Feedback In The Virtual Environment

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I intend to discuss the role of feedback in interactions in a virtual environment along with the various ways it is manifested, as much within human-to-machine interactions as among members of a virtual community, giving emphasis to feedback in discussion groups for educational purposes. This discussion will be followed by an attempt to classify the main types of feedback found in data collected in virtual classes, which were divided into two categories: evaluative and interactional. The names cited in the examples are all fictitious to protect the students' anonymity. Unchanged names are only the undergraduate course teaching assistant's and my own name. All the students have authorized the use of their messages and the original forms were kept.

1. Introduction

Rinvolucri (1994) states "The term originates in biology and refers to the message that comes back to an organism that has acted on its environment"(p.287). Despite this, Robert de Beaugrande (personal communication) is certain that the term was first used in electrical engineering. In fact, the Second Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary declares that the term originated, in 1920 in the area of electrical engineering.

> "***1a****: the return to the input of a part of the output of a machine, system, or process (as for producing changes in an electronic circuit that improve performance or in an automatic control device that provides self-corrective action).* ***2 a****: the partial reversion of the effects of a process to its source or to a preceding stage* ***b****: the transmission of evaluative or corrective information to the original or controlling source about an action, event, or process; also: the information so transmitted.*"

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Or, in the words of the Encarta® Electronic Encyclopedia,

> "***return of output:*** *the return of part of the output of a machine, system, or circuit to the input in a way that affects its performance.*" The same encyclopedia offers another definition more appropriate to our purposes – *feedback would be a response, that is, comments in the form of opinions about and reactions to something, intended to provide useful information for future decisions and development.*"

This idea of reaction is also present in the Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics, which considers feedback to be "any information, which provides a report on the result of behaviour", as well as in the American Heritage Dictionary, which defines feedback as "the return of information about the result of a process or activity; an evaluative response".

In foreign language learning contexts, Penny Ur, (1996) sees feedback as "information that is given to the learner about his or her performance of a learning task, usually with the objective of improving this performance" (p.242). Ellis (1985) focuses on the question from a communication standpoint, defining feedback as ". . . response to efforts by the learner to communicate. Feedback can involve such functions as corrections, acknowledgement, requests for clarification, and backchannel cues such as 'Mmm' " (p. 296).

In the virtual context, according to Stemler (1997) "Feedback can be defined as output, usually displayed on a screen, to tell students how successful they have been in solving problems or to provide information about the quality of their response to a test-like event" (p. 339). As this author says, feedback should be used for more than correction, also to send motivating messages.

As we can infer from the above definitions, feedback has been traditionally identified with the response of the teacher (tutor, computer) to the student, and motivated by some action related to that student's learning.

I would like to define feedback in the context of on-line classroom interaction as: **reaction to the presence or absence of a given action with the purposes of evaluating or seeking evaluation of the performance in the teaching-learning process, or to reflect on the interaction in order to inspire, control or evaluate it**. In my proposed definition, I don't include the terms learner, student, teacher or even computer, because our data shows that feedback can also be provided by a

classmate, or even by someone who is not a member of the learning environment per se. My definition includes, besides the learning aspect, interaction, because in the virtual context, interaction is also an object of evaluation. Such a decision is supported by Ypsilandis (2002) in his comments on the new concept of feedback.

As he says:

> *The recent and welcome shift of interest form language teaching to language learning affected the way feedback is perceived by both learners and teachers. Consequently, feedback is now recognized as an assistance mechanism, a key factor for successful learning, offering support to the learning process. As a result, feedback is now understood to be (or 'as being') provided also by other learners (peers), or generated by the learner himself/herself. (p.169)*

Vigil e Oller (1976), quoted in Allwright e Bailey (1991), mention two types of feedback – cognitive feedback that gives information about the use of the language, and affective feedback, which relates to emotional reactions as response to the interaction itself (pp.92-93).   I would say that, in on-line interactions, feedback can work as evaluation of the learning process, as a mechanism to catalyze, inhibit or measure interaction. That gives us, then, two basic types of feedback: **evaluative** or **interactional**. I call **evaluative feedback**, that which gives information about academic performance of the student, or of the teacher, and **interactional feedback**, that which records the reactions or interactional behavior of the student or teacher and which could be considered similar to the affective feedback named by Vigil and Oller.

2. Feedback in the interaction between humans and machines

Feedback is the fuel for interaction in any context in which it occurs, even when such interaction occurs between humans and machines. For this reason, some researchers have studied ways of providing feedback in human-computer interactions. The programs that we use, give responses to each action: the computer tells us when the system is busy and when it is processing, E-mail software says that the addressee has received the message, but cannot respond at that exact moment. Even printers can give feedback usually by means of different light colors. The printer Compaq IJ600, however, is fitted with an oral feedback – a voice informs the user when the print job will start and when it finishes, as well as any problems that crop up to prevent successful printing. When such a response is not received, the user usually repeats
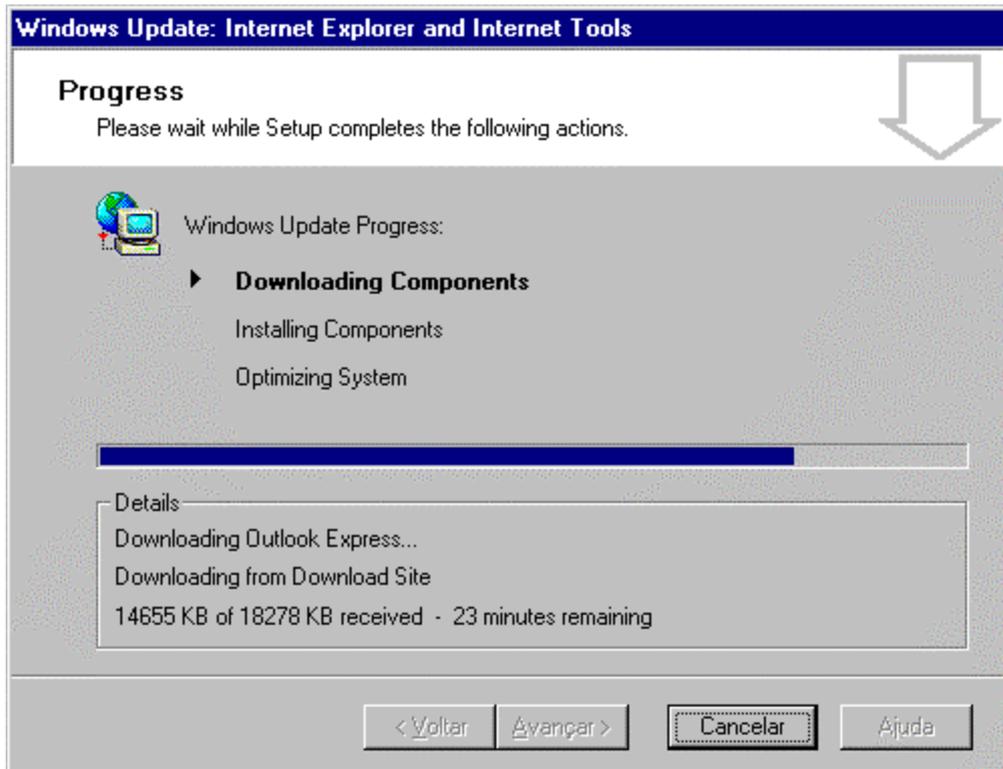
the command. It is like when we call an elevator. We press the button and if there are no lights showing movement from floor to floor, we press the button again. It's a reaction to the absence of a signal.

Models of feedback designed for human-machine contact have been based on human interaction models, as the response to the effort of the user is essential to the success of operations (Pérez-Quiñones & Sibert, 1996). In this way, feedback should be understood not only for its evaluative side, but also interactional, like any kind of sign that we are paying attention to the other or even that something is being processed when the interaction is with a machine. Some examples of feedback provided by the machine to keep our attention or give information are:

1. The automatic correction of a word wrongly typed when we are using a word processor;
2. The sound some programs make when a bad or non-permitted operation is executed;
3. The blue bar that slowly fills in the rectangle showing that a task (e.g. download, saving a file) is in process, nearing completion, etc;
4. Internet warnings and announcements (e.g. your message was sent successfully, your software needs updating)
5. Automatically generated e-mail messages (e.g. your message has been received and a reply is forthcoming, you have been added to/removed from x-discussion list, an e-store informs you that your purchase is complete, etc.)

The first two examples may be classified as evaluative and the others as interactional as they inform the user about his interaction with the machine.

On the screen reproduced below, we can see the feedback given to the user during the download of a file. Besides the blue bar slowly filling in the rectangle, you can see the constantly changing information about how many Kbytes are being received and how many minutes are left to complete the operation.

```
Windows Update: Internet Explorer and Internet Tools

Progress
Please wait while Setup completes the following actions.

        Windows Update Progress:
    ►   Downloading Components
        Installing Components
        Optimizing System

    ┌─Details────────────────────────────────────┐
    │ Downloading Outlook Express...              │
    │ Downloading from Download Site              │
    │ 14655 KB of 18278 KB received  ·  23 minutes remaining │
    └────────────────────────────────────────────┘

              < Voltar   Avançar >   [Cancelar]   Ajuda
```

Some web pages take a long time to load, but keep informing the users that everything is fine through verbal or non-verbal signs, so that they won't give up waiting. Look at some examples: An interesting series of these messages can be found at page http://www.chambinho.com. While the page is being uploaded, these messages appear at regular intervals:

> *The site is being uploaded*
> *Just another second*
> *Only a tiny little second*
> *Now it's almost there*
> *On its way*
> *Stay cool*
> *Just another second*

This sequence of messages repeats until the page arrives in its entirety.

When downloading the software Macromedia Flash Player, the user is told that a video will appear as soon as the download is finished and that it should take about 2 minutes with a 56.6K modem to complete the process.

http://www.macromedia.com/shockwave/download/index.cgi?P1_Prod_Version=Shock
waveFlash.

On the site *American English Pronunciation Practice* http://www.manythings.org ,
where you can access lots of things, like the tune "Row, row, row your boat," for
example, http://www.manythings.org/ pp/row_your_boat.html, the word "loading"
appears, followed by dots that expand into lines until the site is fully uploaded.

Loading………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………

On the screen reproduced below, the vertical bar on the left side tells the reader that
a file is being downloaded and gives instructions about what to do if the download
does not start automatically.
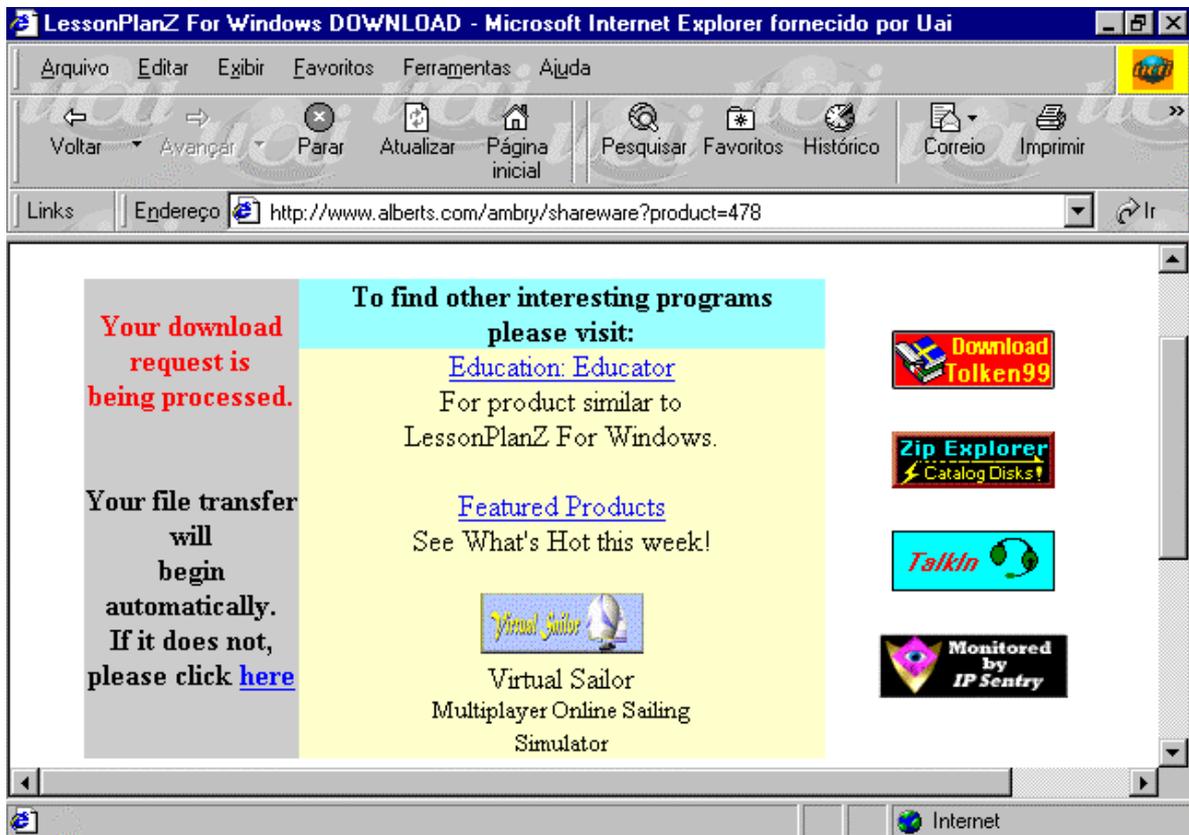
All these examples show the need to give the users feedback so that they will not stop in the middle of an operation that is being processed with no difficulties. There are also messages designed to alleviate the users anxiety through feedback. An example would be the message "This could take a few minutes. Please be patient," given to the client of Norton AntiVirus®, before a download of software updates takes place.

It is not only the machine that gives feedback to the user, of course. There is also the expectation on the part of the webmasters and site-builders that users will provide feedback to them. Almost every site includes an e-mail address, usually in the form of links named "talk to me" or "send your opinion" or with icons that look like letters, post-office boxes, or labeled "e-mail." Some sites even specify the type of feedback they expect: requests for support about a technical difficulty, suggestions, praise, accusations of copyright infringement, complaints, wish list (list of desired services the site does not yet provide), bug reports (in the case of the site interfering with the browser, for example). An example of a request for feedback can be found at http://www.freeservers.com/cgi-bin/feedback.

3. The role of feedback in human interaction

Feedback plays an important role in human interactions, whether they be in spontaneous conversation, classroom interaction or on-line interaction. When we interact, it is important for the listener/s to show that they are paying attention to what we say, and to do so, they need to give us some sign: a look, a facial expression, a gesture, a word, a non-verbal signal, etc. This indication could be of an evaluative nature – agreement, support, disapproval, doubt, suspicion, – or an interactive nature, when the interlocutors show that they are attentive to what we say, or that they want us to speak.

The absence of feedback in face to face conversation usually causes a certain discomfort in the interlocutor. In on-line interactions, an intense anxiety for feedback on the part of undergraduate or graduate students has been recorded in the data collected in discussion lists among specialists of a certain area or in on-line courses. The need for a reply to a message can be observed in an example recorded on a discussion list for the project INGREDE, a project organized to develop an on-line instrumental English course involving eight different Federal Universities. The absence

of immediate feedback caused a certain amount of suffering for the interlocutor. The context that produced the message was as follows: on the 12th of August 2000, a Saturday, a member of the project sent the group some teaching material to evaluate. The names of the people and institutions were removed to protect their anonymity.

> *Dear All,*
>
> *I am sending you all an attached file with a sample class lesson that we made here at X-school   and we would like to have everyone's opinion on it.*
> *Especially about Y-part and Z-part, PLEASE.*
>
> *Thanks,*
> *XXXX and YYYY*

Two days later, a Monday, there had been no reply. The silence, the absence of feedback, brought about a reaction on the part of the teacher who had sent the message, who proceeded to then contact the group coordinator with this e-mail:

> *Dear Vera,*
>
> *I am sending you this message but not posting it to the mist. What's happening? Wasn't the list supposed to be a place for discussion, especially now that we are developing the units? Without discussion, the work will not be collaborative and will be left lacking because of it. I sent a sample class lesson to the list so we could discuss it, and all go in the same direction but up to now only zzzz who I sent a copy to replied. If you think it would be a good idea, as project coordinator, you could post this to the list.*
>
> *I really hope to construct this course collaboratively.*
> *Love,*
> *XXXX*

The above is a good example of the necessity for immediate feedback in the on-line environment. Even though she sent the message on a Saturday, she expected to receive quick replies. Upon receiving the second message, the coordinator replied immediately, explaining her silence by not having had enough time to study the lesson sent to the group.

In the example quoted, we can see how there was a lack of both types of feedback, evaluative and interactional, that is, the teacher hoped that those who read her

message would have at least confirmed receipt of it, saying that they would read and evaluate the material as soon as they could. In an interview conducted by e-mail, the teacher had this to say about the experience:

> *"It was really very frustrating. I was so excited about having the opportunity to participate in a collaborative assignment, but worried that we were all so far apart and would have to speak the same language. When no one replied to my request for evaluation I felt:*
> *1. incompetent, because I thought our proposal had been rejected;*
> *2. after thinking it over, I realized it couldn't be that, but I was very disappointed at not receiving any replies.*
> *We waited, and in fact we're still waiting now without replies and meanwhile, we've finished the unit without any comments. Only from the two coordinators, which was very good. Nevertheless, the type of group that we are promoting with IngRede is an interactive and participatory one. I still hope we get there."*

4. Feedback in the Classroom

Feedback in the classroom has been studied and categorized by several authors. Lyster & Ranta (1997), quoted in Lightbown & Spada (1999:103-105), describe 5 different types of feedback in foreign language classrooms. All of them refer to the students' performance when learning the language. The teacher gives:

1. *Explicit correction.*
2. *Requests for clarification.*
3. *Metalinguistic feedback.*
4. *Elicitation.*
5. *Repetition.*
6. *Reformulation (recasts).*

Schwartz & White (2000:167) distinguish two types of feedback: formative and summative. According to these authors, formative feedback modifies the thinking or behavior of the student to facilitate learning. The summative evaluates a student's assignment or test with the purpose of giving it a grade. The goal of formative feedback is to maintain the students' motivation and participation, and to keep them from feeling isolated or giving up on the course. In my corpus of data, we can find the following types of formative feedback, which can also be classified into evaluative (examples 1,2, and 3) and interactional (examples 4, 5, and 6)

1. *Telling the students that they are correct;*
2. *Complimenting the student on an insight or for having made a good association with another text;*
3. *Making the students think about a certain statement or conclusion they've made with the goal of persuading them to change their minds;*
4. *Encouraging a student to ask questions;*
5. *Encouraging a student to participate;*
6. *Stopping the students from going off on tangents or abandoning the topic under discussion.*

Regarding summative feedback, most of the examples in my corpus of data refer either to a record of assignments received (each task earned x points) or to the warnings sent to students about their absences and the risk they ran of losing the whole semester. These were designed to avoid the shock students might have received if they suddenly found their registrations cancelled after not participating

5. Feedback in the Virtual Classroom

According to Schwartz & White (2000:169-170), students in virtual classrooms consider feedback to be effective when it is

1. *timely and thorough*
2. *formative and summative*
3. *constructive, supportive and substantive*
4. *specific, objective, and individual*
5. *consistent*

You can also see through my data, collected in asynchronous discussions, that the students expected the teacher to give prompt, detailed answers to their questions and send praise and observations that make them think. There are also explanations about their need to see their errors corrected and to follow the process of registering forwarded assignments. In on-line courses, there is the expectation that the teacher will give encouragement and support to the students, pay attention to the achievements and assignment completion of each individual. Finally, the teacher is expected to be consistent, not demanding constant participation if the teacher herself/himself has shown a long absence from discussions.

Schwartz & White (2000: 167) emphasize that

> *Feedback is even more critical on the on-line environment, where students may feel isolated and detached. More than students in traditional settings, on-line students need appropriate feedback on performance because learning in the on-line medium is complicated by the disconnection of electronic textual communication. Devoid of the environment and nonverbal signals available in face-to-face contact, the on-line classroom requires effective feedback in order to alleviate some of this disconnection and to reduce feelings of isolation in the on-line student.*

When the interaction is virtual, the students cannot see the teacher nodding, or making eye-contact, or backchannelling. It is crucial that the student, in the virtual environment feel the presence of the teacher and that this presence is demonstrated through written messages sent to the group. Bischoff (2000:60) enumerates five types of messages that contribute to the visibility of the teacher, an essential factor in students feeling connected in the on-line classroom.

> *Content-related messages (lectures, handouts, clarifications of points in the text, discussion questions, synthesis of discussion);*
> *Process-related messages (order of assignments, directions for sending assignments, descriptions of the flow of the class, guidance when students become confused);*
> *Technical tips (software tips, information about how to send attachments, discussion of how to format notes, URLs);*
> *Protocol guidelines (code of conduct, plagiarism statement, netiquette, online tone);*
> *Responses (answers to students questions, feedback on work submitted to the meeting).*

Bischoff (2000:62) advocates the frequent and consistent use of on-line feedback. To her,

> *Effective on-line instructors not only write to class meetings regularly but they provide frequent and consistent feedback to the class as well as to individual students. Frequent and consistent feedback in the on-line classroom can stimulate active engagement by techniques such as questioning assumptions, disagreeing with certain points, and pointing out well-analyzed points.*

Students in virtual classes do require feedback as we will see on 5.1.3. Their messages show it is important for them to feel that the teacher is accompanying the discussions and reading all the messages. An examination of the corpora of my courses reveals that my teaching assistants and I attempted to give constant feedback

in order to maintain a certain "visibility" that functions as an indirect speech act – "I'm here and I'm following the whole discussion." The strategies employed were the following:

1. Sending a response to the whole discussion list to the individual questions received in my personal e-mail in order to spread the information and also motivate the students to interact as a group and not individually with only the teacher.
2. Encouraging the group to try to clear up a doubt brought up by one member.
3. Forwarding questions to get a discussion started.
4. Suggesting additional readings.
5. Asking the students to obey certain rules that facilitate interaction.
6. Praising the insights and other contributions of students.
7. Asking the students to avoid digressions from the topic.
8. Criticizing short, undeveloped messages.
9. Passing on technical information.
10. Explaining possible absences of the teacher.

To keep up the students' self-esteem we always avoid sending any feedback that might threaten their faces to the whole discussion list. Thus, cautious comments about poorly written assignments or the consequences of a lack of participation are sent only to the individuals' e-mails.

In our courses, we try to motivate discussions, and mainly, to make the students themselves the center of the interaction. Usually, we do not immediately respond to a question, but wait until another student does so, so that the group will be constantly motivated to try to solve problems sent in by their own classmates. Thus, actions, which are traditionally the responsibility of the teacher, become the students'. It is a common occurrence for a student to solve another's problem, saying that s/he must be mistaken, and suggesting other sources of reading or rules of interaction.

The analyses of the corpora, composed of data being collected since 1997, show the following types of evaluative and interactional feedback.

Evaluative Feedback:

1. The teacher evaluates a student
2. The teacher evaluates the group
3. The student asks for feedback about an assignment
4. The student evaluates the course or the teacher
5. The student evaluates the group
6. The student evaluates herself/himself
7. The student evaluates a classmate

Interactional Feedback:

1. The student encourages another student to stay in the course
2. The teacher encourages the students to stay in the course
3. The student asks for confirmation that a message has been received by   a classmate or the teacher
4. The teacher or a student confirms receipt of a message
5. The teacher evaluates an interaction
6. The student evaluates the interaction
7. The teacher sends out guidelines for interaction etiquette
8. The student sends out a suggestion for interaction etiquette

On the following pages I present some examples, using messages collected from three discussion groups: samples of interactions among the participants of the English Language course, "Reading and Writing through the Internet" (1997-2000), in the undergraduate Languages Program at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG); and samples of interaction among participants of courses offered to Applied Linguistics and another in Discourse Analysis graduate students in 1999 and 2000.

The two examples below are very representative of the students' feelings about feedback in the virtual environment.

Hello Vera and Classmates,

Before anything else, I'd like to apologize for not being present much this week in the discussion room. My provider is really failing to meet my expectations. In fact, I'm only waiting until this class is over to change providers, because I'm afraid the change could make the situation even worse right now.

I haven't been able to read this week's assignment yet. But Juliane said that it would be a discussion of a paragraph of the text.

I would like to comment on the first paragraph of item 1.4.2: Teacher feedback and error treatment:

Teacher feedback on responses given by students is another very important element in classroom interaction. Students need to know whether they have correctly understood the teacher and have provided the appropriate answer. They are likely to feel frustrated if the teacher keeps withholding feedback.

Speaking from the point of view of the student this time, I will compare oral interaction with our virtual interaction. I completely agree with the author who says that the student expects feedback from the teacher. When I receive messages (when I can), I first open those from Vera, because I

want to see what she's written about our assignments and our comments. I notice that I'm not the only one with this expectation, because many times, when someone says, "I'd like someone to help me clarify a point," this someone expects anyone in the group to answer, and obviously, that Vera will read the answer. If Vera has no comment, this leads us to infer that the answer was satisfactory.

I also like it when she comments on my work turned in, and in some way also when she noticed that an assignment got lost along the way. I guess I feel like she looked at me and saw that I am interested in participating.
Hugs to everyone,
Daniela

In the above example we have several types of feedback. The student began her message with interactional feedback when she apologized for being absent, and said that she did not manage to read the weekly assignment, probably due to the technical problems with her Internet provider, as she mentioned at the beginning of that message. Then, she comments on the importance of feedback from the teacher and the expectations of the students to receive this type of response. Interesting is the interpretation given to the teacher's silence on any matter, as an example of a good evaluative feedback. In the last paragraph, the student emphasizes the need to receive individualized feedback from the teacher.

Next, examples of each kind of feedback will be provided.

5.1. EVALUATIVE FEEDBACK

5.1.1. Teacher evaluates student

In the following example, the teaching assistant praises the achievements of a student who commented that she continues interacting with penpals in English, through e-mail.

Paula wrote:
>
>By the way I continue changing e-mail with my penpal.
>
Good job Paula! I hope so does everybody else!
Cheers,
Ricardo.

5.1.2. Teacher evaluates the group

In this message, the teaching assistant sends evaluation of the good achievements of the whole group in the activity involving interaction with other English speakers, and mentions a similar commentary to the group from the teacher.

> *Hi people!*
>
> *Just as Vera mentioned her enthusiasm in an earlier message, I am also amazed at the news you have been sending us! I hope you keep on giving us this preview of the contacts you manage to make.*
>
> *Cheers,*
> *Ricardo.*

5.1.3. Student requests feedback from teachers

In the following messages, the students are demanding feedback. In the first example, despite the student's full awareness that simply completing the assignment is enough to earn him credits, he demands an evaluation of form. In the second example, the student after handing in samples of her interaction with other speakers in chats, a course requirement shows her anxiety to meet the expectations of the teacher, and requests feedback.

a) > *Hi Mário,*
    Ricardo or Vera, I´d like to know if I doing the tasks well. I´m waiting for a feedback.

    You are doing great. We expect that all the students work autonomously, that is, doing our activities, but going beyond that in order to develop their personal projects.

    Cheers,

    Vera

b) *Hi everyone,*
Dear Vera I would like to know if you have examined my samples, are they ok??? Do I need to hand in my e-mails samples too.

I am working on my homepage, and I hope I can get it done by the weekend.

When must is be ready??? Vera I would like to know if I have achieved your expectations as a student this term taking this course, would you send me a feedback on my work. I just want you to know that I have learnt a lot. Thank you and to my mates and to Ricardo.

Thanx
Vânia

5.1.4. Student evaluates the course

In the following example a student spontaneously evaluates the course. The student seems to have taken to heart the course's first priority of socially constructing knowledge through interactions with partners and other English speakers.

Dear teachers,

*Our subject through Internet is just **excellent** (in the original, the word was emphasized by appearing in red). It encourage us to write a lot, to read a lot to, to know the other's ideas and also to learn how to use effectivaly the e-communication and the resources of Internet.*

It maybe seems ridiculous, but since I started this course, I want to look for my e-mails, at least, twice or three times a day.

When I see my name or ideas in someone's e-mail, I fell very glad, because, as I told the group, I fell that I'm adding something to them, and it is very important for me.

About my penpal: It's a emotional situation to communicate with a native speaker. I never done it before, despite having an eletronic address. I'm trying to do my best!

Short: Go on with your work, because it is very important, interesting and new (for me, of course). I want congratulate you for your work!

Cheers,
Sueli

5.1.5. Student evaluates the group

The same student, as in the previous example, writes here not only about the teachers, but also about her classmates, praising the work of the group. These types of message contributed in a very positive way to the motivation of the teachers and students alike.

> *Dear teachers and virtualmates,*
>
> *I'm very happy about our virtualclass. I am reading ALL the e-mails that I receive and I believe that everybody is doing the same. This attitude joins the group very much and encourage us.*
>
> *My ideas were mencioned in two e-mails of virtualmates, and I fell glad to know that I'm adding something interesting to the group.*
>
> *By the way, I already founded my penpal; better, he founded me. He is Leroy, from Fenix, Arizona, and I hope we can exchange a lot of e mails, even when the semester have finished.*
> *Cheers,*
>
> *Sueli*

5.1.6. Student self-evaluates

In this message, the student also evaluates the course, but what is most eye-catching is the observation he makes about his own learning process – and the awareness this brings of his own difficulties, which he uses to better plan and organize his learning process.

> *Dear classmates!*
>
> *That's great these reading and writing processes*
>
> *Did you read the text and did the exercises?*
>
> *It is instructive and interesting. At least I thought so when I was visiting the site suggested by Vera. I am amazed with the whole course because most of the time I am working in production of texts. It helps me a lot when I have some difficulties.*
>
> *I suppose the text may be recommendable for all graduates students because of its instructive resources for reading and comprehension.*
>
> *I've done all the exercises and after this, I put the sites at bookmarks for future visits. I've still printed the texts and exercises. It is a way for me in*

sense of studying at home. It is because, in computer, it is easy conferring the correct answers. I thing this is not good. So, doing the exercises at home, I am able to just confer the answers after doing the exercises.

Sincerely!

Josué

5.1.7. Student evaluates a classmate

The next messages demonstrate evaluations sent to certain classmates. In the first example an undergrad student compliments a classmate on her format for e-mail and asks for help learning to duplicate it. In the second example, a graduate student shows the importance of participation of one's colleagues in the construction of one's own insights, and gives offers a personal contribution to the discussions.

a) *Hi Valdete,*

   I have just read your e-mail about the second activity and I'd like to say that the format of your e-mail is very nice. Could you tell me how did you do that? I'd like to know and I'd thank you if you could tell me. Bye.
   Juliana

b) *Danielle,*

   I think your observation is so interesting. I had never thought of such a possibility. It combines well with the comments Ana Beatriz and Rogério made that helped me consider what is "innate" or not.

   Beside your explanation, which really makes sense, I would also add that students have a tendency to want to understand every single word of a listening activity and when they can't understand one, they miss the rest, and get frustrated at their lack of success. I think it's important to show them that even in our native language, we often fail to understand every detail of speech (the evidence of this is clear when we try to transcribe oral texts) but that doesn't mean we miss the main idea, which is what's really important. A good article to help us develop our students' awareness of factors in listening activities is called "Who is afraid of listening comprehension," by Rosana Lucas. Here is the full bibliographic reference: LUCAS, R. "Quem tem medo de listening comprehension?" in Paiva, V. "Ensino de Língua Inglesa - Reflexões e Experiências". Campinas: Pontes, 1996."

   Affectionately,

   Viviane

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5.2. Interactional Feedback

5.2.1. Student encourages another to stay in the course

Testimonies like the following have two roles. Besides motivating the other students to stay in the course, it builds group morale in the sense that more than one person is facing the same problems, which keeps the recipient from feeling inferior to other participants.

> *Alda wrote:*
> *>*
> *> Dear Juçara,*
> *>*
> *>As you I have many problems to do my tasks and send e-mails to*
> *>everybody, because I don't have computer at home and sometimes is very*
> *>difficult to get one free at Fale. But we can't desist because this*
> *>subject is very good for improving our English.*
> *>*
> *> BY,*
> *>*
> *Alda*
>
> *>*
> *Hello, Alda!!!:)*
> *Thank you very much for your friendly words and support. I guess we are not the only ones who are facing such problems: the Computer Lab at Fale is always packed (especially during the breaks between classes) and not everybody has got a computer at home.*
> *The good news is, now I've got my own computer and I*
> *will be able to send my e-mails at night and on*
> *weekends. I won't drop out of this course, because I'm*
> *really enjoying it!*
> *Hope we can be friends,*
> *BYE!*
> *Juçara*

5.2.2. Teacher encourages the students to stay in the course

In the following example, a student insists on turning in the assignments after the due date and employs a kind of emotional blackmail. The teacher, while not failing to enforce the rules of the course, which would be unfair to the other students, assures the student that he is welcome to stay, emphasizing the fact through capital letters.

>*If you do not accept my task, please let me know before I send you the*
>*second, and doing so I'll not spend my net time with this class if I'm not*
>*welcome.*

(...) *Please, try to hurry and catch up with your classmates so*

*that you can get all the presences and marks, BE SURE YOU ARE
WELCOME.*

Regards,

Vera

5.2.3. Student requests confirmation of receipt of a message by classmates and the teacher

Although all the messages sent are visible on the course homepage, the students feel the need to receive confirmation of the teacher or of their classmates that the e-mail arrived, and frequently ask for feedback. When feedback is not forthcoming, the message can be sent a second or even third time to the whole group.

a) *Guys,*

Please, could someone confirm that my messages are getting to you? Because the postmaster keeps on returning them to me...

Ana Paula

b)
> Vera,
>
I would know if my task 4 it was send.

>
It was send before the message thet i send for you about the signature.

>
Rosa

5.2.4. The teacher or a student confirms receipt of a message

Here we see an example confirming the observation made above, that messages are often re-sent in the absence of feedback.

I don't know what happened with my e-mail, so, I'm >sending my task again.
June,It seems your e-mail is working well because we got your three messages with your task.

Vera

5.2.5. Teacher evaluates an interaction

In response to a student who complained of a lack of more active and critical participation on the part of her classmates, the teacher evaluated the complaining student's own participation and suggested that she change the way she interacts.

(...) Disagreeing just to disagree doesn't get you anywhere. You have to say what you disagree with and why. Even now I don't understand what you were disagreeing with. When you say, for example, that classifying strategies only helps the teacher and not the student, I feel frustrated that you didn't elaborate on your ideas.
I'm sure that if you present us with arguments, your classmates will join in the discussion with you. If not, it ends up being a dialogue limited to us two.

Vera

5.2.6. Student evaluates the interaction of the group

In this example, a student evaluates, in a negative way, the interaction of the group that is failing to adequately respond to the questions posed by the teacher.

Just one thing, it seems like we aren't communicating with each other. We don't direct our messages anywhere. To all and to no one. Vera requested that someone send out the different concepts of style and learning strategies. As I have seen that many times one has been confused with another, and she states that they are not the same thing. . . could someone someone take on the responsibility of sending out a text that differentiates them? Academically, please.

5.2.7. Teacher suggests guidelines for interaction

Messages about rules of etiquette in virtual interactions are sent throughout the course, so that discussions can be more effective. Usually, the teacher sends most of these guidelines. One of the most common problems is illustrated in the following example:

> *I would like to ask everyone to leave only that part of the previous message that is necessary to understand the reply or provide context. Some messages unnecessarily include replies of replies of replies.*
>
> *Vera*

5.2.8. Student suggests a rule for interaction

The students also align themselves in relation to netiquette, (internet etiquette), especially when they feel in some way injured by the failure to observe some common rules, such as the following example illustrates, in which the student reminds the group of the necessity to use anti-virus programs, to avoid infecting everyone on the list.

> *I had a big problem this week with my computer cause some of our mates sent me e-mails with virus. Especially some who were sending with attachment.*
> *Please tell them again, firts to run a VIRUS SCAN in their*
>
> *computers and to be more polite as we were seeing about netettiquete on the net.*
> *Thanks*
> *Paulo*

6. Conclusion

The literature about feedback in the classroom has focused mainly on actions, which describe learning conditions, with emphasis on errors. If we believe that learning occurs through social interactions among learners and more expert language users, it is important for us to give more attention to interactional feedback.

Automatic responses may help the teacher at least to inform the students that their tasks have been filed or that the teacher has read their messages. Those responses would work in a similar way to those described in section 2, preventing the students from repeating the same actions that is sending the same task twice or more and keeping sending messages asking if the teachers have received their tasks. However, the students and even the teachers demand more personalized participation.

In on-line courses in which interaction via discussion list is expected to have a central role in the learning process, it is feedback that anchors all the interaction and guarantees the success of the course. Students send in their contributions and questions and expect responses from the teacher and their classmates. They feel

rejected by the group and by the teacher when no one takes an interest in the topics they propose. Silence is then a strong feedback that can even have the effect of the student dropping out of the course. In the example below, we can see that the student is about to drop out because of the feeling of being ignored by the group.

> *Good morning teachers and class,*
>
> *(...) I don't know if I'am write correctly, because nobody answered me, so I'm no learning nothing! I thought thar I will learn to write and read but, I don't know if what I read is right, if I write is correct, and everybody knows english very well!*
>
> *I think too that I'm in wrong place! Excuse me for all,*
> *by for everybody!*
> *a hug for you!*

To avoid students feeling ignored in virtual courses, I frequently send messages explaining a lack of reply to a certain message, as can be seen in the following example, which, nevertheless, does not prevent the demand for feedback.

> *Dear colleagues,*
> *I'm going to avoid replying to every student who contributes to the discussion so as not to overload the in-box with messages. I intend to comment each week about the interaction that occurred during that week.*
> *Vera*

Nevertheless, the students do want personal comments on their works. If no feedback is given, students feel insecure about their progress in the course or feel they could get more attention. Some students interpret silence as a meaning they are not on the right track as we can see in example (a); others just request attention – examples (b) and (c) – and others just want feedback as a kind of proof that their tasks were received by the teacher as in example (d).

> *(a)> Am I in the right way? Please, drop me a line.*
>
> *(b)I'm wondering if you could give me a feedback !*
>
> *(c)Teachers and virtual classmates, if you enjoyed reading my text, please give me feedback making a little comment on it. I hope to hearing from you soon.*

> *(d)I haven't got any feedback on my 3rd and 4th tasks and I just wonder what happened. I would really appreciate if you send me some feedback as soon as possible so I can control all of my work in this course.*

In our graduate-level on-line course, we have weekly readings and on-line discussions, without set schedules. The readings generate reactions – comments, questions, criticism, and consultations of other texts – all recorded through e-mail. These messages receive feedback from the students and the teacher. The feedback, also mediated by e-mail, generates reflections, changes in opinion, revised understanding of concepts, and new messages. As the same text is discussed throughout the week, the students have a greater opportunity to make their own comments, and more time than that available in the traditional scholarly context to give feedback, solve problems and doubts, and add information to the readings.

Nevertheless, it is not easy to exchange the culture familiar to us since childhood, for virtual learning communities. In the traditional classroom, the teacher usually is the one to provide feedback. The teacher asks, the student answers, the teacher comments, and the number of topics is usually reduced and controlled. In virtual interaction, everyone can propose questions/topics and everyone can comment or give feedback in reply to a message.

The absence of comments from the teacher and the students is a major complaint among participants, because not all topics, whether proposed by the teacher or by the students, can be taken up for discussion, leaving the person who proposed the topic frustrated. Moreover, many students continue believing in the academic authority and omnipotence of the teacher, as the only source of information, which creates the expectation that the teacher will respond to every single message, even when a classmate has already done so. Such discomfort felt by many students is evidenced by this message from a graduate student:

> *I have this feeling in the pit of my stomach that I'm not prepared to do an on-line course. This is probably one of the reasons I've been so resistent to the class. I feel the lack of feedback from the teacher, and think it's hard when a classmate asks a question and no one replies to it. I'm worried. Every night I feel the computer judging me, like this, there it is over there, full of messages waiting for me. Am I the only one who feels like this?*

Certainly, she's not the only one who is experiencing the discomfort in the transition from the paradigm of teaching concentrated in the limited knowledge of the teacher to a hypertextualized classroom, where not only the words of the teacher, but many other voices with other words combine into a semiotic system made dynamic by feedback. Other students adapted well to the new environment, as can be noted in the message below of one student's interactional feedback provided to the student of the previous example:

I think making a challenge out of working on reducing your anxiety could by a good affective strategy. Don't be discouraged. The feedback could be from all of us, and who knows, maybe by having lived through this experience, we'll be able to do this with our students in a conventional classroom? I mean, who knows, but that we'll be able to truly create student-centered classes and they'll then become more independent?

Don't get discouraged.

There is strong evidence in our data that feedback in the virtual environment is of paramount importance. In the learning environment, no matter what kind of feedback it is, be it evaluative or interactional, the role of feedback is to link together the members of the virtual community, giving them the feeling of belonging

We are all learning and trying to make the best choices. In our constant exchanges, our continuous interaction, we are constructing a collective intelligence that outgrows each one of the participants, that builds something much bigger than each one of us, but that certainly exists only due to the feedback that each one of us, in our own way, gives to the group and to its participants individually.

7. Acknowledgements

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