issues and concerns, the portfolios to read their peers' work and publish their own, and the email to contact their adviser, the instructor or other students. The platform was used for the first time on the research course, and it became an asset to the program. The process of getting acquainted with the system did not take long. Elsa referred to this process in the following excerpt.

> *Blackboard* was the means to receive the theory about how to do research, specific material about my topic, the way to turn in my research drafts, and to receive feedback and my grades. I learned how to use this system and took advantages of technology to read my peers' work and make comparisons to develop my study. I could say that when I began using the blackboard, more than being a benefit, it was an obstacle. I had hard times while learning how to use it to receive or send information. But now I feel more confident when working with this system. It's nice to have everything there. (Elsa, C-51)

Students seemed satisfied with the course management system. They were aware of all the capacity blackboard has to bring together, in a single place, classified information using scanned documents and Internet links. Irene perceived the capacity of the platform and its potential to contribute to her learning. The following is an excerpt of what Irene reported.

172

> For me the *Blackboard* system is by all means an incredible way of learning. The interactive learning-teaching that goes on has enriched my view of learning. Perhaps I would have liked more advice about the full use of the resources we can access through it, and make full use of those. It helped me to see an array of potential places to look for background information I need, and especially because it helped me to see not only theory and guidelines, but also to read some actual research studies by teacher researchers from other parts of the world. (Irene, C-52)

Perceived benefits of the platform included the multidimensional kind of learning that it promotes. While developing research knowledge, the participants were also enhancing their computer skills and becoming aware of the complexity of distance learning. This learning condition is not possible in a regular classroom and by course books only. Employing technologies such as the Internet, applying collaborative learning, making course management tools accessible to learners, and using distance learning applications such as videoconferencing systems, create information-rich, stimulant conditions for learning of different kinds. In a very short text, Sylvia reflects on how the course environment contributed to her learning.

> *Blackboard* helped a lot to communicate timely and effectively with my instructors and classmates. I think Blackboard helped me understand the idea of distance learning. It was very rewarding to read our work online. I grew as a teacher and as a researcher. It also helped me understand technology more. (Sylvia, C-45)

To what extent does the course management system hinder their learning?

The perceived weaknesses of *Blackboard* had to do with reading preferences and time management skills. Although most students were used to spending many hours working on the computer, some of them complained of having to spend on printing materials because they did not feel comfortable reading online. The fact that all reading materials were online was not helpful for Pat, who perceived that *Blackboard* did not meet her needs. She referred to the problems she had with the platform in the following terms.

> Personally, I need to have the printed material because I get very tired of being in front of the computer. Also, there is the problem that some professors take too long in uploading materials. I think more people should be hired to help the instructor in replying to emails, uploading materials and all the activities involved. (Pat, C-1)

Distance learning takes an enormous amount of preparation time from the instructor and from students. Distance education students must be well organized, self-motivated, and possess a high degree of time management skills. Some students with heavy workloads and family commitments have more difficulties than others to cope with the demands of online learning. This was the case of Ann, who preferred printed materials.

173

> I think *Blackboard* is very interesting and useful but also demanding because you need to be constantly connected and most of the time this is hard with all the other obligations one has. (Ann, C-54)

Conclusions

Evidence from this study indicates that distance students valued videoconferencing technology for the support provided by their research adviser, their peers, and the instructor. They received academic assistance, a different perspective on their work, enthusiasm, feedback, opportunities to confront thoughts and opinions, and to share feelings. The challenge perceived in the videoconferencing environment was the physical absence of the instructor. The course management system was perceived as highly beneficial to their learning, mainly because of the amount and variety of support resources concentrated in the site; and because it stimulates different kinds of learning. Some students, however, were not comfortable reading online.

The first implication of these findings is that the combination of videoconferencing and course management technologies is perfectly suited to develop research knowledge in language teacher education programs. Borg (2006) has stressed the importance of continued support from a more experienced individual and opportunities to participate in a community of colleagues as necessary conditions to develop research knowledge in EFL teachers. The participants gave different examples of how technology facilitated opportunities to collaborate, to discuss research issues, and to develop a sense of community. Distance education did not seem to hinder in any way the teachers' efforts to engage in research. On the contrary, they received more proper and richer guidance because Web-based technology facilitated the provision of a larger and more diversified array of reading materials in a more organized way.

174

Moreover, teachers could request and receive assistance in oral or written form, depending on the medium they decided to use or the kind of support needed. For academic assistance, they could resort to the instructor, the adviser or peers, either through the videoconferencing system, the portfolio, the discussion forum, the blog, or email. To feelings, the discussion forum seemed to be to be most frequently used. The possibility of communicating with an adviser was considered important, given the nature of the course. Based on the value that students placed on this kind of support, we suggest that distance research courses include local or distant advisers, and that more research is carried out to identify better ways to provide distance tutoring.

Borg (2006) has called for more empirical studies on the conditions that facilitate research in particular contexts. Research knowledge is a precondition for teacher research and distance learning environments can provide opportunities to develop such knowledge. However, not all student teachers in this study were able to take advantage of the available resources due to skills, preferences and beliefs about learning. Teachers who valued technology highly, and those that perceive it as useful, seemed to have fewer problems using it.

Interaction with others seemed to be what students valued more and looked for when using both videoconferencing and course management technologies. However, people from different cultural backgrounds may prefer other modes of support. Cultural differences could have implications for the mode of support student teachers prefer and the effectiveness of the support they seek. Further research may investigate these issues.

On the other hand, this study did not attempt to investigate in any detailed way the different ways in which interaction was constructed by the students. Further studies could analyze samples of recorded utterances of students engaged in different types of activities through different communication tools to understand how specific supports contribute to and improve the development of research knowledge.

This field study was not without limitations. One of such limitations was the exclusive use of transcript analysis. Despite this limitation, even interpreted tentatively, results can contribute to the current body of research on the broad areas of distance education and language teacher education, as well as the specific areas of learner support and research knowledge.

175

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176

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177

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178