

# Fostering Communication through Blogs in an International, Multi-grade Context

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This is a report on a pedagogical application carried out in a bilingual (Spanish-English), Colombian school in connection with a Canadian and a Chilean one through an online platform hosted by the Francisco José de Caldas University<sup>1</sup>. The different tasks developed intended to show the importance of networking for educational purposes and the place of new technologies in students' learning processes. As a result, this pedagogical intervention enhanced the use of English as a foreign language. Besides, the use of technology raised students' awareness about the cultural differences through contact with other learners of their same or similar age when sharing their thoughts, expectations, questions and answers about topics of common interest.

*Key words:* online, collaboration, forum, communication, blogs

Este es un informe sobre una aplicación pedagógica llevada a cabo en un colegio bilingüe colombiano (español e inglés) en conexión con dos escuelas, una canadiense y otra chilena a través de una plataforma virtual de la universidad Francisco José de Caldas. Las diferentes tareas desarrolladas intentan explicar la importancia de la conexión en red con propósitos educativos y el lugar de las nuevas tecnologías en los procesos de aprendizaje de los estudiantes. Como resultado, esta intervención pedagógica incrementó el uso de inglés como lengua extranjera. Además el uso de la tecnología aumentó la conciencia de los estudiantes acerca de las diferencias culturales a través del contacto con otros estudiantes de su misma edad o similar. al compartir sus pensamientos, expectativas, preguntas y respuestas sobre temas de interés común.

*Palabras clave:* colaboración, virtual, foro, comunicación, blogs

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1 This teaching application called *Fostering Communication through Blogs* was an assignment in the Masters' Program in Applied Linguistic to the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, in Bogotá - Colombia.

## **Introduction**

The Colombian national government through its educational policies has proposed including ICTs to use in everyday teaching and learning experiences in order to enhance the pedagogical transformation that allows Colombian students to develop accurate technological competences and empower intellectual improvement in teachers and students.

By using ICTs continuously, individuals should become more creative, autonomous, capable of solving problems, and producers of ideas to generate new knowledge. The bilingual school ALS also proposes in its PEI allowing students to become critical thinkers by means of acquiring technological and bilingual competences focused on argumentative and problem solving processes, which are connected to the idea the national government assumes in regard to the language framework versus the use of ICTs. Thus, ICTs empower critical thinking, which involves creativity, autonomy, and problem-solving patterns development.

### *Context*

This pedagogical project fostered authentic communication and the use of ICTs among eighth graders at a bilingual (English/Spanish) school in Bogotá, Colombia, tenth graders at Kennebecasis Valley High School Public (KVHSP) in New Brunswick, Canada, and ninth graders at Colegio de Humanidades (CdH) in Villarica, Chile, through the use of personal and group blogs in the virtual forum <http://www.ourdigitalculture.net/admin/directory.html> supported by the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas in Colombia. This virtual platform has been used by students of elementary, middle, and high school, university professors and students of undergraduate and postgraduate studies during the last two years in order to enhance the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language.

### *Purpose*

This pedagogical application intended to show the importance of networking for educational purposes and the place of new technologies in students' learning processes. The use of this virtual space has permitted communication among native and nonnative speakers of English in different countries, and has provided insights about the target culture.

The remaining part of this paper contains the theoretical framework that supports the pedagogical intervention, a brief description of the curricular context, the process of designing and implementing the pedagogical innovation which was carried out in three phases, the pedagogical practices developed in the virtual forum by students from the three institutions, a brief account of the discoveries and successes of the experience and finally, the conclusions.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Online Collaboration*

The participants of this project worked in a collaborative way, there was collaboration among teachers and the students from the three schools (countries) which allowed them to carry out all the activities that had been proposed at the beginning.

According to Knezevick (1996), **collaborative** work means working together to accomplish a task. People involved carry out a series of actions that complements those of their partners, based on respect and appreciation of the others' presence.

Pallop and Pratt (2003) state that collaboration does not just happen. It takes planning and coordination on the part of the instructor to carry out collaborative activity successfully in an online class. There is a need to stay up-to-date and involved in order to assure that students will work with one another in a meaningful way.

The bases of this project were collaboration and interaction among teachers and students of the three schools. Communication among students was through the platform and, communication among teachers was by e-mail. See Annex 1 for samples of the different interventions in the virtual platform.

### *Forum Principles*

This implementation followed the following pedagogic principles suggested by Clavijo, Hine and Quintero (2008):

**Language.** Students were asked to use the English language to communicate in the virtual platform because this project aimed at enhancing communication in an

EFL environment, whereby Colombian and Chilean students could improve their communicative skills by interacting with the Canadian students.

**Reflective thinking.** Students reflected upon some statements posed in regard to their viewpoint about some cultural issues.

**Cross cultural awareness.** Interactions and opinions exchanged in the debate and personal spaces raised students' awareness about similarities and differences the three participant cultures had.

### *Communication through Blogs*

Bloods (2002) suggests that the use of blogs promotes self-awareness. I think it happens because first, students grasp that someone else is going to read what they post. Second, some questions or statements are posted by other participants and those might raise the writer's awareness about the issues proposed. The author also refers to the role the instructor should perform when working in a virtual platform like this. Thus, the instructor should *model the process* or propose the activities to be carried out, the principles to be followed and the goals to be reached. *Guide it*, this is to say, to make sure and collaborate with the students in order to develop all the activities and *evaluate it*, i.e. students' insights are very important to enhance the process (how students felt during the process, if they liked the activities done, their suggestions).

Blogs in language learning constitute an interesting tool for teachers and students. Teachers can use blogs to work on students' writing and pragmatic skills (written communication) even without students noticing it. As soon as students plan their postings, they receive their instructor's feedback and correct what they have to. It engages students in such a way that they enjoy the writing process since they have the opportunity of interacting with people who might have their same interests and thoughts by manipulating the internet, which is the mainstream of technology nowadays.

This intervention adopts the definition of task given by Willis (1996): "a goal-oriented, communicative activity with a specific outcome, where the emphasis is on exchanging meaning, not producing specific language forms". According to Willis, there are six kinds of tasks and these are listening, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem solving, sharing personal experiences, and creating. Thus, the ones that fit this proposal are comparing and sharing personal experiences.

The principles this project is based on are those of the communicative approach or communicative language teaching (Dictionary of Applied Linguistics, 90). Communication involves the integration of different language skills. Thus, the learners use a language to communicate, despite their imperfect target language performance, and the communicative objective is clearly reached because the participants collaborated with and enriched each other.

Likewise, the types of activities carried out enhance learning and cause it to happen. Learning is a process of creative construction and involves trial and error, so that authentic and meaningful student-centered activities should be the goal of the classroom instruction.

In conclusion, communicative purposes were fostered through collaboration not just among students but also among teachers who share similar learning criteria to engage students in their learning processes.

## **Pedagogical Design and Implementation**

This process was developed in three phases: establishing contacts, carrying out the activities in the forum and observation of an evaluation stage.

### ***Phase 1: Establishing Contacts***

The following steps were taken into account in order to begin this intervention. First, communication was established among teachers. After having a school and a teacher to work with, the teachers interchanged e-mails with each other.

Then we established communication with the University of Dundee for technical support to access the forum. Names of students were sent to Professor Hine; he was in charge of assigning passwords in order for the students to access the virtual forum.

Afterwards, we established communication between groups of teachers for planning and proposing the activities for the teachers in Chile and Canada to be carried out in the forum (student pair work and individual work).

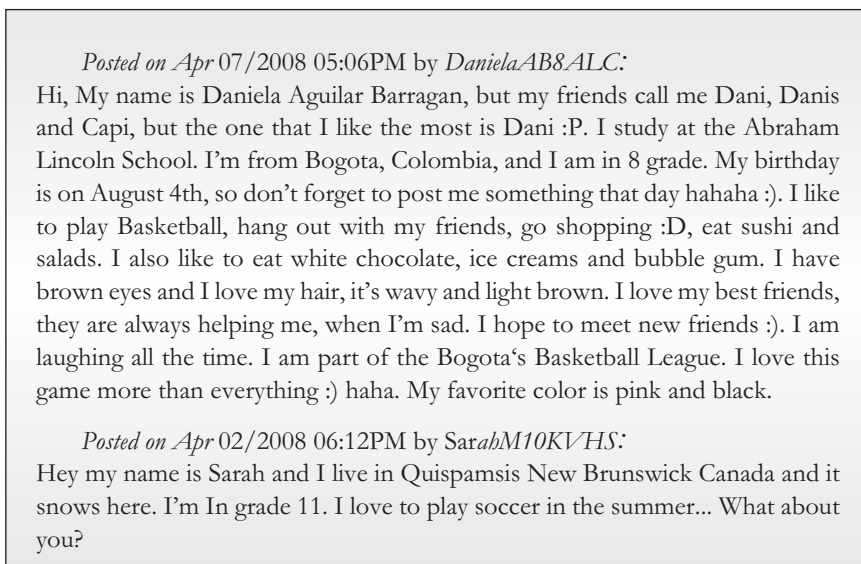
The bases of this project were collaboration and interaction among teachers and students of the three schools. Communication among students was through the platform and communication among teachers was by e-mail.

### *Phase 2: Carrying out the Activities in the Forum*

The spaces used during this intervention were the personal and debate blog. The activities done by the students in the virtual forum were as follows:

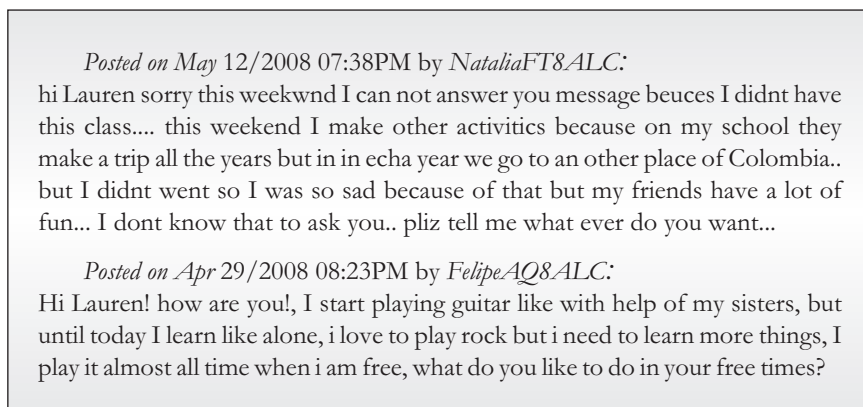
**Activity 1.** Tour through the different platform spaces. Familiarization with the way the platform works and its utility as a tool to expand communication and learning possibilities.

**Activity 2.** Students wrote a draft of their profiles in order to introduce themselves. As can be seen in the samples shown in Figure 1, students introduced themselves to the partner at the Canadian school they decided to work with.



**Figure 1.** Samples of students' profiles.

**Activity 3.** The students replied to the messages they received as a way to keep communication alive. It was an activity they did every single week and they were asked to end the posting with a question. Here, students reply to messages, as can be read in the samples contained in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Samples of students' responses to each other.

In the previous samples we can see that students talk about the activities they like. They send and reply messages and hence, show that communication is happening.

**Activity 4.** The students created a hypertext about their hometown. Here students tell each other about their country and city (Figure 3).

The use of hypertexts gave students the choice of including much more information that they wanted their virtual friends to know about their country. In addition, hypertexts allowed them to enrich information by adding different virtual sources that clearly contributed to developing the reader's curiosity about any topic.

**Activity 5.** The final activity took the form of a debate divided into two parts, namely:

1. The students in Canada wrote some questions to be answered by the Colombian students in the school space.
2. The Colombian teacher posted four statements related to cultural issues to be discussed by the other students at the other schools (see Figure 4). This activity was adapted from Kohls (1979, p. 60).

The following is the last question the Colombian students addressed as a part of activity number 5: What do you imagine people from other countries think

*Posted on May 12/2008 07:58PM by AndresFP&ALC:*

**Bogotá** is the capital city of the Republic of Colombia, as well as the largest and most populous city in our country. With an average population of 7,033,914 inhabitants and 8,244,980 including the entire city Bogotá with its metropolitan area, which includes municipalities such as Chía, Cota, Soacha, Cajicá and La Calera. Bogotá's altitude of 2600 meters above the sea level makes it the third highest major city in the world after La Paz and Quito. Also in the way of comparison, the city of Bogota has land area that is largcer than the cities of New York City, Mexico City, or Sao Paulo.

**Geography:** Bogotá is located in the center of the country, on the east of the Savannah of Bogotá. The geographical site is actually a high plateau in the Andes mountains. The 'sabana' is bordered to the east by the Eastern Cordillera of the Andes mountain range. Surrounding hills, which limit city growth, run from south to north, parallel to the Guadalupe and Monserrate mountains. The western city limit is the Bogotá River. The Sumapaz paramo (moorland) borders the south and to the north Bogotá extends over the mentioned plateau up to the towns of Chía and Sopó.

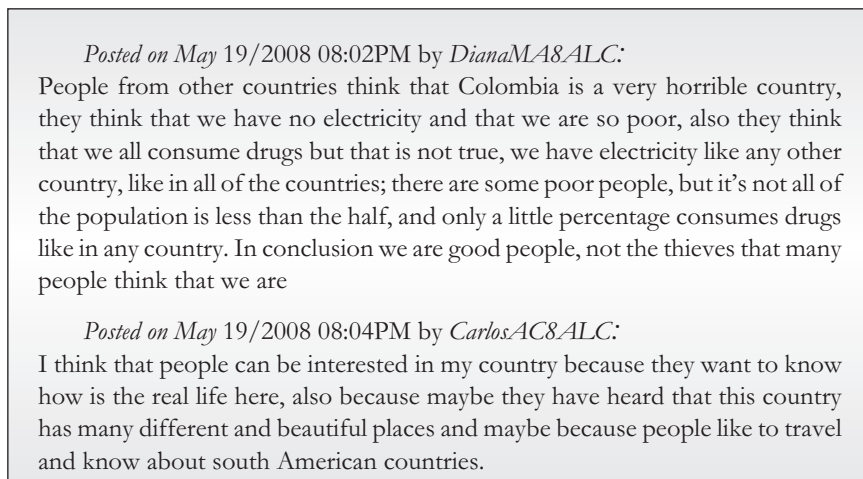
**Figure 3.** Samples of students' hypertexts.

Read the following statements. Indicate whether you agree or disagree with them:

- Foreigners who go to live in a new country should give up their foreign habits and adapt to the new country as soon as possible.
- Many of the world's population groups do not take enough initiatives to develop, so they stay underdeveloped.
- English should be accepted as the universal language of the world.
- Some of the world's populations have not yet reached the higher states of civilization.

**Figure 4.** Statements for discussion.





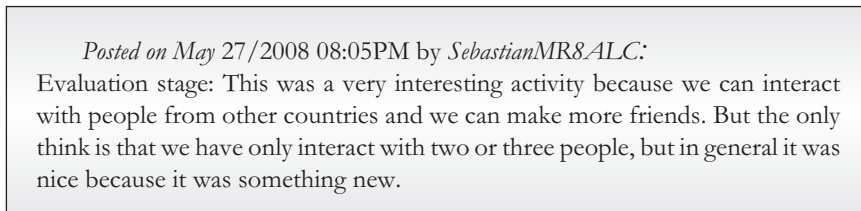
**Figure 5.** The Colombian students write about their home country.

about your country? The Figure 5 shows the students' answers to the posed questions.

This is a way of inviting others to visit it. The objective of these questions was to have students reflect upon the way foreigners may perceive Colombia. Interestingly, students were not concerned about making grammatical mistakes, but on communicating their viewpoint without interferences.

### ***Phase 3: Evaluation Stage***

Students were asked to write a brief evaluation stage of the activities carried out. The students wrote what they thought about the activities done on the platform. Some excerpts are gathered in Figure 6.



*Posted on May 20/2008 08:15PM by DiegoLB&ALC:*

Evaluation stage:

The activity for me was very interesting, because we could talk and interact with people of other countries, also we have debates, and we could show the other people of other countries, how we live and how our school looks like.

*Posted on May 27/2008 08:28PM by DanielBN&ALC:*

well, having finished this activity I think, it was a better form of practicing English than writing on a notebook. I think, it is a good thing to speak to people from different parts of the world and I think is a good form of studying.

*Posted on May 27/2008 08:27PM by MariaGG&ALC:*

All the activities that we made in I.S. class this bimester, I think that was the best in all the years that I have had I.S. because we can know a lot of new people and share our cultures. I don't like some question that we have to answer because they seem to be written by an outsider person.

*Posted on May 19/2008 07:32PM by DianaMA&ALC:*

Evaluation stage: I liked so much this activity because it is a very fun way of practicing our English and being in the computer because we all like to be on facebook or msn because it's too nice, also I liked that we could talk with many people from other countries and know a little bit of their customs.

*Posted on May 20/2008 07:29PM by PaulaCR&ALC:*

Evaluation Stage:

This activity was very good for me, it was funny, the interaction with others was nice. I like to meet new people so this was very cool for me.

One bad thing about this was the constant communication we had to maintain with some people.

*Posted on May 20/2008 08:31PM by FelipeAQ&ALC:*

I think the activities we made were interesting because we could communicate with people in English so I learned a lot of this and I think we need to make more activities like this one.

*Posted on May 20/2008 07:29PM by PaulaCR&ALC:*

Evaluation Stage:

This activity was very good for me, it was funny, and the interaction with others was nice. I like to meet new people so this was very cool for me.

One bad thing about this was the constant communication we had to maintain with some people.

In conclusion, it was very nice, another kind of activity and I liked that.

**Figure 6.** Students' reflection upon their participation in their virtual community.

The previous samples evidence how communication and learning can occur if teachers use appealing sources for the students to produce different results. First, students managed to communicate without thinking of the accuracy of the language; their main goal was to send a message. Second, as seen in the different samples, those spelling mistakes did not interfere with communication because the Canadian students replied to the questions accordingly. Anyway grammar and spelling were topics never addressed.

For the teachers, the final activity was a videoconference where we talked about the different systems of education, the possibility of working together next semester, contacting other teachers who might be interested in participating and, of course, a nice friendship. From the videoconference it can be concluded that technology is an outstanding tool for education. There are many resources that can facilitate our performance as teachers. Actually, no conclusions about improvements needed were addressed. Thus, the whole implementation was assumed as a rewarding learning process carried out by the students.

## Conclusions

Pedagogical instruments as technology allow teachers to motivate their students to learn any subject matter as well as trigger professional development issues. Thus, students engage in the implementation of the platform as a tool of communication. Their interest in getting to know others make them look for strategies to achieve their goals. Therefore, teachers can take advantage of those social relationships to teach different aspects related to the target language and its culture as such, in addition to getting a big deal of research possibilities to improve classroom instruction.

Learners were able to explore other people and cultures via inquiry-based classroom projects that involve the focused, intensive study of one or more aspects

of the art, music, literature, religion, values, daily life, customs and traditions of other cultures. In addition, students supplement traditional resources with extensive use of the Internet, both for information and for communication with knowledgeable adults and peers in the country they are studying.

Interestingly, I collected my students' positive opinion of the process carried out, and noticed my students' understanding of some different traits of culture embedded in a meaningful activity. They approached people of their own age and inquired about the lifestyles in an English speaking country while answering questions about the own culture based on their own cultural mindset. In addition, they improved their writing process (grammar, punctuation, coherence, cohesion) by means of the interaction this implementation provoked.

For a generation of young people, technology, particularly the Internet, has assumed a substantial stake in their social and educational lives. Networking gives learners the opportunity to approach different levels of knowledge, be they culture, race or social status.

Discipio (2008) suggests that even with evidence of safe social networking possibilities to help students acquire skills needed for the 21st century and to meet standards within curriculum frameworks of major national education organizations, there remains one challenge to an expanded use of social networks in schools. Our challenge is to harness that informal learning by bringing it to school settings since "each of those activities contains opportunities for learning, creative expression, civic engagement, political empowerment, and economic advancement" (p.8). There are many ways to be social; there is more than one way to learn, and definitely a nearly infinite number of ways to form a network.

To conclude, this was a rewarding activity because I worked with two professionals that strived, helped and collaborated a lot. We kept in touch during the whole process and our students' mindset about the suggested activities comforted our teaching perspectives.

I consider this exploratory pedagogical intervention to be a good start to further research experiences related to multicultural environments dealing with technological opportunities.

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## The Author

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## **Annex 1.** **Communication on the platform**

### **Communication among teachers**

*andrea castellanos* escribió:

Hola Angélica .MI nombre es Andrea Castellanos. La doctora Clavijo te informó sobre el contacto se tus estudiantes con los míos aquí en Btá. Te envió una copia de lo que planeo para que me cuentes si estas de acuerdo o no.

Mariöffffeda Ortiz

jueves, 27 de marzo de 2008 05:45:29 a.m.

Hola Andrea,

Recibi tu e-mail y lei tu proyecto, me parece muy interesante, mi colegio es particular subvencionado por el estado, y mis alumnos son de clase media hacia abajo, este no es un colegio bilingue, aqui Ingles se enseña como cualquier otro subsector. Me dices que tu podrias trabajar con tus alumnos los dias lunes, me gustaria saber cual es la hora en que esto puede ser para ver la posibilidad de arreglar un horario especial aqui.

Espero tu respuesta...

jueves, 27 de marzo de 2008 05:47:22 p.m.

Hola Andrea,

Esta bien voy a esperar los ajustes al proyecto y mañana o el lunes lo presento a mi colegio y de inmediato te responderé la disponibilidad de hacer esto, de verdad me encantaría que pudieramos realizarlo por el bien de los jovenes... saludame a Amparo

Estamos en contacto,

*Enviado:* jueves, 27 de marzo, 2008 14:09:01

Hola Angelica:

Ayer presente el proyecto a mi profesora y ella me recomendó hacer algunos ajustes, los voy a hacer y te lo vuelvo a mandar. Trabajariamos los lunes de 10:40 a 12:10 y de 1:00 a 2:30 hora colombiana.

Gracias por responder,

Andrea Castellanos

lunes, 31 de marzo de 2008 07:44:00 a.m.

Good morning Sandra:

My name is Andrea Castellanos: I work at the Lin School, this is a bilingual school in Bogotá ,Colombia. I would like to know, if you and your students would like to work with me and my eight graders on the platform our digital culture. I`m sending the plan I have , I would appreciate your answer ASAP. Thank you again

Andrea Castellanos

lunes, 31 de marzo de 2008 06:13:27 p.m.

Hi Andrea,

I will offer it to my Grade 10 students in the afternoon. The class is actually Ancient History but I will offer them bonus marks to correspond with your students. Sandra

My students were posting on Thursday and I`ll give them some time this week again to respond to your students. They are really excited and looking forward to talking with your students. Lets keep the momentum up!!

Sandra\

### **Communication among students**

*Posted on Apr 07/2008 07:26PM by DavidGP8.ALC:*

Hi Tyler how are you, I also like those sports and i think snowboarding is incredible, and well i like chemistry no so much fisics, but well. How are you?, you like parties? and i want to ask if you play any instrument?.

*Posted on Apr 08/2008 07:38PM by AndresGP8.ALC:*

hi Tyler....I don`t like those sports I like football because It has more sense than the rugby....I don`t know were that town is locate...but I am also against usa`s government..... why do you are against US government??? Why do you like rubgy?? Where is located that town??