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The Use of Feedback on Accuracy as a Strategy to Enhance Students' Descriptive Writing Skills

on virtual courses.

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Research Report submitted

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the effects of the use of correction symbols on accuracy as a strategy to help learners enhance the writing skill in descriptive texts. The researcher wanted to answer the question if using correction codes, as a form of indirect teacher feedback is effective or not to help learners improve grammar.

To achieve this objective, the researcher relied on three instruments: a questionnaire, a semi-structured interview and some artifacts. The student's questionnaire aimed at finding out their understanding of teachers' feedback and their viewpoints about correcting their own mistakes by the use of symbols. The semi-structured interview was destined to enrich the answers of the questionnaires because the researcher elicited more insights on the use of indirect feedback and attitudes towards writing descriptive texts. Artifacts were analyzed in order to check improvements in grammar aspects. The analysis of the results of the texts showed, to a large extent, the effectiveness of correction symbols in enhancing student's grammar and descriptive texts.

Key words: Writing, feedback, indirect feedback, autonomy, virtual learning.

Resumen

El propósito de este estudio era determinar los efectos de la utilización de símbolos de corrección en gramática como una estrategia para ayudar a los alumnos a mejorar la habilidad de la escritura en textos descriptivos. La investigadora quiso responderla pregunta si el uso de códigos de corrección como una forma de realimentación indirecta del profesor sería eficaz o no para ayudar a los alumnos a mejorar la gramática.

Para lograr este objetivo, la investigadora se basó en tres instrumentos: un cuestionario, una entrevista semi-estructurada y algunos artefactos. El cuestionario del estudiante fue dirigido a averiguar su comprensión con respecto a los símbolos utilizados por el profesor y sus puntos de vista hacia la corrección de sus propios errores mediante el análisis de los símbolos. La entrevista semi-estructurada estaba destinada a enriquecer las respuestas de los cuestionarios ya quela investigadora indagaba más ideas sobre el uso de realimentación indirecta y las actitudes hacia la escritura de textos descriptivos. Los artefactos fueron analizados para comprobar mejoras en aspectos de gramática. El análisis de los resultados de los textos de los estudiantes mostró en gran parte, la efectividad de los símbolos de corrección en la mejora de la gramática y textos descriptivos del estudiante.

Palabras clave: Escritura, realimentación, realimentación indirecta, autonomía, aprendizaje virtual.

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Chapter One: Introduction

English is widely regarded as having become a global language. Globalization has helped this language to have this privileged position as it is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science technology, diplomacy, sports, advertising and pop music among others (Graddol, 1997, p. 2). At the present time, the English language has become more important as a tool of communication. English as a global language sets an important role in teaching this language at school from elementary up to high school and even in university or other levels. From this fact, students are not only expected to speak English nowadays but they also have to be able to write using the foreign language.

Beginner students have difficulty when writing in English. This skill is one of the most challenging aspects of second language learning, and numerous approaches and strategies have been adopted to teach this complex skill. This research project explored indirect feedback as a strategy to help learners in virtual courses to improve their grammar in the writing skill. For that reason, feedback played an important role in motivating students to learn the foreign language as it informed them about the degree of their learning or their needs of enhancement. Brown (1994, pp. 476-500) considered feedback as one of the keys to successful learning. In L2 writing, written feedback on students writing has been considered as an essential part of the learning process. Then, it is remarkable that responding to students' writing is time-consuming and requires a great effort from teachers. Thus, teachers hope that this time and effort which they spend correcting and commenting on students' written work will result in some progress in students' writing skill.

Among different types of teachers' written feedback, indirect feedback is one of the most commonly used in the writing process. This feedback mainly focuses on students' grammatical features and teachers give symbols when problems with grammar occur. Therefore, this research mainly attempted to use teacher's written feedback concentrated on indirect feedback (symbols) to analyze if this type of feedback could help students in virtual courses in the improvement of their writing skill. Finally, this study was supported by Ferris findings that indirect feedback focuses on using symbols to alert students to errors, but gives them the opportunity to fix mistakes by themselves (2002, p.31).

Statement of the problem

Based on empirical observation, it was noticed how students in a virtual program for beginner level at SENA (Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje) struggled with the writing skill, especially when writing descriptive texts. It was evident that students needed more practice doing so, since at that level students had just filled some exercises with words and not with complete sentences or paragraphs written by them. Students had problems in writing even a small text or sentences because they learnt writing without using a good approach or strategy. They were just asked to write a text based on a task given by the teacher in the virtual course. Though, students were not asked if they had the ability to master aspects of writing. The students did not know for example the standard structure of a type of text or how to correct their own writing because they did not recognize the correct answer from their mistakes. Based on that, from the preliminary needs analysis, a questionnaire was administered to 10 students in the virtual program aged between 18 and 45 years old (Appendix 1), students asserted that the most difficult skill to learn in the virtual course was writing due to structure and grammatical aspects. They

argued that when they were given a task in which they were expected to write some descriptive sentences or a paragraph, they felt insecure when performing the written task since they were not trained to do so. Furthermore, students at times were not aware of the tenses in order to perform the written tasks because of their lack of information in the use of structures to write in English, appropriate form to use connectors and in general, rules in the foreign language. Moreover, they mentioned that in the first level they learnt a lot of vocabulary but sometimes they did not know how to use it when writing and forming sentences. Additionally, they asserted that they would like to receive written feedback as sometimes they only received a numerical grade without any feedback from their teachers in the virtual course.

All of these answers made the researcher realize that students in the virtual course at SENA in the second level needed more practice in the writing skill and at the same time receive feedback to practice and reinforce this skill. Writing is an ability and skill that involves conscious effort and much practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas to be understood by others. As Myles (2002, para. 2) states "the ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments. Writing skills must be practiced and learned through experience." On this basis it may be inferred that for beginner students in the virtual course to become better in writing skill, several exercises need to be developed.

Consequently, the focus of this study was to practice the writing skill by asking students to compose some texts in virtual forums in a course to observe whether the improvement of grammar in descriptive writing could be aided by indirect feedback. The descriptive genre was chosen from the content found in the program of the virtual course.

The researcher was a participant-observer who guided students in the writing process, trained them in the concepts such as descriptive texts and feedback, and analyzed the artifacts produced by the students.

Research Question& Objectives

The following research question, general objective and specific objectives will allow aid me to discover the possible effects of indirect feedback in descriptive texts with my A1 students once this project is conducted.

Research Question

What is the effect of indirect feedback on accuracy in descriptive texts written by A1 level students?

Research Objectives

General Objective

To identify, describe and document the effects, if any, of giving indirect feedback on accuracy on the students' improvement of their writing skill of descriptive texts.

Specific Objective:

To analyze if giving feedback to the students through virtual forums can raise students' language awareness to improve grammar in the descriptive writing skill.

Rationale/Justification

The aim of this research project is to contribute to the field of foreign language teaching and learning, so that teachers can be informed about the important role that feedback practices play in the development of the writing skill. Over the time, the use of feedback in language learning and teaching has had an important role since it is a strategy that can help students in the improvement of their foreign language skills, and allow students to have evidence of their progress.

In the first virtual English course at SENA, the practice of writing skill was generally developed using Tell Me More ® (TMM) which is an e-learning platform used by the students in the virtual course to learn the foreign language through different exercises. During the early stages of using TMM students mainly filled out exercises with words. As time progressed these students started to ask for more practice in writing. As a result of the students desire to do more in writing, the teacher-researcher started to get students to participate more in the forums in the virtual course by posting descriptive texts.

Consequently, this project attempted to implement indirect feedback to address learners' particular needs for the improvement of their grammar in the written texts. Moreover, this study also intended to give account of the students' perceptions towards the implementation of indirect feedback when writing the second version of their written texts.

As noted above, the researcher considered that when using indirect feedback in the students written texts contributed to emphasizing the importance of reflecting on errors as a way to improve and not to discourage learners. Biggs (2003) states that, students need sufficient feedback on their work in order to improve, because feedback is an important aspect in encouraging learning (pp. 40-42).

As a result, by using indirect feedback on descriptive written texts, by exploring students' analysis upon feedback practice and by using it as a way to learn, the researcher wanted to raise awareness of the importance of feedback as a tool to guide students in the language learning process; hence, as a tool to change the view that indirect feedback only focuses on errors and marks in the writing process but as a way to enhance the process by reflecting on them. Flower (1979 cited in Asiri, 1996) points out that, providing teacher's feedback not only intends to help learners monitor their progress, but also to encourage them to take another's view and adapt a message to it.

Therefore, this study expected to gain more insight of using teacher's indirect feedback in beginner Level at the virtual English course at SENA and its possible effect on students' writing skill in particular in descriptive writing texts. Also, the strategy could be replicated by other teachers in other virtual environments to make the writing-development process more effective and efficient for both teachers and learners.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

The following is a discussion on the constructs that underlie the study and what they represent as well as similar studies.

Teacher and student role in virtual learning environments

This study sets up to improve writing through the use of virtual learning environments that require a level of commitment from the teacher as well as from the learner. Traditionally, the main role of the teacher in asynchronous online teaching environments has been to encourage student participation, act as coordinator for group planning, suggest alternatives, model certain behaviors, reflect on students written postings, remain present to learners' needs and foster the sense that there is a learning community online (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001, pp. 1 - 17).

Therefore, learning processes in virtual environments are usually encouraged by teachers. However, this is a process where learners as well as teachers are essential in the development of a teaching/learning practice as they are autonomous in the establishment of schedules and participation along the course. Thus, the participations in activities and in this case in written ones in forums are not compulsory for students. However, some students responded to the process in a good way until they have finished the course.

Characteristics of the Student in a Virtual Learning Environments

Distance learning involves a high level of interaction between teacher and student, interaction that is essential if the learning process in a virtual environment is to be successful.

Despite the fundamental role of the technology in distance learning, the success of all such programs demands focusing on the learning needs of the students themselves that they be tailored to the learner's age, culture, socioeconomic background, personal interests, experience, and level of education (Sherry, 1995, p. 337-365).

Computer-mediated technology permits the students to take distance learning courses where internet is accessible and there is no need to go to face-to-face classes. However, the freedom provided by virtual environments requires that individual learners be endowed with sufficient self-discipline and self-motivation to take more responsibility for their own learning, organize time, and work with the technology. Thus, online learners need to have a number of skills and competences which are not a birth gift, but have to be acquired and practiced persistently, knowing that the skills and competences applied in traditional settings, should be reinforced, replaced, or reoriented when learning virtually. It is difficult to know the best characteristics of a good student in a virtual learning environment. However, Bautista et al (2006, pp. 43-45) asserts some characteristics which some have been italicize due to their close relevance to this study:

- *Personal involvement and responsibility in their performance as a student.*

- Respect for classmates and their opinions and proposals.

- Reading and writing thoughtfully, with their own judgement.

- *They should act honestly, not copy work by others or from other sources and pass it off as their own.*

- *They should ask, participate, and contribute to the virtual classroom.*

- *They should know what help channels exist and use them if they need help or clarification.*

- They should be willing "to explore, to experiment and to learn in another way".

- *They organize their time adequately in such a way that they make their academic devotion compatible with their work and family obligations.*

- *They know that learning in a virtual environment is not necessarily easier.*

Thus, for the purpose of this study, these characteristics are important since the students in the virtual course at SENA platforms must be responsible and autonomous to participate in the course. Furthermore, they need to organize their time to respond to the activities on time and ask when they need clarification.

The Role of the Teacher in a Virtual Learning Environment

Salomon (1996, pp. 17-38) defines the role of the teacher in the hi-tech classroom as a diagnostician and moderator whose role is to work with student groups, and help them make progress on their own in coping with the task presented to them by the computer. Salomon claims that teaching and learning in hi-tech classrooms or virtual environments needs to be based on the understanding of learning and technology. Thus, the main characteristics of teacher's role in online learning are: the technical operation domain, treat problems and solve them in the virtual course, take into account the needs of individual students, encourage the development of the activities and be able to make wise use of technology.

Therefore, in this case in virtual environments, different kinds of activities are used, such as writing activities in the forums, on-line sessions to help students with the pronunciation of some words or receiving feedback in synchronous time and the use of recorded videos and dialogues for listening , among others. Then, as mentioned above, these two characters, teacher and learner, are the most important ones during this research project because the use of virtual environments require that the learner is autonomous and plays a significant role during the

learning process, and the teacher who is a facilitator, coordinator or researcher in the process and helps the learner in their advancement.

Having explained the role of the teacher and the learner in virtual learning environments, it is time to focus on the process of autonomous learning.

Autonomy

According to Holec (1981, p. 3), "learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own directed learning". Little (2004) states that it requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management. Gardner (1999) adds that "it is the process of taking personal responsibility for one's own progress, and notes that this process requires self-assessment in order to determine one's level of knowledge and skills" (p.50). The latter is the concept that this research project took into account as in virtual environment processes, the learner is perceived as a decision maker, developing the capacity to select the tools and resources appropriate to the task they want to perform independently. Thus, as it was mentioned above autonomy involves that students take charge of their own process of learning. In virtual learning environments students need to be responsible, participate and progress in the language learning autonomously. To be precise, teachers in virtual environments allow students to be autonomous, thereby making them responsible for their learning progression and do not force or push them in their development. Therefore, this study ensured that the learners were allotted the opportunity to be in charge of their own advancement.

Fazey and Fazey (2001) emphasize three key psychological factors that predispose learners to be able to develop autonomy; which are perception of competence, perceived internal locus of control and intrinsic motivation (p. 345). They claim that the internal perceptions of students as to the locus of control regarding academic success or failure are important for the development of

learner autonomy. In other words, students may take more responsibility for learning if they believe themselves to be in control of the outcome. Nunan & Lamb (1996) consider autonomy – at this stage called "semi-autonomy": "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions" (p. 156). However, the achievement of autonomy is a process that poses struggle and difficulty, as rightly suggested by Dickinson (1987):

"Autonomy is an ultimate; it constitutes a kind of nirvana to be achieved through struggle. Learners do not achieve autonomy by being told to nor by being denied conventional class teaching […] Autonomy is achieved slowly, through struggling towards it, through careful training and careful preparation on the teacher's part as well as on the learner's […]" (p. 2). Given that autonomy is a goal, an ultimate, this study was an attempt to see whether the implementation of indirect feedback in forums' participation could enable students to realize their current situation in the pursuit for autonomy, or if autonomy, from this perspective, is a difficult path to pursue.

As it was mentioned previously learning in virtual environments requires learners to be autonomous of their process as they are in charge of their learning progress and the teacher guides them until the end of the course. That is, in virtual learning environments as the SENA courses are, the learners that finish a course are the ones that have a high level of responsibility and commitment with their learning process.

Finally, **Why learner autonomy in language learning?** There is a major argument in favor of trying to make learners autonomous. Meaning that if learners are reflectively engaged with their learning, it is more likely for them to be more efficient and effective due to the fact that they will be engaged with the learning process and will be able hopefully focus on the goals or

objectives for their enhancement. Then, this was the aim of virtual learning where learners need to be active in their process to be successfully acquiring the target language.

Feedback

Feedback is one of the constructs that need to be clarified as the fundamental elements of this research study. Since feedback is the central unit of this study, the participants were explained on the meaning of this concept to understand the feedback they would receive in the forums. Feedback has been defined in different ways, depending very much on the school of thought from where the definition originated. Keh (1990) defines feedback as the; "input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision" (294-304). In other words, it is the comments, questions, and suggestions a reader gives a writer in order for them to check their texts. Freedman (1987) offers a more exhaustive definition. She states that feedback "includes all reaction to writing, formal or informal, written or oral, from teacher or peer, to a draft or final version" (p.5). Leeman (2007) points out that feedback is a mechanism that provides the learner with information regarding their success or failure, consisting of a wide variety of responses to learner output (pp. 111-137).

From the above definitions it is perceived that feedback can derive in different forms, from different readers, giving diverse forms to respond to a task, for example using comments to correct a mistake to let the writer knows that something is wrong in his/her written participation and with the purpose to improve this contribution.

Therefore, for grammatical correction to work, the correction can be precisely done by teacher's feedback. For instance, Sommers (1982, pp. 148-156); Raimes (1983) and Ziv (1984) state that feedback is a fundamental aspect in the writing process and it plays a central role in learning to write successfully. A good model of feedback was provided by Vigil and Oller in

1976 (as cited in Brown 2007) with their communication feedback model. With a set of traffic-light metaphors, the authors aim at discerning how affective feedback and cognitive feedback can serve for error correction in language classrooms. In short, affective feedback should determine whether the speaker should continue with his or her attempts to convey a message. Cognitive feedback, in turn, appears to be the point where corrective feedback is located and where error correction takes place (red or yellow lights) (p. 274). It is worth noting that green lights symbolized non-corrective feedback, too many of which may lead to fossilization. For this study, it is believed that this model serves to illustrate that feedback must have a point: it should enable the learner to modify the language that is being produced, if any advancement is expected to be made. This affirmation is supported by Brookhart's (2008) view of feedback:

> Feedback can be very powerful if done well. The power of formative feedback lies in its double-barreled approach, addressing both cognitive and motivational factors at the same time. Good feedback gives students information they need so they can understand where they are in their learning and what to do next— the cognitive factor. Once they feel they understand what to do and why, most students develop a feeling that they have control over their own learning— the motivational factor. Good feedback contains information that a student can use, which means that the student has to be able to hear and understand it (p. 2).

Thus, feedback is helpful in encouraging students to write a given task several times, if they want in order to produce a much more improved piece of writing (Asiri, 1996). This can be adopted and benefited from in a teaching situation where rewriting is encouraged. In the lack of feedback, students can become discouraged (Hedge, 2000, p. 302), and lose sense of how they are doing and which aspects of their writing they should pay more attention to.

As it was mentioned in the statement of the problem, students in virtual English courses struggle with writing; consequently, teacher's indirect feedback was used to provide students with information about the errors they make and allow them to notice and become aware of their mistakes. Then, even though a variety of feedback has been proposed up to date, the research project at SENA was mainly dealing with indirect feedback and this is the one that is first explained. Later, a different type of teacher's written feedback will be briefly introduced; content or meaning-based feedback.

Indirect feedback

Indirect feedback was the type of feedback chosen specifically to be a part of this research project. This type of feedback focuses on using symbols to alert students to errors, but gives them the opportunity to fix mistakes by themselves (Ferris, 2002, p. 31). Frodesen (2001, pp. 233-248) declares that indirect feedback is useful as students are able to express their ideas more clearly in writing and to get clarification on any comments that teachers have made. Similarly, Fulgor (2006) states that in indirect feedback, students appreciate its beneficial effect on their learning since it encourages students to reflect on aspects of their writing and develop improvements (p. 34). This is the main reason why this project has included this type of feedback taking into consideration that it could benefit students in the virtual program.

Maarek (2009) carried out a study at the department of English in the University of Mentouri, Constantine, with two groups of first year students. The study taught both groups correction symbols in order to make students familiar with this technique. Students were required to write some paragraphs responding to a topic "I hope if there are more than twenty-four hours in a day". The students' papers were collected and corrected out of class using correction

symbols. Next, the students were handed their writings and asked to rewrite their paragraphs, taking into account the underlined mistakes and symbols. The study concluded that correction symbols were an effective technique in enhancing students' self-correction.78% of the students asserted that indirect feedback helped them to enhance their writing after receiving symbols from their teachers (p. 56).

Unlike Maarek (2009) study, it was developed in a face-to-face setting, but correction symbols were used in the form as this study did, and the results obtained are of great relevance as in both studies the concept of indirect feedback play a central role to facilitate or enhance learning.

It could be concluded, then, that feedback acts as a powerful tool of both the cognitive and the motivational conditions in the learner. When handled well, it could prove a useful way to help students gain better control over their own learning

Seng (2010) carried out a similar study at STKIP PGRI Sumatera Barat institution with a group of students who needed to write a descriptive text and receive indirect feedback from the teacher. After the researcher analyzed the students' texts again, he concluded that the implementation of teacher's indirect feedback in assessing writing could improve students' writing quality. He could see that students' progress during the process. In the first draft, the students started to write a composition by using descriptive text pattern and they produced disorder sentences and lacked in language. However at the end of the process, students produced better texts learning from the feedback that the teacher gave them.

It was noted by Seng (2010) that the implementation of teacher's indirect feedback in assessing writing can improve students' writing quality. The author mentioned that after the teacher gave them indirect feedback that showed their problem in writing, even tough, they were

still lack in language use aspect. Then, they were taught about the language use more intensively and the result is in the third draft, students had produced good organization and correct language use. This result shows that the students did improve in their practices. Seng (2010) mentioned some advantageous aspects of indirect feedback; not only do the author claim that the participants evidenced linguistic improvement, but he also emphasized that students reported that they see indirect feedback as having a high value to analyze errors and would like to use indirect feedback in future classes (p. 20).

Robb, Ross and Shortreed (1986) carried out a study in Japan with a total of 134 Japanese college freshmen. They were assigned to write some narrative compositions in order to be revised by the teacher and evaluate the effects of different types of feedback on error in the written work of second language writers. Four methods of feedback were used to know the effects of feedback in the writing skill. The first type of feedback was corrections done by the instructor, covering all categories of lexical, syntactic, and stylistic errors. Once the papers were returned, the students needed only to copy the original compositions incorporating the instructor's corrections. The second type of feedback was codes marked in every error students made. Students in this group used a guide to decipher the instructor's markings on their papers. The third type of feedback was a marked done with a yellow text-marking pen. The former specified the location of the places in need of editing or revision and finally, the last type were errors marked with the number of errors per line and written in the margins of the student's paper. Students were requested to reread each line of their composition to search for the places in need of revision (pp. 83-93).

As a result of the study by Robb, Ross & Shortreed (1986), it was concluded that feedback given to the students resulted in accuracy in some students' writing, but for others it was not convincingly demonstrated. Nevertheless, it was noticed that practice in writing using feedback

over time resulted in gradual increases in the mean of scores and grammar of all students when compared with the initial pretest scores, regardless of the method of feedback they received.

From the studies above mentioned, it is important to highlight that feedback is a strategy that most of the time helps learners to know about the advancement in their foreign language process. Therefore, to make indirect feedback more effective, Lee (2004) states that indirect feedback can be done by a symbol representing a specific kind of error (T=verb tense, Sp=spelling) and to reduce student confusion, teachers can consistently use a standard set of symbols or markings to indicate place and type of error and train the students in what kinds of corrections to make based on each symbol. Furthermore, teachers should familiarize students with the system so they will not be surprised when new symbols occur. Therefore, this strategy is the one that was used throughout the development of the research.

Content-based feedback

It is also known as content or meaning-based feedback. Content-based feedback focuses more on content quality and organizational features in students' composition and teachers provide overall comments on where it does not make sense in terms of content or give some comments on logical misconceptions in writing without pointing out specific grammatical errors.

Zamel (1985) was also interested in the effects of teacher's written feedback. According to her study, when a teacher gave two types of feedback together, for example grammar feedback and content feedback, learners corrected only local grammatical errors and did not pay attention to overall content features or logical mistakes which can be underlying problems in writing. As a result, learner's writing ability did not show any positive changes later on (pp. 79-101). Based on her findings, she claimed that pointing out grammatical errors and commenting on general

content and organization together could cause learners to be confused on which type of response deserves higher priority and obstruct their development of actual writing competence.

Kepner (1991) strongly believed in the efficacy of content-based teacher feedback. He showed superiority of the method by comparing form-focused feedback with content-based comments in terms of level of grammatical accuracy and level of thinking expressed in contents of student writing. In an experiment conducted by him, two groups of students learning Spanish as L2 received different types of written feedback and were measured their degree of development during one semester. According to his conclusion, grammatical error correction is not likely to help to improve the level of accuracy or to enhance the ability of thinking inL2 writing (pp. 305-313).

Lee (1997) showed a different result in regard of correcting surface errors yields a better result than meaning-based correction in student writing performance. For this result, she analyzed that it is because it is more difficult to fix correcting meaning and logical errors of writing than surface errors. In other words, correcting meaning and logical errors of writing is a cognitive demanding work particularly for students with low language proficiency. Thus, in this research project the feedback on accuracy was also a strategy used to notice if learners in virtual courses at SENA could improve grammar in writing.

Writing Skill

Writing is another important component in this research, since the tasks that students developed were written activities, taking into account descriptive texts while participating in forums at SENA by way of the virtual platform.

The researcher has noted from experience, that writing is one of the most difficult skills for students to develop. In this regard, there has been debate on the nature of writing and on the way in which a writer achieves text.

Taking the writer as the point of departure, an expressivist view of writing conceives thinking as a preceding step to writing; it also holds that "free expression of ideas can encourage self-discovery and cognitive maturation" (Hyland, 2009, p. 18). As further stated by Hyland (2009), writing is, from this perspective, a developmental process that cannot be learned nor defined narrowly based on notions of grammar accuracy. However, he adds, this view fails to offer clear theoretical principles to evaluate good writing.

Flower and Hayes (1981) proposed a theory on the cognitive processes to writing, in which they perceived it as a problem-solving situation. Their model conceived writing as a non-linear, even probably simultaneous set of inter-related elements: task environment, (i.e. decision to solve a rhetorical problem, and the text that is written so far) the writing process (i.e. planning, translating, and reviewing) and long-term memory (i.e. knowledge of topic, audience and writing plans) (pp. 369-373). This model dominated, or still does, mainstream pedagogical approaches to writing perhaps due to its simplicity and potential for teachers to adopt it in the classroom. However, as Hyland (2009) points, out, the model fails to describe *why* learners write the way they do, and leaves teachers alone as to how to advise their students to improve their writing practices (p. 23).

Reid (1993, p. 217) states that writing is essentially begun of the students writing experience from a formal school setting and informal "real life" situation. That is, at the beginning writing is learned through academic learning then it will be continuing as a part of the human life. According to Nunan (1999, p. 88) writing process includes inventing ideas, thinking

about how to express them, and organizing them into paragraphs as clear as possible.

Consequently, the ideas should be organized and arranged to be understandable and pleasant.

For the current study, the strategy stated by Reid (1993) supports this study as students in the virtual course are beginners and at the beginning practice the development of the writing skill by receiving formal instruction on how to respond to the text they should write, although not only that would count towards the achievement of the objective to improve grammar through feedback. As to Nunan's idea (1999), this project intended that students could enhance grammar through feedback. Then, at the same time it was thought that this process could help the organization of a text and this to be more comprehensive.

The Process of Writing

Different stages have been adopted through the time when writing a text. These stages or steps can vary. According to Lee (2004), in improving the effectiveness of writing, there are some important proceedings that must be noticed in teaching writing.

In teaching writing, the teaching should engage students in peer /self-evaluation. When the criterion is applied, the learner becomes better informed about the requirements of good writing (for specific genres) and provides students with a language for discussing their writing. Gardner and Johnson (1997) describe the stages of the writing process: "Writing is a fluid process created by writers as they work. Accomplished writers move back and forth between the stages of the process, both consciously and unconsciously. Young writers, however, benefit from the structure and security of following the writing process in their writing". Thus, the process of writing depends on the knowledge of the writer when developing this activity. For some writers there are no stages since they do this unconsciously. Nevertheless, novice writers need some steps to develop this ability. In this research project as the students were in beginner level of the

virtual course, they were explained how to write descriptive texts and which aspects this type of

text should include. Though, not all of the students responded with a well written descriptive text.

Oshima and Hogue (1999, p.3) asserts that there are four main stages in the writing

process: prewriting, planning, writing and revising draft, and writing the final copy.

Prewriting is the first step in producing a piece of writing. Students make decisions about

why to write and which aspects of a topic to focus. After getting the ideas to write, students have

to plan to organize them well. Harmer (2004) states that in this stage (planning) writers have to

think about three main issues. The purpose of writing, the audience to write for and the content

structure, ideas or arguments to be included in the planning stage.

Later, the writing or revising draft which is intended to be revised as in the first time

written texts are not always perfect. And finally, writing a final copy. The final version is the best

writing that writers have. This is a process that writers think should be the complete one.

From the strategy mentioned above, as this research study attempted to explore indirect

feedback as a way to help learners improve the writing skill, it was essential to define that written

products followed a similar process as Oshima and Hogue (1999) identified. Students produced a

text (prewriting) which was revised and given feedback and after students revised it again. They

would include some improvements after analyzing the codes they received from the teacher-

researcher.

Thus, students would develop the writing process by receiving a task to be performed

within a week. This was the process in which feedback was given as a strategy for them to

enhance their writing skill. However, no attention was paid to the organization of the text but to

the enhancement of grammar.

Descriptive Writing

Through the forums' participation, this study aimed at seeing the extent to which grammar in descriptive texts could be improved, if it can at all. Then it is important to note what is considered descriptive writing.

There are different approaches in writing; one of them is genre based approach. The use of genre approach in solving the problem in students' writing, particularly in language use and organization is a very effective way. Derewianka (1992, p. 17) stated that a genre is a kind of text types that have structure in different ways and characterized by own language features. Genre based approach can be said to make the text structurally and characterized which consists of purpose, generic structure, and language features.

According to Martin in Grabe and Kaplan (1996), the factual writing consists of six types, they are; recount, procedure, description, report, explanation, and exposition. However in this study, the text was focused on the descriptive text as most of the topics in the virtual course were related to situations and people which was better for the students to describe.

Descriptive text is a text which says what a person or a thing is like or to provide enough vivid detail to help the reader create a mental picture of what is being written about. Descriptive text can be divided from its purpose, generic structure and language feature. The purpose in descriptive writing is to engage a reader's attention, to create characters, to set a mood or create an atmosphere, to bring writing to life, and also to help a writer develop an aspect of their work, for example to create a particular mood, atmosphere or describe a place so that the reader can create vivid pictures of characters, places, objects etc. (Martin in Grabe and Kaplan, 1996).

The generic structure of descriptive texts are: identification; identifying the phenomenon to be described in general, and description; describing the phenomenon in parts, qualities, or/and

characteristics. They may choose vivid, fresh language, they may use examples, they might take

something ordinary and by comparing it with something extraordinary, make

it interesting, or they may use their senses. (Medina, 2003, p. 152).

The language uses of this text should rely on precisely chosen vocabulary with carefully

chosen adjectives and adverbs. It is focused and concentrated only on the aspects that add

something to the main purpose of the description. Sensory description – what is heard, seen,

smelt, felt, tasted. Precise use of adjectives, similes, metaphors to create images/pictures in the

mind, strong development of the experience that "puts the reader there" focuses on key details,

powerful verbs and precise nouns (Medina, 2003, p. 152).

Thus, the students in this study were not familiar with descriptive texts. However, they

were explained how to write this types of texts at the beginning of the virtual course in order for

them to develop the activities. Nevertheless, attention was not paid to whether the participants'

forum entries really met the requirements of a descriptive text, but basically that they described

their stories according to the topic required using their own ideas.

Chapter Three: Research Design

This chapter deals with the research question and the objectives is also made, as well as a description of the context in which this study was carried out. An account of the participants and of the data collection instruments is also given. Finally, a brief discussion is shown of the ethical considerations of the study and of the ways in which validity and reliability were achieved.

Feedback refers to the information that learners can receive from their teacher or any other learning participant about their performance, which will help them take self-corrective actions and enhance their progress. As mentioned in chapter two, learners could receive feedback from several sources: peers, parents, and the teacher. The purpose of giving feedback is to enhance learner's performance, because it provides constructive advice and guidance to learners in their effort to raise their performance levels. Feedback is generally given for informational and/or motivational purposes. Informational feedback corrects errors that the learner commits, but it should not be demotivating. Feedback can also be used as a device to reinforce learning. Then, effective feedback focuses on the learner's performance and stresses both strengths and suggestions for improvement.

Thus, this research study sought to explore how indirect feedback on accuracy given through virtual forums could be used as a strategy to enhance students' grammar in descriptive Writing.

The following table summarizes the main data regarding the research and instructional design. Afterwards, there is a detailed explanation of each aspect.

Type of study	Qualitative action research. (Nunan, 1992) (Hopkins, 1993)
Setting	SENA virtual environment. Blackboard® platform
Participants	6 students from beginner level. Researcher's role: teacher–researcher.
Instruments	Questionnaires Semi – structured interviews Students' artifacts
Materials	Students used Blackboard® platform available at https://sena.blackboard.com/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp

Table 1. Research design framework

Type of Study

The type of study that was followed was a qualitative action research. Nunan (1992) states that action research is a process of formulating questions, problems, or hypotheses; collecting data or evidence relevant to these questions/problems/hypotheses; and analyzing or interpreting these data (p. 3). Thus, a pedagogical intervention was carried out to identify, describe and solve the questions of this study to interpret the effectiveness of indirect feedback on students' and analyze if any improvement could be raised on learners' writing skill. So, the aim of action research studies is the improvement of the teaching/learning process where the teacher and students are involved, together with the environment where the study occurred. Therefore, the environment of this research study took place in the virtual learning platform Blackboard® where the forums were posted and in which participants and researcher posted their entries.

Furthermore, action research in education has been studied by many researchers, such as: Elliot (1991); Hopkins (1993); Nunan (1993), who state that it is as a powerful tool both for researchers and practitioners. For researchers who want to understand and describe what the practitioners do, and for practitioners who want to improve their practices being prepared to

change them through a process of continuous reflection and action. In this research, feedback was a strategy used for the improvement and development of the writing skill and language proficiency to reflect on its outcome at the end of the pedagogical intervention.

Finally, Bouma (2000, p. 173) states, "The aim of qualitative research is often to describe in detail what is happening in a group, in a conversation or in a community – who spoke to whom?, with what message?, with what feelings?, with what effect?." Therefore, the boundaries of this research were the group of students in the virtual community who needed to improve the grammar in the writing skill. Indirect feedback was the strategy used to help students to advance in language proficiency. So, the focus of the research was concerned with the participation of the learners in the forums analysed.

Research Question

What is the effect of indirect feedback on accuracy in descriptive texts written by A1 level students?

Research Objectives

General Objective

To identify, describe and document the effects, if any, of giving feedback on accuracy on the students' improvement of their writing skill of descriptive texts.

Specific Objective:

To analyze if giving feedback to the students through virtual forums can raise students' language awareness to improve grammar in the descriptive writing skill.

Setting

The study was carried out in the Blackboard® platform that works with SENA (*Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje*), a public institution from Colombia focused in the development of programs of professional education. It is a government initiative to develop education in Colombia and promote employment.

The national service for training (SENA) was established in 1957 as a result of the joint initiative of organized workers, entrepreneurs, the Catholic Church and the International Labour Organization. It is a public establishment of the national agenda, with legal status, its individual and independent heritage and administrative independence, attached to the Ministry of the Social protection of the Republic of Colombia.

SENA meets the role the State investing in the social and technical development of Colombian workers, offering and executing the professional comprehensive training for the inclusion of people in productive activities that contribute to the country's social, economic and technological growth. In addition to the comprehensive professional training through the training centers, it provides services of continuous training of human resources linked to companies, information; orientation and training for employment; support for enterprise development; technological services for the productive sector, and support to projects of innovation, technological development and competitiveness.

Thus, students from all the programs that SENA offers have to fulfill a requirement established by the institutional policies where every student is required to complete some levels of English as a foreign language depending on the program they belong to. For instance, for technical programs students must complete four levels of English, and seven for the technological

ones. Here, it is important to take into account that English levels are carried out virtually in a period of a month and a half each level (60 hours). So, "the bilingual program" as it is called at SENA works with two platforms; Blackboard® and Tell Me More®. Blackboard® is the one that was taken into consideration in this research project since it allowed the opportunity to use forums as a learning tool to exploit in the learning process. TMM was the platform where students learned different topics and structures with different activities. SENA uses virtual learning management systems like the mentioned ones because there is not a possibility to have enough teachers of English for the amount of students SENA has in the different centers (headquarters) around the country.

Vision

SENA will be a knowledge organization for all Colombian people, permanently innovating in its strategies and learning methodologies, in total agreement with trends and technological changes and the needs of the business sector and workers, positively impacting productivity, competitiveness, equity and development of the country.

Curriculum

SENA bases it goals ("results") in the National program of bilingualism of Colombia (2006) and assessment on the Common European Framework of reference for languages (CEFR). The CEFR is a document that provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabi, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc.; it describes what language learners have to do in order to use language for communication and it also describes what knowledge and skills learners need to develop. The framework also defines levels of proficiency which allow learners'

progress to be measured at each level of English, (Council of Europe, 2001). Therefore, SENA

takes into account CEFR levels for the requirements its apprentices must fulfill. These are:

CEFR level	REQUIREMENTS FOR SENA APPRENTICES	EQUIVALENCE WITH RS	EQUIVALENCE WITH TMM
A1	TECHNICIAN	LEVEL 1	BEGINNER
			ELEMENTARY
A2		LEVEL 2	PRE-INTERMEDIATE
			INTERMEDIATE
B1	TECHNOLOGIST	LEVEL 3	PROFICIENT
			PRE-ADVANCED
B2		LEVEL 4	ADVANCED

Graph 1. English levels to be accomplished by SENA students.

The graph contains the levels to be fulfilled by SENA students by the end of their

program. They are expected to get level B2 if they belong to a technological program while

technical students are required to get level B1. As SENA is currently working with TMM (Tell

Me More) platform, technological students require seven levels to get the certificate while

technical students four levels. Many students develop the levels in TMM. However, the final

level (advanced) does not guarantee the level B2 according to the CEFR. Nevertheless, SENA

takes into account the chart showed above to finish the process with the students in its programs.

Participants

The participants of this study were six students of the beginner level in the English virtual

course. They were selected as they wanted to participate in the process in the research project.

The coordinator of the virtual courses and the students were asked for their permission and cooperation to develop the study. (See consent forms Appendix 2 and 3).

Regarding the participants' profile, they were six students in beginner level. Generally, these students had a low level in the writing skill. It meant that many grammar errors were found. Therefore, they were interested in participating in this research study to improve their skill by receiving indirect feedback from the teacher.

Furthermore, in this level, learners asked more writing activities to reinforce and enhance this skill, since they had more speaking and listening activities to reinforce the rest of the abilities. With respect to the number of hours per week, they were expected to work ten hours to have 60 hours in a month and a half. Students were required to use TMM platform every day since the activities they developed in the forums were related to the topics they had in this platform. To sum up, the participants of this study were SENA apprentices. All of them were required using TMM platform to respond to the activities in forums.

Researcher's Role

The researcher's role during this study was as a participant-observer. The participant observation allows the researcher to adopt different levels of involvement in the research study (Burns, 1999). For example in this particular study, the researcher as a participant was in charge of designing and posting material for EFL learning, guiding the activities in forums and giving feedback to the students. Therefore, as a participant, the researcher interacted with the participants by giving them feedback in their written texts in the forums. In Burns' words, "the researcher becomes a member of the context and participates in its culture and activities" (p.82).

Finally, the researcher as an implementer undertook any changes during the research process and will analyzed, reflected and made decisions upon the pedagogical intervention and gathered data.

Instruments and Procedures for Data Collection

Written and spoken data was collected and gathered by administering questionnaires, interviews and by collecting artifacts. This study followed critical language testing views, thus, instruments selected allowed the expression of the participants' ideas.

Questionnaires

A Questionnaire were used in the middle of the stage of this study. It was administered to the students and it gave the researcher information about the feedback provided by the instructor in the course (in this case the researcher as a participant), the insights students had in respect of indirect feedback and the expectations they had in that moment about the feedback provided to them.

Student's questionnaire (Appendix 4) involved fourteen questions most of them are opened-ended and a few ones closed. According to (Burns, 1999) open-ended items facilitate expression to respondents to feel free in their answers. De vos, A.S, Strydom, H, Fouché, C.B & Delport, C. (2002, p. 293) state that open-ended questions do not need a one word answer but provide interviewees with ample opportunity to express their feelings. Thus, the apprentices on virtual courses had the opportunity to feel free and give their opinion. Furthermore, the information gathered in these questionnaires supported the researcher to identify and describe if

students felt that there was an improvement after receiving indirect feedback and their perception towards the implementation of indirect feedback as a strategy to help them improve grammar.

Semi-structured Interviews

A semi-structured interview was conducted for the students (Appendix 5) at the end of the course. As (Burns, 1999) points out, semi-structured interviews are *open-ended* and provide *flexibility* and, Cousin (2009) adds that semi- structured interviews allow researchers to develop in-depth accounts of experiences and perceptions with individuals (p.71). In other words, this instrument served as a source of empirical and rich data regarding developmental aspects of the writing process, specifically (analysis of symbols to enhance grammar), and as a detection of participants' perceptions towards the implementation of indirect feedback. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allow for emergence of themes and topics which may not be anticipated at the beginning of the process. Thus, there were nine questions predetermined but some others were added according to interviewee's answers. It permitted the researcher to know in depth insights students had about feedback to analyze it and get information to answer the research question.

Students' Artifacts

Another instrument to collect data in this investigation were students' artifacts, which were analyzed by the researcher as the evidence of every participation in the forums. This served to see the impact of the intervention and analyze the indirect feedback as a strategy to help learners improve grammar.

Willis (2008) asserts that artifacts can be regarded as products of an activity or process (p.64). In this case, these products were the manifestation of the participants´ ideas when writing their descriptive texts in the forums. These products were artifacts used as evidence to triangulate this information with the questionnaire and semi-structured interview. Freeman (1998, p. 95) says that artifacts are "student work," potentially good to provide information on the students' learning, to be collected in the classroom or while teaching takes place. In this regard, three screenshots were taken to the post in the forums. The first one was the participation with the descriptive text students posted the first time. The second one was taken to the feedback provided by the teacher-researcher and finally, the last one showed the researcher the changes students made after receiving feedback.

Ethical considerations

This study gathered information following (Creswell, 2004) ethical issues in respect to the following aspects: to inform participants of the purpose of the study and data collection procedures, to consider the participants' right to ask questions, to inform participants of the benefits of the study, to sign consent forms and protect the participants' identity.

Then, first the participants were informed with detail description of the objectives of the research, the data collection procedures and benefits of the study. Furthermore, they knew that they were free to participate and withdraw any time. Moreover, they knew that this process did not have an effect on their final grades in the virtual course.

Thus, first, learners received the consent letter (Appendix 3) which contained all the information in regard to the research study. Next, they agreed, they were explained the process of

their participation in the forums during the virtual course. That is, they participated at least two times in every cycle of the project in the forums, because there were four activities they needed to develop in four weeks. Next, after reading the activity in the first forum, they were expected to participate responding to the requirements in the forum in form of written contribution. After that, the written production of the participant was read and the researcher provided the learner with indirect feedback. The participant received the feedback and analyzed the symbols to post a new participation with improvements if possible. Thus, these participations were taken into account as evidence in the research study. However, as Polit and Hungler (1999, p. 143) stated that *Confidentiality* means that no information that the participant divulges is made public or available to others. The anonymity of a person or an institution is protected by making it impossible to link data to a specific person or institution (if there is no permission). So, no proper names of the student were used for this study, to maintain confidentiality of the students. Then abbreviations for the participants' names were used to name the artifacts, questionnaire and interview. The institution permitted to use the name as permission was provided by the coordinator of the researcher.

Validation process

In order to give validity to this research study, three instruments were chosen and designed based on the research question and objectives. As Sagor (2011) points out "validity refers to whether the data actually reflect the phenomena they claim" (p.109). In effect, these data collection instruments were piloted with a similar population to ensure validity and warn about the inappropriateness or drawbacks that may emerge during the administration of the real research.

Another way to check for validity in this study was through the use of triangulation to include different perspectives on the situation being addressed (Burns, 1999). As a result, the semi-structured interviews, students' artifacts and questionnaires were compared to corroborate the findings and establish validity.

Procedures for data analysis

Finally, data was be analyzed by using a grounded approach. As claimed by Burns (1999): "grounded research enables the researcher to adopt interpretations that are motivated by data derived from the actual social situation, in this case teachers' own classrooms, rather than by theoretical constructs alone" (1999, p. 25). Therefore, the researcher in this case, did not begin the process of research with a predetermined theory in mind. On the contrary, this formulation of theories stemmed from the data analysis.

In practice, the data derived from this study followed the process proposed by Freeman: naming, grouping, finding relationships, and displaying. Thus, the researcher compared and coded the data. Then, detailed categories emerged and relationships or patterns were identified. Lastly, an interpretative stage was done to make sense of the analyzed data in terms of implications and connections with the research question. (Freeman, 1998, pp. 99-100).

On the whole, this chapter presents the arrangement of conditions for collection and analysis of data. In other words, it includes the structure, context, strategy and action plan (appendix 6) of the investigation so as to obtain answers to the stated research question.

Chapter Four: Pedagogical Intervention and Implementation

This chapter presents the description of the pedagogical intervention implemented in this study. The intervention took place in a six-week period, five hours a week. First, students got acquainted with the Blackboard® platform they used at the moment and the procedure to be implemented to participate in the forums where they posted their contributions. Second, a timeline of the dates and activities were posted in the forum in order to be visualized by the participants. And a description of the activities learners would be developing in the virtual course was published with some sample activities in order for the students to understand the writing activities they would develop.

As mentioned before, the research started to address the interest of beginner students of virtual courses at SENA who wanted to enhance their grammar in the writing skill. To do so, students were required to participate in some virtual forums in Blackboard® platform to analyze if any improvement in the writing could be achieved at the end of the implementation of the research. The teacher's role was as a participant – researcher who was in charge of giving feedback to learners in the more traditional role, helping the learners with grammar, lexis and spelling among others, correcting language errors found in their written activities in the virtual forums. Mistakes were shown to students using some symbols to indicate not only where the mistake was, but also the type of mistake it was.

The use of symbols was developed taking into account the most typical mistakes that could appear, and chose the ones that could be more appropriate for the research study. Therefore, the symbols the researcher used in the course were:

Code	Meaning	Kinds of errors
WC	Word choice	The words are inapplicable with the sentences / meaning
PREP	Preposition	Wrong preposition
GR	Grammar or verb tense = General grammar problems	Wrong tense / use another tense
SP	Spelling error	Wrong spelling.
Art	Article	Use article a, an or the for singular noun.
(^)	Missing word	You need to insert a word.
?	Do not understand	I cannot understand the sentence. The meaning is not clear.
WO	Word order	The words in the sentence are in the wrong order.
P	Punctuation	You need to use a punctuation mark / or you do not needed to put it there.
SV	Subject/pronoun	Subject verb agreement
CAP	Capitalization	Use upper-case letters.
SUB	Subject	Subject missing / subject choice

Table 2 - Correction Codes to indicate Error Types in indirect Feedback

The symbols were posted in the first forum by the teacher/researcher in the first week of the course in order to have them permanently displayed, so that learners could always refer to them. In this week the teacher used different examples to explain learners how to understand the symbols via written examples and an online synchronous session.

Then, the teacher chose some topics that better captured the learners' attention to write descriptive texts according to the program of the platform used in the virtual course. These topics were familiar to the students since they studied them in the virtual course in previous lessons using Tell Me More® platform. However, it is important to mention that the topics had not to do with the program students were studying at the institution but they were chosen because they were the ones that captivated the most to learners in this specific level. They are as follows:

Week	Topics	Activity	Date
1	Topic 1: Pets (Describe your favorite pet)	Descriptive writing: describe a pet in a way that enables the reader to visualize it. Use your senses to write about your pet and let the reader know it.	Students had a week to develop the activity.

November 22nd – 28 2012 |
| 2 | Topic 2: An important event (description of one event you enjoyed in the past) | Descriptive writing: write a text that describes an important event you enjoyed the most in the past. For example a birthday party, your baptism or your first communion. (Write at least 70 words).
Give some ideas about your clothes, the decoration, or the food. | Students had a week to develop the activity. November 29 – December 5 2012 |
| 3 | Topic 3: A place (describing a place) | Describe a place that you enjoyed or enjoy nowadays, use the questions to have some ideas.

Describe the place where you went, for instance the landscape, climate, food, etc.

Where did you go?
Who went with you?
Where did you stay?
What new things did you eat? | Students had a week to develop the activity.

December 6 – 11 2012 |
| 4 | Topic 4: My family member (Describing a member of your family) | Describe a person from your family Her/his main physical characteristics. Talk about hair, eyes, high, and weight. | Students had a week to develop the activity.

December 12 – 18 2012 |

Table 3: Pedagogical Intervention Chart

The virtual course lasted a month and a half; about six weeks. The first two weeks were used by the researcher to help learners get acquainted with the process and procedures to be implemented in the course, and the last four weeks were for students to respond to the activities posted in the forums by the teacher every week. The students needed to devote at least one hour a day to check the comments they received by the teacher in their forum.

Procedure

The study was carried out as follows: Students participated in 4 forums that were posted

for them to write a short descriptive text. The graph below shows the stages followed to

implement the research process.
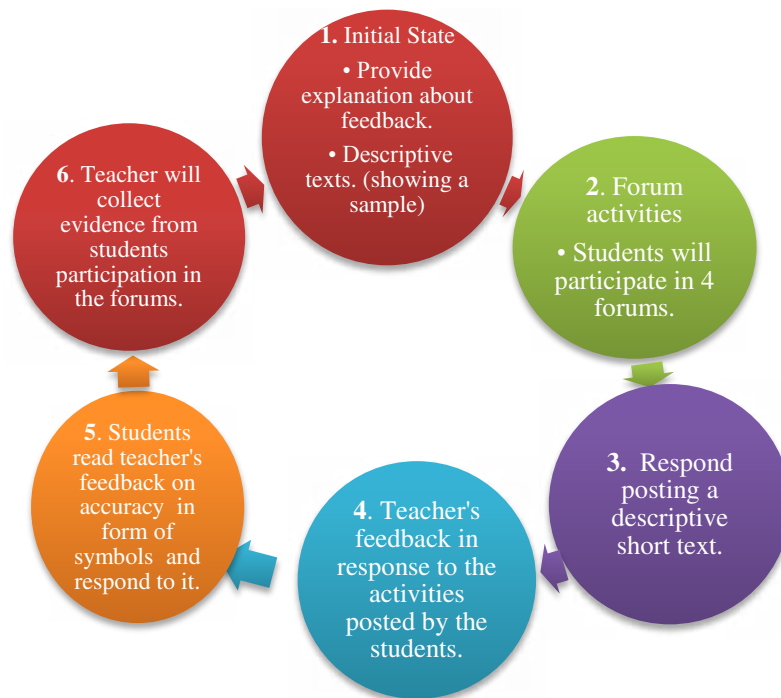
Graph No 2. Stages of the Pedagogical Intervention

Stage 1: Introduction

The first stage was designed to get participants familiar with the Blackboard® platform

where the forum was displayed. The teacher explained to the learners what feedback was,

providing students with a sample of type of feedback they would be receiving in the activities

developed in the forum. The concept of indirect feedback was presented as a strategy used to

encourage students and allow for improvement in a particular process. Furthermore, it might help

students understand their mistakes and possibly motivate them to enhance their writing skill. It means, the use of symbols were not used as a way to criticize their development in a specific activity. Moreover, students were presented some descriptive samples to give students a clear idea of what descriptive writing was. Next, students used descriptive writing in response to the activities posted by the teacher in the forums. This stage was completed in the first week of the virtual course. Students received some samples of descriptive writing and the codes the researcher used during the course to give indirect feedback in the process. Questions and support were provided via synchronous and asynchronous tools supplied by the platform such as chats, video calls and e-mails.

Stage 2: Written Activities

In the second stage students were aware of table No 3 Pedagogical Intervention Chart with the specific topics they were expected to use to write their descriptive texts during the next four weeks. This stage took place during the second week of the virtual course. The first day of each week the students were provided with the topic and the guidelines to develop the activity.

Stage 3: Responding to the activity

At this stage, students knew how to add a "sequence" to post their entries with a descriptive paragraph or a short text. Thus, the primary purpose of using this type of text was for learners to describe a person, place or thing in such a way that a picture was formed in the reader's mind. Furthermore, capturing an event through descriptive writing involved paying close attention to the details by using all of their five senses. Then, teaching students to write more descriptively would possibly improve their writing by making it more interesting and engaging to read.

Moreover, the use of descriptive texts help students' writing become much more interesting and full of details thereby encouraging them to use new vocabulary words. To sum up, good descriptive writing includes many vivid sensory details that paint a picture and appeals to all of the reader's senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste when appropriate. However not all the time all the senses were shown in one piece of writing.

In this stage students had a week to develop the exercise an hour a day for a total of five hours a week. Students responded to each activity every week, providing their texts.

Stage 4: Teacher's feedback

After students posted their entry, the teacher/researcher collected the first entry as an artifact and the first analysis was carried out. After that, the researcher gave them feedback. As it is mentioned above, some symbols were used for students to help them notice their mistakes. Correction symbols refer to the indication of types and locations of students' mistakes through the use of correction codes. The application of correction codes was "normally done by underlining the mistakes and using some kind of symbol to focus the attention of the students on the kind of mistake they had made" (Byrne, 1988: 125). So, the coding technique consisted of using a number of different codes or symbols to refer to the different aspects of language such as word order, spelling and verb tense. Moreover, Hyland (2009, p. 181) points out "this technique makes correction neater and less threatening than masses of red ink and helps students to find and identify their mistakes". Harmer (2007, p. 121) adds "codes makes correction look less damaging". The feedback process is completed once students have made changes in their written production (Harmer, 2001: 112).

Stage 5: students' response to the feedback

Students responded to the feedback provided to them and improved or not the piece of writing they did. Hedge (2000, p. 316) states "correction codes encourage students to look at writing as a skill that can be improved, and train them in looking for areas of improvement. Then, if some students did not correct their piece of writing, there was not a problem, since this was an issue the study wanted to pursue. It means, learners were autonomous to correct their errors after they had received feedback. This was an autonomous and useful activity for learners to stimulate them in learning English and enhance their writing skill. Thus, students could identify the error and correct it again if they wanted to focus on their language progress. Nunan (1996) proposes awareness as "the starting point to empower students' role in their learning process and finding a new way of interaction with their peers and teachers to be more autonomous" (p. 298).

Stage 6: New researcher's collection of entries as artifacts

Finally, the teacher/researcher collected evidence on the corrections that students made to improve their piece of writing after having received indirect feedback and analyzed if any improvement had appeared during the implementation of the feedback process. The second entry served as an evidence for artifacts for obtaining data on the students' initial situation in their descriptive writing and the improvements they had had after receiving indirect feedback to determine any changes the written process has had throughout the pedagogical intervention. This was the last stage of the pedagogical intervention. At that time, the researcher had four weeks of entries to be analyzed. The study looked for improvements students' writing had after having received indirect-feedback.

This chapter has introduced the pedagogical intervention that was carried out for this study. A description was made of the six stages and activities the researcher and participants developed along the process.

The next chapter describes how the research was conducted and the results obtained from the analysis of the data.

Chapter Five: Results and Data Analysis

The present chapter will offer a thorough description of the process and the analysis carried out in this research project. First the approach to data management will be illustrated along with the data analysis. Then, the chapter will expose the categories, interpretation and findings obtained from the data gathered by means of students' artifacts, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

Data Management

This study collected data from **students' artifacts.** The artifacts were published online by their authors in the forums arranged in Blackboard platform. They are not visible in the original context; however, for analysis purposes, their content was integrally copied and pasted in a text document via screenshots taken to the original page after each stage of the process. The artifacts were stored and classified in four files after each student's participation in the forums. They were analyzed by the teacher-researcher, using the symbols given in a chart in the opening forum of the course.

Concerning the **questionnaires**, the participants filled out this instrument in the middle of the study. These questionnaires were named with the initials of the participants as the artifacts and semi-structured interviews. They were stored and organized in a file to take them into account in the triangulation process. (see figure 3 for samples of the answers of students to the students' questionnaire)

8. ¿La realimentación recibida, ha sido útil en su aprendizaje de Inglés?

Qyuho: Sí. Porque a partir de la retroalimentación recibida aprendo los errores.

Qroro: Sí. Me ha ayudado a aprender elementos de gramática con la ayuda de los símbolos.

Qjofapo: Sí. Porque obtuve resultados positivos después de implementar las correcciones.

Qcriscas: Sí, _Aplico como conocimiento y escritura en el idioma _

QMacar: Sí, _____porque aprendo mas_____

Qanque : sí, SIENTO QUE HE MEJORADO TANTO EN LA ESCRITURA, COMO EN LA PRONUNCIACION, SE QUE IRE MEJORANDO CADA VEZ MAS

9. La utilización de la realimentación con uso de símbolos ha ayudado a la mejora de sus escritos?

Qyuho: Si. Las cosas en Inglés se entienden mejor con los símbolos

Qroro: Si. Me ha ayudado a aprender elementos de gramática mas fácilmente por mi misma analizando los signos

Qjofapo: Sí. Porque cada símbolo representa una explicación.

Qcriscas: Si puesto que me añaden mas cuidado la hora de hacer una escritura_

QMacar: Sí, por el momento si, aunque se nesecita muchas mas clases para poder mejorar cada ves mas ___

Qanque : Sí, LA UTILIZACION DE LOS SIMBOLOS HA SIDO FACIL Y ÚTIL PARA LA IDENTIFICACION DE LOS ERRORES QUE HE TENIDO EN LOS ESCRITOS PARA MEJORAR

Figure 1 – Sample of Students' Answers to the questionnaire – screenshot taken to the students' general questionnaire.

Finally, the **semi-structured interviews** were administered at the end of the pedagogical intervention. So, after the administration of this instrument, a digital folder was opened to save all interview files. Similarly, the transcriptions were made and saved in the same folder to facilitate access. Finally, these files were organized and named according to the participants' initials assigned at the beginning of the process as a way to identify the six participants of the project.

Data Analysis Approach

For the analysis of the data, this research study was supported with the use of Grounded Theory Approach. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), "a Grounded Theory is one that is

inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents" (p. 23). In other words, the process for building Grounded Theory in this research involved different stages, in which the researcher decided on a problem, enclosed it in a research question, collected data, analyzed it and built theory. Thus, this project started with a research question arose during the needs analysis and research process carried out to know the phenomenon or problem to be studied.

Freeman (1998) describes this approach as the procedure of obtaining information from data, and from it, generating theory (p. 100). Thus, the categories and theory of this study were originated when data was collected and analyzed.

Additionally, as stated by Strauss and Corbin (1990) Grounded Theory follows a process beginning with **open coding.** It is a process developed when breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data (p. 61). This process permitted the researcher to assign the codes arising from data conceptualization, to be later grouped in a single phenomenon. **Axial coding** is then defined as **"**the set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories" (p. 96). This process was carried out by finding relationships and connecting the group of codes and identifying the pieces of data that did not fit in the same phenomena. Finally, **selective coding** was the last process developed in the research**.** It established acore category, systematically relating it to other sub-categories.

Data Analysis Procedures

The core of this research project was to answer a research question regarding feedback on descriptive texts to enhance writing skill on virtual courses. As a result of the process followed and to determine the units of analysis and identify the categories and subcategories that would

answer the research question, three coding procedures were implemented. They were open, axial and selective coding. Strauss and Corbin (1990) pointed out "coding represents the operations by which data are broken down, conceptualized, and put back together in new ways" (p. 57). This coding process was followed in this manner:

To start with, the researcher began the analysis using **open coding** by analyzing the information students had written in the students' questionnaires and the transcription of students' semi-structured interviews. The way of approaching this type of coding was a line-by-line analysis to have a closer examination of phrases, sentences or even single words (Nagy & Leavy, 2008, p. 164). This coding process served the researcher to identify similar ideas, recurrent patterns and incidents. To do this, the researcher used colors to identify relationships between data. Then, after having commonalities and relating the information gathered from color coding, the first step the researcher did was a master list to account the more important concepts to the phenomenon under study. This master list represented a basic outline or classification system reflecting the recurring regularities or patterns in the study (Merriam, 2009, p. 180). It is worth to mention that during the analysis of each instrument the research question and objectives were taken into account. The figure below shows the main commonalities found in the answers of the students' questionnaires and interviews.

FIRST MASTER LIST ATTEMPT
1. symbols interpretation 2. Understanding of feedback 3. feedback to enhance writing 4. writing practice 5. descriptive texts writing 6. effect of feedback on writing 7. reflections about feedback 8. students perception of feedback 9. clarity of symbols 10. Grammar improvement 11. Enhancing writing 12. Noticing errors. 13. Self-correction as a way of language learning 14. decision-making 15. Language learning awareness

Graph 3. Researcher First attempt Master List

Subsequently, **axial coding** was conducted by making connections between all the information gathered in open coding, and data was put together in new ways (categorizing). Thus, key concepts such as, **perceptions, writing performance, language learning awareness and indirect feedback as a useful tool** arose during axial coding process. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990) the process of grouping concepts that seem to pertain to the same phenomena is called categorizing; the name of the categories is usually the one that seems most logically related to the data it represents, and should be graphic enough to remind the research quickly of its referent (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, p. 67). After analyzing this data two categories emerged; the first one named **the effects of feedback** that contained indirect feedback as a useful tool, enhancement in writing skill and grammar improvement as sub-categories; the second one **raising awareness to language improvement** that enclosed self-correction as a way to language learning.

However, based on the interpretation of the findings and the analysis done during open and axial coding, selective coding emerged by selecting a core or central category that integrated other categories in the phenomenon of the study (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, p.116). The following chart shows the category and subcategories that emerged at the end of the process:

What is the effect of indirect feedback on accuracy in descriptive texts written by A1 level students?

General Objective	Specific Objective:
To identify, describe and document the effects, if any, of giving feedback on accuracy on the students' improvement of their writing skill of descriptive texts.	To analyze if giving feedback to the students through virtual forums can raise students' language awareness to increase the descriptive writing skill.
Core category	
The effects of feedback	
Sub-categories	
Indirect feedback as a useful tool (grammar and writing improvement).	Noticing language errors (Self-correction as a way of language learning).

Table 4. Core Category and Sub-categories

Core Category: **The effects of feedback**

The core category emerged from the participants' opinions towards the implementation of indirect feedback in the forums of the virtual course. These opinions were revealed in the analysis of the data of the interviews and questionnaires. For example, the questionnaires exposed positive attitudes towards the use of indirect feedback as a way to improve writing skill. As well as, interviews transcription showed that participants felt motivated to have a new way to understand how to enhance their writing process by receiving feedback as a useful tool to improve their process

in learning the foreign language and a new way to correct grammar. Some of the comments that

evidence the positive attitude towards feedback are:

> **Int Roro:** ehh...La realimentación escrita a través de los símbolos es muy buena, pero también considero que es bien importante la realimentación que se recibió con la docente a través de otros medios como skype o en el curso, pues ella nos dice como se puede mejora y pues eso lo enriquece mucho a uno.

(SIC. Semi-structured Interview. December 14th, 2012. Roro)

> 9. ¿Crees que la utilización de realimentación por medio de símbolos ayuda en el fortalecimiento de gramática del idioma extranjero?
>
> **Int macar:** si señora y bastante, porque como siempre lo he dicho es algo que a uno lo hace caer en el error, hace que uno mismo analice, reflexione en que fue lo que uno hizo mal y pues así mismo como que uno memoriza más para no volver a cometer el mismo error, entonces uno dice tal palabra va acá y no vuelve a cometer el mismo error.

(SIC. Semi-structured Interview. December 14th, 2012. Macar)

(SIC. students' questionnaire. December 11th, 2012. Jofapo– Question 8)

Such positive comments are in conjunction with other phenomena that act as a subcategory

in this effect. That is, indirect feedback as a useful tool and the usefulness of this in the

enhancement of writing skill and grammar.

Subcategory: Indirect feedback as a useful tool

In the virtual course the participants in the first week had the opportunity to know the

symbols to be used as a way of indirect feedback to help them to enhance their writing process in

case they used feedback as a way to improve. They mentioned that feedback helped them to

enhance their writing process. The following answers in some questionnaires, interviews and

artifacts show feedback as a useful tool:

_ si porque los simbolos me ayudan a mejorar la manera en que redacto mis escritos y a ser mas cuidadoso cuando escribo. _

(SIC. Students' questionnaire. December 11th, 2012. Criscas – Question 12)

_LA UTILIZACION DE LOS SIMBOLOS HA SIDO FACIL Y ÚTIL PARA LA IDENTIFICACION DE LOS ERRORES QUE HE TENIDO EN LOS ESCRITOS PARA MEJORAR

(SIC. Students' questionnaire. December 11th, 2012. Anque – Question 9)

As it is noticed, these participants mentioned that indirect feedback was valuable to enhance their writing process and learn from it. That is, they noticed progress not only in the writing process but also in grammar. Additionally, participants mentioned that this feedback gave them the opportunity to correct grammar mistakes by themselves and not by receiving the answers from the teacher. Actually the students' artifacts likewise revealed that they made some improvements in their grammar after receiving feedback as noticed in the artifacts of the students in their participation in the forums of the virtual course; the following are some examples of their written process taking into account indirect feedback:

The first example is taken from the second forum which required students to write a description of one event they enjoyed in the past:

(SIC. Extracted from Anque Artifact 2 - December 11th 2012)

*(Researcher's Feedback – Anque Artifact 2)*

(SIC. *Extracted from Anque Artifact 2- December 13th 2012)*

As it is noticed, in the second post of the student she made improvement in some aspects

of grammar; as this is the aim of the study. For example, most of the symbols used to elicit

correction from the student showed preposition (PREP), word choice (WC), capitalization (CAP)

or subject (SUB) problems. These were corrected by the student in a good way using the correct

preposition or word choice in different cases. Most of the symbols used to help the student in

terms of grammar were used responding positively to enhance this aspect (accuracy). The sample

below also shows some other different grammar improvements corrected by the student after

receiving indirect feedback. They are circled in blue. In this case the example is taken from the

first forum which expected that students wrote a description of their pet.

(*SIC. Extracted from Criscas Artifact 1- November 21st 2012*)

(*Researcher's Feedback – Criscas Artifact 1*)
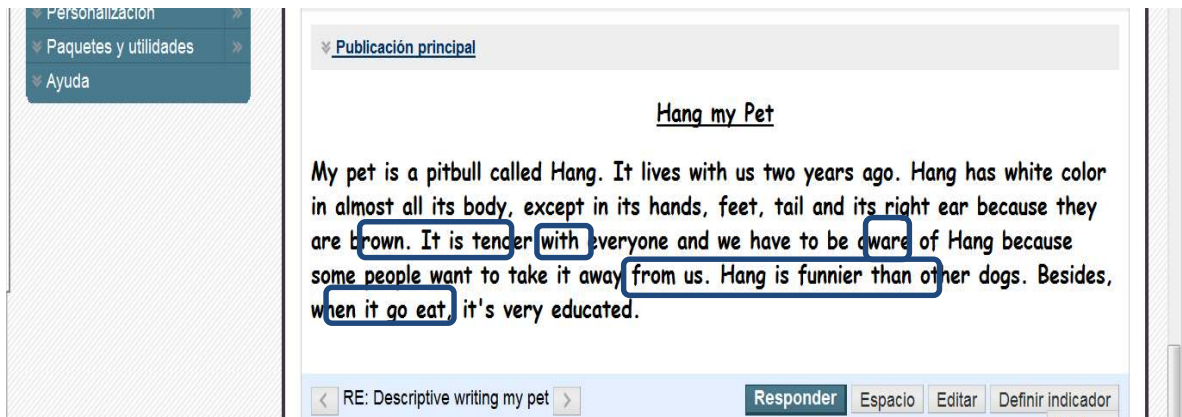
(SIC. Extracted from Criscas Artifact 1- November 24ᵗʰ 2012)

Ur (1996) says that in the context of teaching, feedback is information that is given to the learner about his or her performance of the learning task, usually with the objective of improving their performance´. In addition, Roger (2001) says "Feedback is not just about weaknesses. Student will respond if teachers are encouraging as well as allowing mistakes, emerging capabilities, and give ideas for directing further learning". From these definitions, it is clear that feedback is useful in teaching and learning process when the purpose of it is clarified. In this case, from the beginning of the course it was established that indirect feedback was used as a way to help students with the enhancement of grammar in the writing skill, not by emphasizing errors to discourage the learner. Thus, when providing (indirect feedback), the teacher-researcher aimed to encourage students to continue writing and correct their texts to enhance their written process and to motivate them to continue learning grammar.

Thus, as mentioned above enhancement in writing skill in terms of grammar was noticed throughout the process of indirect feedback use. During the development of the virtual course the participants were given four different topics to write descriptively: describing a pet, describing an important event, describing an important place and describing a person from their family. Some participants wrote the descriptive text using images and details, some others wrote longer

descriptions and they revealed progress after feedback. The screenshots below taken from the

virtual course portray a participant's progress in grammar.
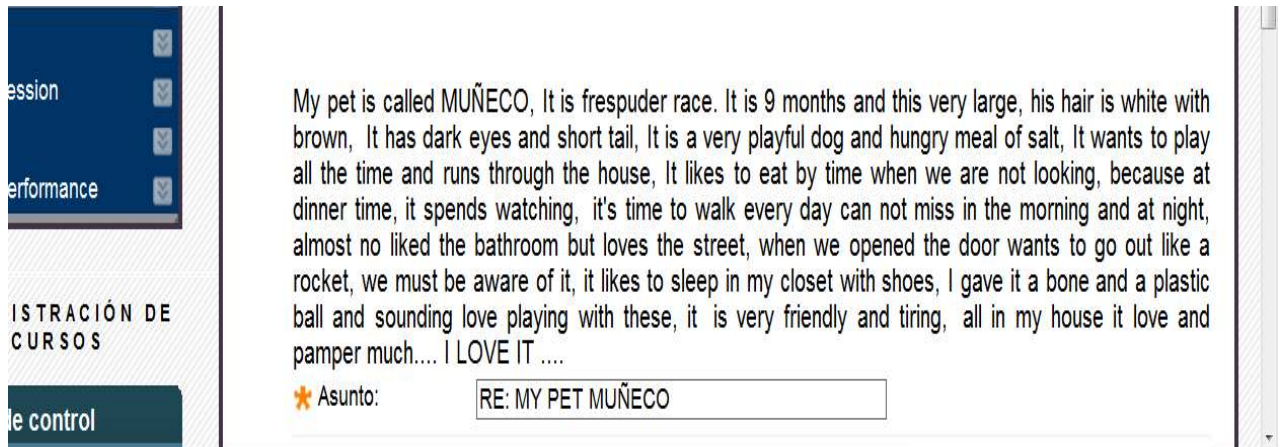
(SIC. Extracted from Yuho Artifact 1- November 23rd 2012)
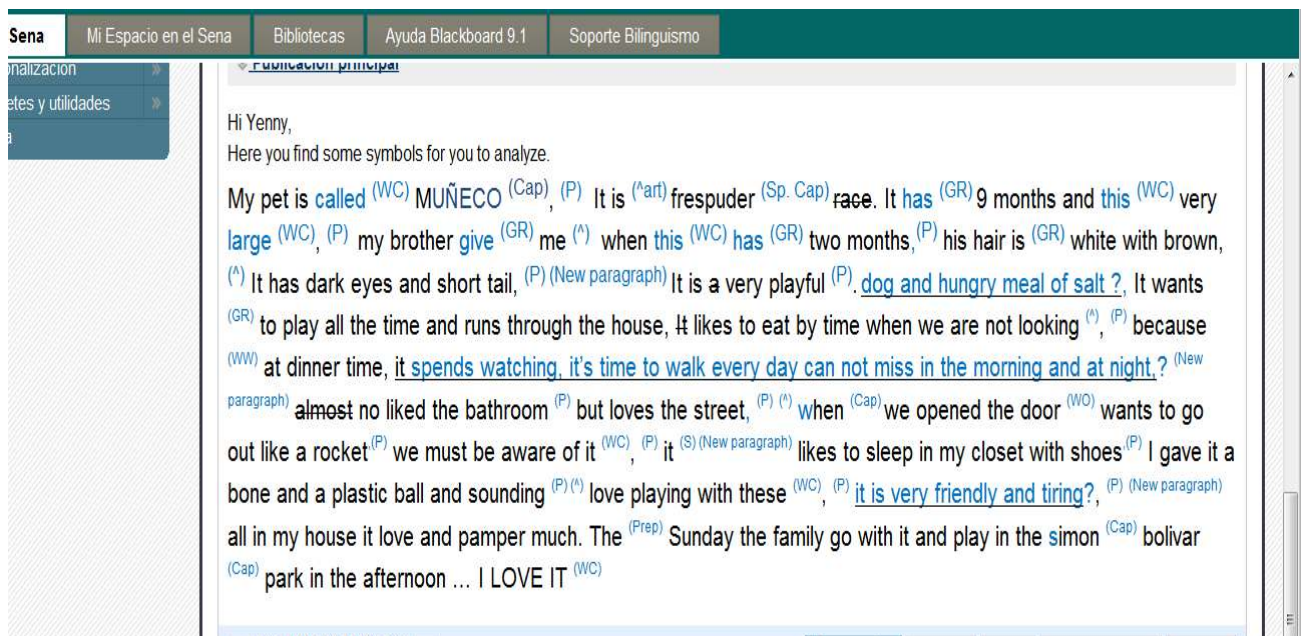
(Researcher's Feedback – YUHO Artifact 1)
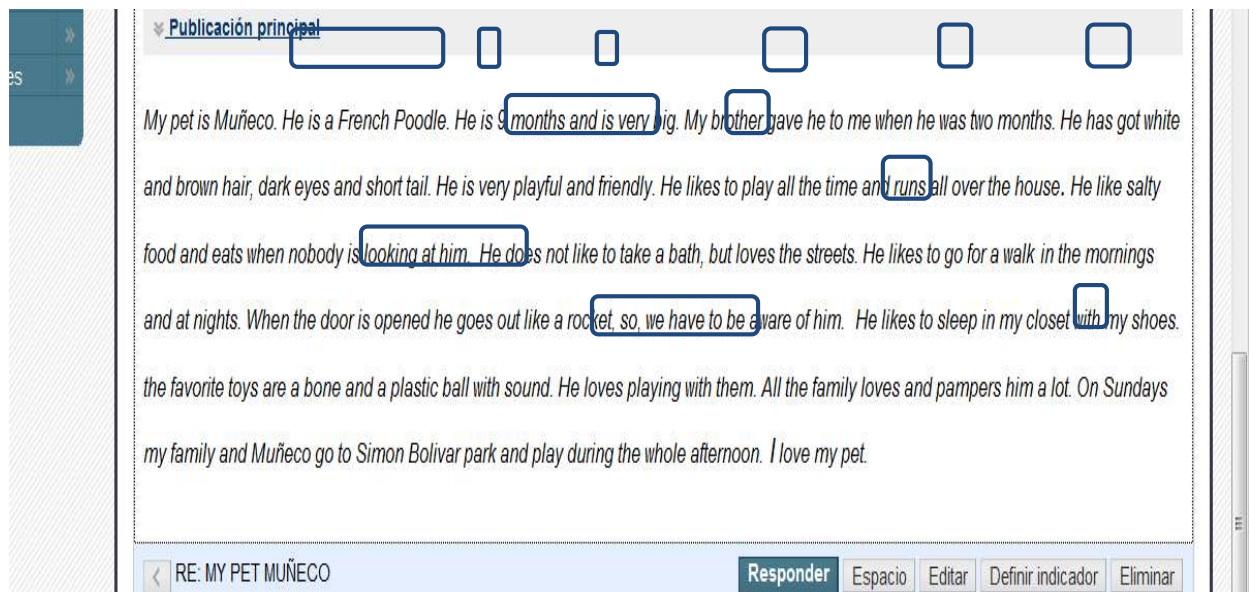
(SIC. Extracted from Yuho Artifact 1 - November 25th 2012)

As it is observed in the screenshots taken from a participation in the first forum of one of the students named Yuho in the research project, the progress after receiving feedback can be seen in the corrections made by the student according to the symbols the teacher-researcher gave her. As El Tatawy (2002) points out, beginner language learners are limited in what they are able to notice. Thus, the teacher can use feedback as a tool to guide learners through the process of identifying their mistakes and correct them to enhance their writing. Then, as it is noticed most of the corrections made by the students showed progress in grammar and improvement in the expression of ideas too. That is, most of the students showed progress in the use of articles, prepositions, grammar aspects such as: verb agreement and subject choice. Furthermore, the use of capitalization and punctuation changed after receiving indirect feedback and that is shown in the screenshots analyzed above. Additionally, students' opinions in questionnaires and interviews support enhancement in grammar when using indirect feedback as a strategy to help them to advance in language learning:

> **Teacher:** La utilización de la realimentación con uso de simbolos ha ayudado a la mejora de sus escritos? Si _____ No _____ ¿Por qué?
>
> **Int Anque:** si, si me ha ayudado eeee... claro como lo decía los símbolos me especifican bien el error que tengo en la escritura pues en lo que he escrito en el foro, esto me deja otra vez como volver a escribir como a redactar mejor lo que escribo, pero si me ha ayudado a escribir mejor de bastante forma.

(SIC. Semi-Structured Interview. December 13th 2012. Anque – Question 4)

> **Teacher:** La utilización de la realimentación con uso de simbolos ha ayudado a la mejora de sus escritos? Si _____ No _____ ¿Por qué?
>
> **Int Roro:** uhmm mucho, porque ya cuando veo el símbolo veo si es un error de tiempo, si es un error de palabra y entonces como que cuando vuelvo a escribir trato de tener en cuenta aquellos símbolos y recordando los escritos pasados para no cometer el mismo error.

(Sic.-Semi-Structured Interview. December 13th 2012. Roro – Question 4)

The aforementioned excerpts corroborate the fact that indirect feedback has helped students to enhance grammar aspects such as: better using of articles, prepositions, subjects, word choice and word order among others. As noticed, these students stated that the symbols helped them to identify the error to later try to understand and enhance their written text.

Finally, it is worth that when completing the four cycles of the research the participants of the project improved their written texts in terms of accuracy aspects as it was stated above. Ferris (2002, p. 19) states that "indirect feedback is when the teacher/tutor alerts students about errors, but gives students the opportunity to fix them by themselves. The advantages of indirect feedback are as follows:

- Studies show that indirect feedback "is more helpful to student writers in most cases because it leads to greater cognitive engagement, reflection, and 'guided learning and problem-solving'" (19).

- Although error is greatly reduced from one draft to the next as students respond to direct feedback, student writing as a whole improves over time as a result of indirect feedback when students are asked to find errors, and solutions to errors, on their own."

In effect, this enhancement in grammar was evidenced along the process of the participations of the students in every forum posted by them after receiving feedback to end up with more captivating written texts with less grammar inaccuracies after feedback. . The bar graph below indicates how throughout the implementation, the participants showed an evolving improvement in relation to grammar aspects in descriptive texts.

Students who improved grammar aspects after receiving indirect feedback

■ Students who improved grammar aspects
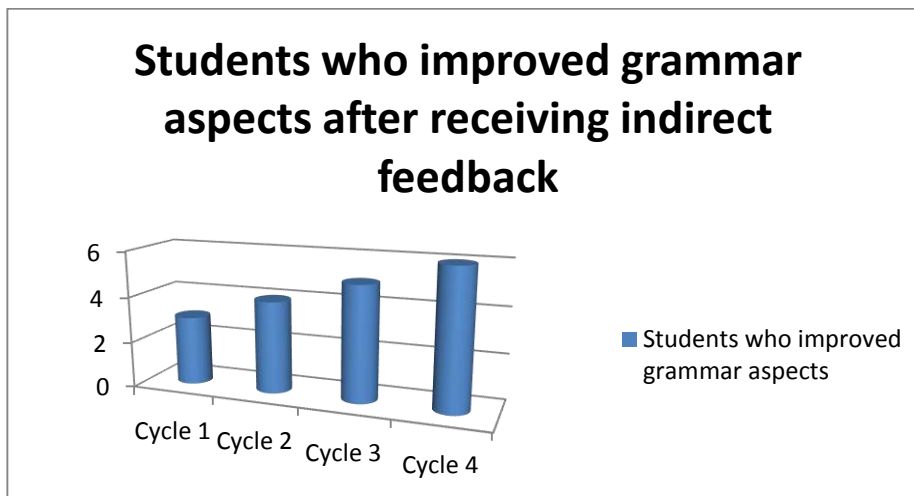
Bar graph N°1. Implementation 4 cycles

The above analysis was possible after comparing the first written post of students and the correction they posted after receiving indirect feedback from the teacher-researcher. The graph shows that in the first cycle two students used indirect feedback to improve their grammar in their written texts. However, in cycle fourth all the students did improvements in their grammar in their texts. This meant that after every cycle students were analyzing indirect feedback provided to improve their grammar to write with less inaccuracies in their posted texts.

Finally, a sample taken from an artifact of the third cycle evidences the enhancement in writing skill in terms of grammar aspects such as the use of prepositions (Prep), subject (Sub), word order (WO) and articles (Art) among other aspects.

One place I like is the sea because I passed a lot of peace, tranquility and above all allows me to reconnect with myself, I can remember the greatness of God because I have the pleasure to feel the air, the water, the sound of the waves and the wind, the heat of the sun and sand texture playing my skin.

What better game to feel alive to be the face of the great wonders of nature before the Almighty created for us.

Also I can easily appreciate the tiny species in their neighborhood as starfish, snails, crabs and others.

When I need to think a little one to the beach otherwise usually go as a family with my husband and my children, I love to eat fried fish, coconut rice, and fried plantains and shrimp too.

Normally when we go to the beach did not stay at any hotel because we actually live on the coast and we can easily return home the same day but the beaches around there are very good five star hotels.

(SIC. Extracted from Yuho Artifact 3 - December 3rd 2012)

One place I like is the sea because I passed $^{(GR)}$ a lot of peace, tranquility and above all allows me to reconnect with myself, $^{(P)}$ I can remember the greatness of God because I have the pleasure to feel the air, the water, the sound of the waves ~~and~~ the wind, the heat of the sun and sand texture playing $^{(Prep)}$ my skin.

What $^{(Art)}$ better game to feel alive to be the face of the great wonders ?of nature before the Almighty created for us.

Also I $^{(WO)}$ can easily appreciate the tiny species in their neighborhood as starfish, snails, crabs and others.

When I need to think a little one $^{(WC)}$ $^{(^)}$ ~~to~~ the beach otherwise? usually go as a family with my husband and my children, $^{(P)}$ I love to eat fried fish, coconut rice, and fried plantains and shrimp too.

Normally $^{(P)}$ when we go to the beach $^{(Subj)}$ did $^{(GR)}$ not stay at any hotel because we actually live on the coast and we can easily return home the same day $^{(P)}$ $^{(New\ paragrap)}$ but $^{(WC)}$ the beaches around there are very good five star hotels $^{(Rewrite\ it)}$.

(Researcher's Feedback – YUHO Artifact 3)

One place I like the most is the sea because I pass a lot of peace, tranquility and above all allows me to reconnect with myself. I can remember the greatness of God because I have the pleasure to feel the air, the water, the sound of the waves, the wind, the heat of the sun and sand texture playing with my skin.

What a good game to feel alive the nature in front of us. I can also easily appreciate the tiny species in the neighborhood as starfish, snails, crabs and others.

When I need to think a little bit about the beach, I usually go there as a family with my husband and my children. I love to eat fried fish, coconut rice, and fried plantains and shrimp too.

Normally, when we go to the beach we do not stay at any hotel because we actually live on the coast and we can easily return home the same day. Although, there are very good hotels (5 stars) around the beach.

Yudi hospital

(SIC. Extracted from Yuho Artifact 3 - December 8th 2012)

The aforementioned screenshots corroborate the fact that indirect feedback implementation facilitates the participants' improvement in grammar aspects such as the use of prepositions, articles, subjects, subject verb agreement among other. As noticed, this student showed differences in grammar after posting the new version of the text when receiving teacher's feedback.

Subcategory 2: Noticing Language errors

This subcategory identifies the effects that indirect feedback had to raise students' language awareness to increase the descriptive writing skill. The effect was given in terms of noticing inaccuracies in their texts after receiving indirect feedback. As it was noticed before, participants showed improvement during the process; and they affirmed this happened because they felt that the symbols used in their written texts served as a way to motivate them to improve writing process by correcting grammar by themselves.

> 4. La utilización de la realimentación con uso de símbolos ha ayudado a la mejora de sus escritos? Si _____ No _____ ¿Por qué?
>
> **Int macar:** Sí señora, si pues por lo que uno va analizando, reflexionando en cada error, va uno profundizando también en que estuvo el error y obviamente que así se va mejorando.

(SIC.-Semi-Structured Interview. December 14th 2012. Macar – Question 4)

> 12. ¿El uso de la realimentación con símbolos le ha ayudado a ser más consciente de sus errores para el aprendizaje de Ingles en posteriores escritos?
> Si ___X___ No _____
> ¿por qué?
>
> Normalmente he notado que mi memoria es fotográfica y se me graba mejor las cosas con símbolos.

(SIC.-Semi-Structured Interview. December 14th 2012. Yuho – Question 12)

These findings relate to Schmidt (1990), who identifies three aspects of consciousness involved in language learning: awareness, intention and knowledge. The first sense, consciousness as awareness, embraces **noticing.** According to Schmidt (1990, p. 20), "the noticing hypothesis states that what learners notice in input is what becomes intake for learning. Thus, noticing is a necessary condition for L2 acquisition."

In other words, the intention of the researcher with the use of symbols was that learners noticed that when using a symbol in their texts meant that an inaccuracy was taking place. As a result, if learners noticed the symbol and corrected the grammar aspect, the process of noticing would help them to improve grammar and then their writing skill.

Additionally, Batstone (1996) states that noticing is a complex process: it involves the intake both of meaning and form, and it takes time for learners to progress from initial recognition to the point where they can internalize the underlying rule. Then, at the beginning of the process the written activities were short and had a lot of symbols. However, at the end of the

process in the fourth cycle the written assignments were better, longer texts were posted and less symbols were seen on them. Students reflected more when writing with the aim of not to make a lot of errors again. The answer of the student in the questionnaire evidences this:

11. ¿La realimentación con símbolos le ha ayudado a ser consciente de sus aciertos/desaciertos en la escritura?

Si ____X__ No _____

¿por qué?

_Si me ha ayudado a ser mas consciente, porque en el próximo escrito tengo en cuenta los errores cometidos anteriormente. _____

(SIC. Students' questionnaire. December 11th, 2012. Roro – Question 11)

According to Ivor and Carlos (2003), noticing can take a number of forms; guided by the teacher i.e. the teacher directs the students' attention to lexical features thought to be useful; 'self-directed', i.e. the students themselves select features they think will be useful for them; noticing is explicit, e.g. when items in a text are highlighted; implicit e.g. when the teacher reformulates a student's text. In all, noticing enables teachers to raise awareness of the language in their learners. As a result, the researcher intended that learners were aware of language learning by highlighting their inaccuracies and allow learners to reflect on them to improve their grammar.

Self-correction

As stated in the theoretical framework, students in the virtual course are not forced to correct their texts when receiving feedback. However the participants in this research did this because they wanted to reinforce their writing skill. In this case indirect feedback was used in this research. It focuses on using symbols to alert students to errors, but gives them the opportunity to fix mistakes by themselves (Ferris, 2002). Below an excerpt from a semi-structured interview exemplifies this subcategory:

Teacher: ¿La realimentación con simbolos le ha ayudado a ser consciente de sus aciertos/desaciertos en la escritura?

Si _____ No _____ ¿por qué?

Int Anque: si claro me ha ayudado bastante eeee pues mas los desaciertos pero también he tenido aciertos, pero he fallado en la escritura de algunas palabras. Sin embargo hice el proceso de corrección pues ahora quiero ser capaz de corregir los errores por mi misma sin preguntar tanto.

(Semi-Structured Interview. December 13th 2012. Anque – Question 6)

Teacher: ¿La realimentación con simbolos le ha ayudado a ser consciente de sus aciertos/desaciertos en la escritura?

Si _____ No _____ ¿por qué?

Int Roro: eh sí, soy consciente entonces del error que tuve.. ehhh aunque quizá entonces me cuestiono bueno entonces si el error es este? Cuál debería ser entonces la forma adecuada de escribir y de que ese error no se presente de nuevo y repensar la escritutra.

(Semi-Structured Interview. December 13th 2012. Roro – Question 6)

6. Teacher: ¿La realimentación con símbolos le ha ayudado a ser consciente de sus aciertos/desaciertos en la escritura?

Si _____ No _____ ¿por qué?

Int Yuho: sí, si me ha ayudado poruque a través de estos símbolos uno analiza y aprende por uno mismo y así uno trata de aprender pues de los errores y pues en estos escritos se aplica el aprendizaje que uno ha tenido previamente

(Semi-Structured Interview. December 13th 2012. Yuho – Question 6)

6. ¿La realimentación con símbolos le ha ayudado a ser consciente de sus aciertos/desaciertos en la escritura?

Si _____ No _____ ¿por qué?

Int macar: Sí señora bastante, porque uno va dándose cuenta que palabras debe de utilizar en cada oración, en cada expresión que se escribe en el idioma, entonces así mismo uno va concientizándose de que uno debe utilizar en unas frases y que no debe utilizar.

(Semi-Structured Interview. December 13th 2012. Macar – Question 6)

6. **Teacher:** ¿La realimentación con símbolos le ha ayudado a ser consciente de sus aciertos/desaciertos en la escritura?

Si _____ No _____ ¿por qué?

Int Criscas: si claro pues me ayuda mucho, más que todo pues a mejorar la forma y las palabras que a veces escribimos y como las escribimos.

(Semi-Structured Interview. December 13th 2012. Criscas – Question 6)

As noticed above, participants' perception towards awareness was related to self-correction. At the end of error the self-correction activity, teacher's feedback is crucial and must be performed in a way to have a long-term positive effect on students' ability to monitor their own performance (Bartram & Walton, 1991:95). In this case, the purpose of indirect feedback aimed to be a crucial tool that permitted learners to be aware of their mistakes. Thus, they became more responsible of their own process of learning permitting them to learn and advance not just receiving the teacher's answer.

What has been described and explained so far in this chapter encloses the process of evaluating data from various sources using analytical and interpretive reasoning to examine each component of the data provided in order to generate categories and sub-categories that allow the

researcher to answer the research question posed at the beginning of this process drawing some

sort of findings or conclusions. At the same time as the findings were presented, theoretical

background to this study was interwoven with it, with the purpose of supporting it with accepted

current theory.

In the following chapter, conclusions of this study, its limitations, some pedagogical

implications of the findings, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter Six: Conclusions, Pedagogical Implications, Limitations and Further Research

The aim of this chapter is to present the conclusions that arose at the end of the research study, pedagogical implications, limitations and finally to make recommendations relating to the possible application of this study for further research.

Conclusions

Taking into account that this research project intended to help students to enhance writing skills through feedback given in some forums in a virtual course, the data collected, revised and analyzed allowed the researcher to discover a core category to respond the research question in this project. The core category was: **The effects of feedback.**

As mentioned in chapter 5, "**The effects of feedback"** was a category that involved the students' opinions about the implementation of indirect feedback as a way to enhance grammar in the writing skill. The former category allowed the researcher to find two subcategories **indirect feedback as a useful tool** and **noticing language errors.**

To start with, **indirect feedback as a useful tool** was an opinion gathered from the six questionnaires and interviews and also corroborated in most of the students' artifacts. Students corrected grammar errors that they had in the first posts of the forums such as: the use of prepositions, subjects, articles, word order and word choice taking into account the symbols provided by the teacher-researcher. Thus, this kind of feedback served to be a useful tool for the learners to use in their writing process to enhance their performance in grammar aspects.

In this regard, **enhancement in writing skill** specifically in grammar use was evidenced on the participants' posts with the corrections and improvements of the written tasks done by them from the first to the fourth forums in blackboard platform. It is important to highlight that this project used indirect feedback as a tool to help students to learn and progress in the foreign language not as a way to focus on mistakes using a symbol to discourage learners in written tasks. Then, the participants in the study understood this strategy in the same trail as the teacher-researcher.

As to **grammar improvement** as stated in chapter five was demonstrated after collecting students' artifacts. They showed that most of the symbols given to students as a tool to help them to enhance their written process were effectively used for the purpose of the research. That is, after students received feedback they were able to change the last participation and made improvements to their texts taking into account the symbols given by the teacher-researcher; this was evidenced in the new versions of their texts in the forums. Learners could understand what they had to use instead of what they wrote.

It is important to notice that some students received the written feedback (symbols) but also oral feedback via synchronous sessions if they wanted more comments about their written tasks and examples of every task they were expected to develop..

As a final point, regarding **noticing language errors,** students mentioned that feedback received (symbols) was a useful tool because when they needed to correct their mistakes, they needed to think, analyze more and reflect by themselves to **notice** the errors they made. Then, they mentioned that this was an opportunity for them to examine the language and learn the foreign language process having the teacher as a guide and not by receiving all the answers from

her. Consequently, they did corrections by themselves (noticing) and this served them to be aware of the foreign language learning as they advance in the process of the writing skill.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings in this research revealed useful insights into the importance of incorporating written feedback in virtual courses at SENA. First of all, writing is an important skill to be developed in the foreign language, and beginner (the elementary level at SENA) students need different tasks to develop this skill. In virtual courses at SENA written tasks are given to be developed in the forums of blackboard platform. The use of indirect feedback in these tasks was a way to help students reinforce the language in the writing skill (in terms of accuracy). As it was noticed, after analyzing the instruments, the use of symbols was a useful way to nurture students throughout the process in the virtual course to help them increase their writing skill. This strategy (symbols) was not taken as a way to emphasize on **errors marking texts** to judge, but served as a way to engage learners in the analysis of their written assignments and look for improvement.

Thus, sometimes it is common to say that this kind of feedback just focuses on errors. However, it is important to state the purpose of the feedback provided before starting a process and in this case symbols were useful to learn from them and not as a way to judge and evaluate but to use feedback to contribute to their language learning process.

Limitations

During the development of this research project, the researcher encountered some situations that made the process harder. The limitation had to do with time constraints, the

participants in the study, the activities developed not on time by the students, and the lack of availability of local studies.

First, the hours devoted by the students to participate in the forums were not enough to develop the tasks week by week. In fact, some students developed the participation in the forums (the last two cycles) at the end of the virtual course. Moreover, the researcher needed to do the process in a six-week period of time since she had virtual lessons and did not have face-to-face lessons to develop the project. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that the process was finished and the outcomes the researcher wanted to pursue were achieved. Additionally a key limitation of this study was participation; this study had to be conducted twice, due to very low levels of participation by the population in the first implementation. Then, the findings referred to in this document were worked out in the second attempted intervention, where the population was committed.

Apart from that, as mentioned above in virtual courses it is difficult to carry out a process since students could quit the course whenever they wanted. Thus, though at the beginning of the process in the first attempt of the research some students agreed to participate and signed consent letters, most of them quit the course and the others did not develop the tasks to be done in the forums and did not respond to the questionnaire and interview. As consequence, the first attempt to do the implementation could not be developed as there were not instruments to analyze; this was the main obstacle to perform this study.

However, in the second attempt after initializing again the process with different participants, the process changed since they responded to the activities (forums participations) proposed by the researcher and also answered the questionnaire and interview. Thus, when developing virtual projects it is important to take into account if the participants in the process are

committed with the project and the activities to do; if not sometimes there is not chance to restart a process. Nevertheless, in this case the process could be developed again and finished, although few people participated.

Furthermore, when performing the process in the second attempt of the implementation, some participants posted their texts in the forums in the last part of the virtual course. Nevertheless, those circumstances were overcome since participants finished their tasks before the course was closed and the study was adjusted to the conditions in the virtual course.

Finally, the researcher undertook problems with the local studies availability to supplement the present project since the majority of studies were international, though, the researcher could use the information gathered to enrich the study.

Further Research

Feedback has been a widely explored area; nevertheless, during the research process it was noticed that in the institution that the research was carried out, there is a need to work on feedback provided by teachers in the virtual courses.

For example, the use of indirect feedback allowed the researcher to know that students liked to receive feedback to improve their foreign language learning. However, one of them mentioned that it would be better to receive more than one type of feedback to know which type could be better to improve the language learning process. Taking this into account, it would be worth to explore written and oral feedback as a way to help learners enhance writing skill in these virtual courses.

Furthermore, it is highly recommended that future studies be conducted with a broader target population and as mentioned by a student, with an additional method of feedback to

supplement indirect feedback. For instance, it would be interesting to use peer-feedback in the

forums to cover the additional feedback in virtual courses. It means, since the purpose of the

study in these courses was to use symbols as a strategy to give feedback and help learners

improve their writing skill, peer-feedback was not taken into account. Then, it would be

interesting to use peer-feedback in these courses as a way to enhance writing.

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APPENDIX 1

SENA (Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje)
ENCUESTA
LENGUA EXTRANJERA (INGLÉS)

Estimados aprendices virtuales SENA

OBJETIVO: Esta encuesta tiene como objetivo identificar la habilidad de inglés que más se le dificulta al aprender el idioma extranjero (inglés) a través de los cursos virtuales, las posibles dificultades que se le presentan en su aprendizaje y el tipo de realimentación recibida en los foros temáticos (si ha tenido alguna), además de la efectividad del instructor en el uso de la misma.

Gracias por tomar el tiempo de completar este formulario cuidadosamente. Sus respuestas y comentarios ayudarán a la mejora de su profesor(a) en cuanto al uso de la realimentación.

Por favor responda las siguientes preguntas; recuerde que su identidad y la información aquí recibida serán confidenciales.

Teniendo en cuenta el curso de Inglés virtual tomado.

Por favor responde con una equis (x) la(s) respuesta(s) que considere adecuada(s):

1. ¿Cuál de las siguientes habilidades del inglés le parece más difícil de aprender a través de los cursos virtuales de Inglés?

   a. Habla   b. Escucha   c. Lectura   d. Escritura

   ¿Por qué?
   _____
   _____

2. ¿En cuál de las habilidades comunicativas se sientes más seguro?

a. Habla   b. Escucha   c. Lectura   d. Escritura

¿Por qué? _____

3. ¿Cuál de las habilidades cree Ud que necesita más refuerzo en los cursos virtuales?

   a. Habla   b. Escucha   c. Lectura   d. Escritura

   ¿Por qué?
   _____

4. ¿Ha tenido la oportunidad de hacer escritos a parte de los ejercicios de completar realizados en Tell Me More?

Si_____ No_____

¿Por qué?

_____

5. ¿Ha recibido realimentación escrita de su profesor? (si su respuesta es afirmativa responda la pregunta 6)

Si _____   No_____

6. ¿Si ha recibido realimentación escrita, la lee?

Si _____   No_____ ¿por qué?

_____

7. Cuando quiere escribir en inglés, ¿qué se lo impide?

a.   Falta de vocabulario.
b.   Conocimiento de gramática.
c.   Miedo a cometer errores.
d.   No sabe cómo escribir las oraciones.
e.   Sabe lo que quiere escribir, pero al hacerlo comete muchos errores.

Otro.   ¿Cuál?
_____

8. ¿Qué estrategias utiliza cuando no sabe cómo escribir una oración en inglés?

a.   Buscas la ayuda de un traductor
b.   Le escribe al profesor/a
c.   Busca palabras desconocidas en un diccionario

9. ¿Qué clase de realimentación le gustaría recibir (Si no la ha tenido)?

a.   Escrita
b.   Oral
c.   Las dos

¿por qué?
_____

Muchas Gracias

Karina N. Jiménez Padilla

SENA Virtual Instructor

Appendix 2: Coordinator's Consent Letter

Bogotá,D.C.

Señor:
Jairo Antonio Castro Casas
Líder Ambientes Virtuales de Aprendizaje e Idiomas
Centro de Desarrollo Agroempresarial – Regional Cundinamarca
SENA Servicio Nacional De Aprendizaje

Respetado Señor:

Con el deseo de contribuir al desarrollo de la escritura en el área de Inglés, se pretende desarrollar un proyecto educativo llamado "The use of feedback on accuracy as a strategy to enhance students' descriptive Writing skills", dirigido a los estudiantes de Cursos virtuales de nivel Beginner, con el objeto de contribuir y enriquecer los procesos de aprendizaje de la lengua extranjera y al mismo tiempo reorientar las prácticas docentes de realimentación académica.

El objetivo de este estudio es examinar la forma como los estudiantes desarrollan y mejoran su proceso de escritura en Inglés, a través de participaciones en los foros dispuestos en el curso virtual. Cabe anotar que dicha investigación hace parte de mi trabajo de grado de la Maestría en Didáctica del Inglés con Énfasis en Ambientes de Aprendizaje Autónomo que actualmente curso en la Universidad de la Sabana.

Para este propósito, comedidamente solicito su consentimiento y colaboración para realizar mi propuesta de investigación, que se llevará a cabo durante el segundo semestre académico del presente año. Esto implica recolectar datos y analizar los resultados recogidos de los foros temáticos del curso virtual donde los estudiantes participarán activa y voluntariamente y guiados por el docente del área.

Para hacer el seguimiento del desarrollo de este proyecto se tomaran algunas de muestras de los foros hechas por los aprendices, las cuales servirán de evidencia para el posterior análisis de la misma. A los participantes se les garantiza estricta confidencialidad con la información que se obtenga. El proyecto no tendrá incidencia alguna en las notas finales del curso.

Agradezco de antemano su valioso aporte para llevar a buen término mi investigación.

Atentamente,

Karina Nathaly Jiménez Padilla
Tutora Virtual Idiomas
Regional Cundinamarca
SENA Centro de Desarrollo Agroempresarial

Appendix 3 – Participant's Consent Letter

Bogotá, D.C.

Señores:

Estudiantes nivel Elementary

Curso Virtual de Inglés

SENA Servicio Nacional De Aprendizaje

Apreciados Estudiantes:

Actualmente estoy realizando una investigación titulada "The use of feedback on accuracy as a strategy to enhance students' descriptive Writing skills"(El uso de realimentación en precisión como una estrategia para mejorar la habilidad de escritos descriptivos de los estudiantes), dirigida a estudiantes de Cursos virtuales de nivel Elementary, con el objeto de contribuir y enriquecer los procesos de aprendizaje de la lengua extranjera y al mismo tiempo reorientar las prácticas docentes de realimentación académica.

El objetivo de este estudio es examinar la forma como los estudiantes desarrollan y mejoran su proceso de escritura en Inglés, a través de participaciones en los foros dispuestos en el curso virtual. Cabe anotar que dicha investigación hace parte de mi trabajo de grado de la Maestría en Didáctica del Inglés con Énfasis en Ambientes de Aprendizaje Autónomo que actualmente curso en la Universidad de la Sabana.

Por lo anterior, comedidamente solicito su consentimiento y colaboración como participantes de mi propuesta de investigación, que se realizará durante el segundo semestre académico del presente año. Esto implica recolectar datos de sus participaciones en los cursos y analizar sus escritos, por lo cual daré realimentación a las particiones hechas por ustedes con el fin de conocer y analizar experiencias en el proceso de escritura académica.

Igualmente, a los participantes se les garantizará el uso de nombres ficticios para mantener su identidad en el anonimato, así como estricta confidencialidad con la información que se recolecte. El proyecto no tendrá incidencia alguna en las evaluaciones y notas parciales y/o finales del curso.

Agradezco de antemano su valioso aporte para llevar a buen término mi investigación.

Si está de acuerdo con participar en el mencionado estudio, por favor firme esta carta y devuélvala a su profesor en cuanto le sea posible.

Atentamente,

Karina Nathaly Jiménez Padilla

Karinajimenez@misena.edu.co

karinajipa@unisabana.edu.co

Tutora Virtual Idiomas

Regional Cundinamarca

SENA Centro de Desarrollo Agroempresarial

En constancia de que conozco y apruebo la información aquí contenida, y de que deseo ser un participante de este estudio, firmo la presente carta de consentimiento.

Nombre

Fecha

Appendix 4 - Data Collection Instrument: Students' Questionnaire

Estimados aprendices virtuales SENA

Los elementos de este cuestionario piden que comente sobre la realimentación recibida en este curso.

Este tiene por objeto conocer su percepción sobre la realimentación recibida en los foros temáticos, además de la efectividad del instructor en el uso de la misma.

Gracias por tomar el tiempo de completar este formulario cuidadosamente. Sus respuestas y comentarios ayudarán a la mejora de su profesor(a) en cuanto al uso de la realimentación.

Por favor responda las siguientes preguntas; recuerde que su identidad y la información aquí recibida serán confidenciales y no tendrán incidencia alguna en sus calificaciones.

Teniendo en cuenta el curso de Inglés virtual tomado.

1. ¿Qué tipo de realimentación ha recibido de su profesor(a)?

        Oral ____   Escrito____   Ambos____   Ninguno____

2. ¿Ha recibido realimentación escrita, la lee?

    Si _____   No_____

¿por qué?

_____

3. ¿Los trabajos escritos han sido entregados?

     Si _____   No _____

4. Han sido realimentados?

     Si _____ No _____

5. ¿El profesor(a) lo ha mantenido informado de su progreso en su realimentación escrita?

    Si _____   No _____

6. Que hace con la realimentación recibida? Cómo la usa?

_____

_____

7. ¿Ha entendido la realimentación recibida en los foros temáticos? (Símbolos utilizados)

Si_____   No _____

¿Por qué?

_____
_____

8. ¿La realimentación recibida, ha sido útil en su aprendizaje de Inglés?

Si_____   No _____

¿Por qué?

_____
_____

9. La utilización de la realimentación con uso de símbolos ha ayudado a la mejora de sus escritos?

Si _____ No _____

¿Por qué?

_____
_____

10. ¿Los símbolos de la realimentación escrita fueron claros?
Si_____   No _____

Explique

_____
_____

11. ¿La realimentación con símbolos le ha ayudado a ser consciente de sus aciertos/desaciertos en la escritura?
Si _____ No _____
¿por qué?

_____
_____

12. ¿El uso de la realimentación con símbolos le ha ayudado a ser más consciente de sus errores para el aprendizaje de Ingles en posteriores escritos?

Si _____ No _____

¿por qué?

_____

_____

13. ¿Qué le gusto o disgusto acerca de la forma de recibir la realimentación con símbolos?

_____

_____

14. ¿Crees que la utilización de realimentación por medio de símbolos ayuda en el fortalecimiento de gramática del idioma extranjero?

_____

_____

Appendix 5 - Data Collection Instrument: Semi – Structured Interview

1. ¿Qué tipo de realimentación ha recibido de su profesor(a)?

      Escrita, oral, ambas.

2. ¿Si ha recibido realimentación escrita, la lee? Si__ No___ ¿por qué?

3. ¿Ha entendido la realimentación recibida en los foros temáticos? (Símbolos utilizados)

    Si_____   No _____ ¿Por qué?

4. La utilización de la realimentación con uso de símbolos ha ayudado a la mejora de sus

    escritos? Si _____ No _____ ¿Por qué?

5. ¿Los símbolos de la realimentación escrita han sido claros?

          Si_____   No _____ Explique

6. ¿La realimentación con símbolos le ha ayudado a ser consciente de sus aciertos/desaciertos

   en la escritura?

     Si _____ No _____¿por qué?

    7. ¿Cuál fue tu reacción ante la presencia de un símbolo en tu escrito?

    8.¿Qué le gusto o disgusto acerca de la forma de recibir la realimentación con símbolos?

    9. ¿Crees que la utilización de realimentación por medio de símbolos ayuda en el

fortalecimiento de gramática del idioma extranjero?

Appendix 6 – First Students' entry samples

SIC. Screenshot taken to the first artifact forum of Roro (November 22nd 2012)

Feedback provided by the teacher-researcher in the virtual platform

SIC. Screenshot taken to the correction of the second forum of Roro (November 24th 2012)
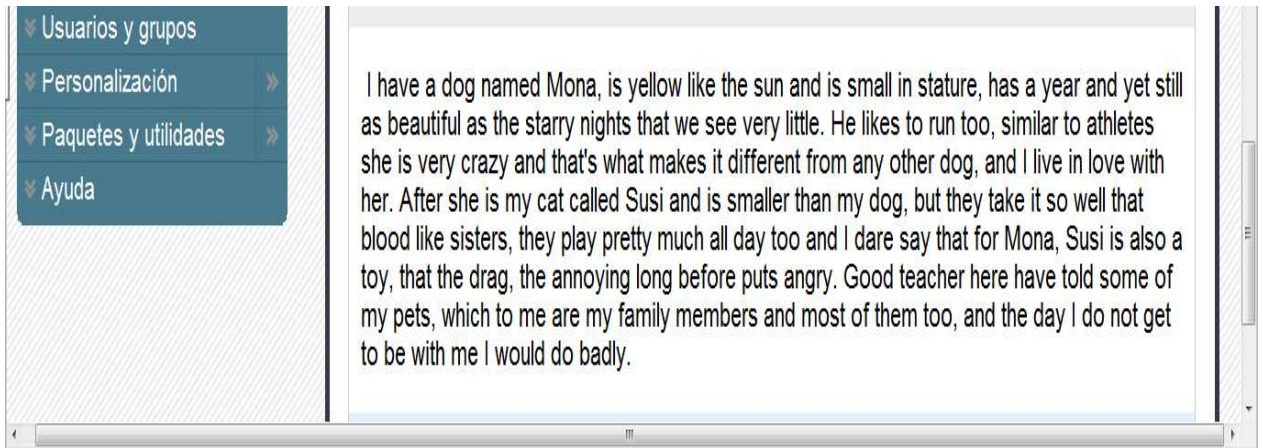
SIC. Screenshot taken to the first artifact forum of Anque (November 25th 2012)
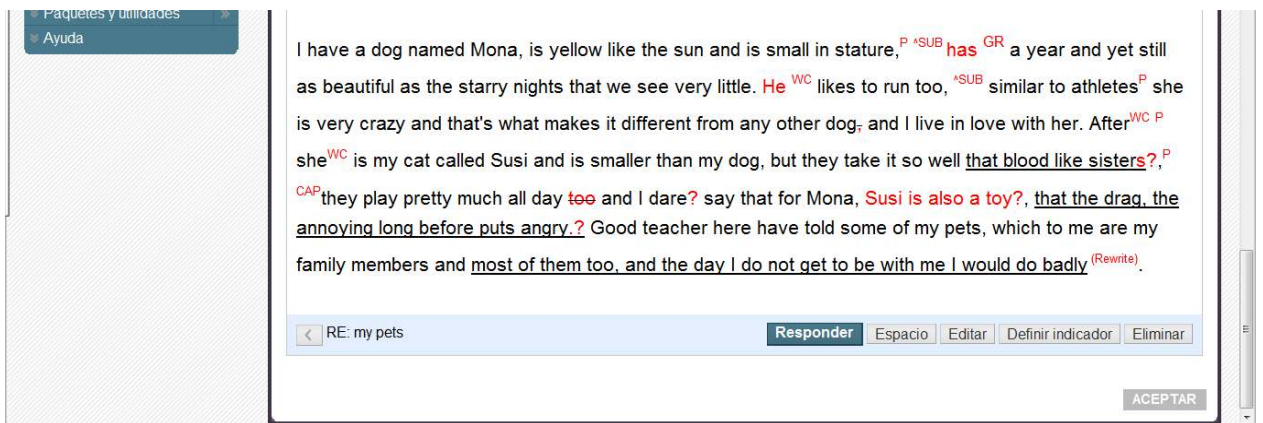
Feedback provided by the teacher-researcher in the virtual platform
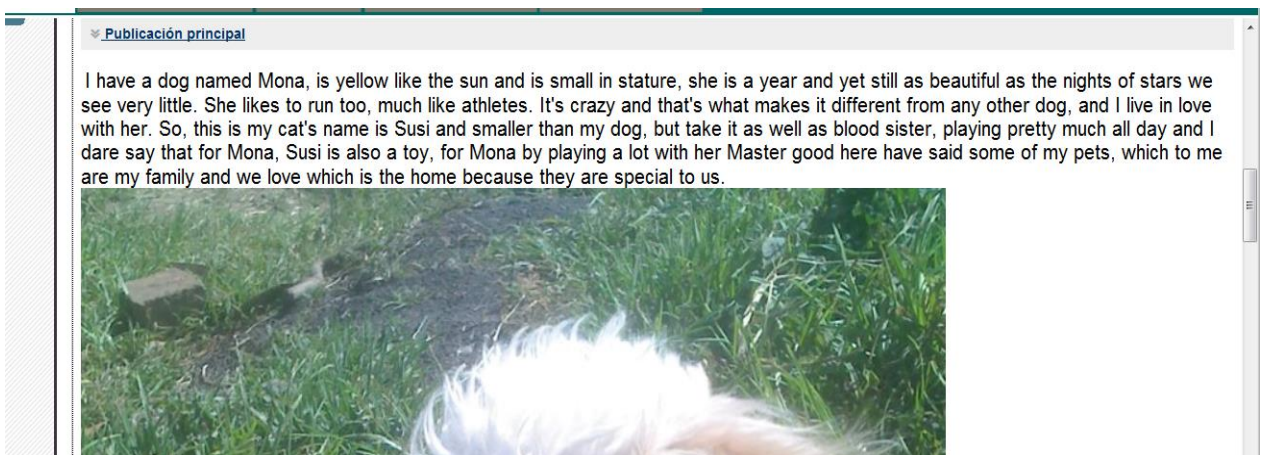

SIC. Screenshot taken to the correction of the second forum of Anque (November 26th 2012)

Appendix 7 – Action plan

Activity/Date	Month (2011)August – September – October- November				Month (2012) March – April- May				Month (2012- II) September- October				Month (2012- II) November- December				Month (2013- I) March – April- May
	eek 1	eek 2	eek 3	eek 4	eek 1	eek 2	eek 3	eek 4	Week 1	eek 2	eek 3	eek 4	eek 1	eek 2	eek 3	eek 4	Week 1 – Week 2- Week 3- Week 4
Step 1: Initiation	orange	orange	orange	orange													
Step 2: PreliminaryInvestigation	orange	orange	orange	orange													
Step 3: Lit. review	orange	orange	orange	orange	green	green	green	green	green	green	green	green	green	green	green	green	green
Step 4: Design of action plan – consent letter					orange	orange	orange	orange									
Step 5 : Design of instruments and piloting					orange	orange	orange	orange									
Step 6: design / Implementation					orange	orange	orange	orange	orange	orange	orange	orange	orange	orange	orange		
Step 7: data collection									orange	orange	orange	orange	orange	orange	orange		
Step 8: Analysis and of data									green	green	green	green	green	green	green	green	green
Step 9: Reflection&decision making									green	green	green	green	green	green	green	green	green
Step 10: Sharingfindings									green	green	green	green	green	green	green	green	green