

HERDING CATS: A DESCRIPTIVE CASE STUDY OF A
VIRTUAL LANGUAGE LEARNING COMMUNITY

A Dissertation

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Doctor of Philosophy in English

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This virtual ethnographic study describes what it is like to study in a virtual language learning community. Data was generated through participant observation, online interviews with selected students, and analysis of publicly available documents related to the community.

An analysis of both the class activity and the synchronous interviews led to the discovery of six general insights.

- Multiple means of interaction are important in virtual classes, but each student should be allowed to select which means of interaction he/she will (or will not) use.
- Change is an inevitable and necessary part of virtual communities if they are to continue for more than a few months.
- Language learning communities take a conscious effort to develop and maintain.

- The context-poor medium of virtual interviews requires that the interviewer compensate by paying more attention to the text he/she receives.
- Virtual interviews require attention to time, including the time it takes to conduct the interview, the time it takes to gain the trust of community members, and a consideration of what time zones are involved in any interview.
- Since the members of the community will have a wide range of technological equipment and experience, the teacher (or researcher) needs to adjust his/her plans to what is available to a specific student.

Online teachers and researchers should take the following recommendations into consideration in planning their class/study.

- Have a Back-up Plan.
- Establish Ground Rules at the Start.
- Allow Sufficient Time.
- Take Time Zone Differences into Consideration.
- Provide for Multiple Means of Participation, but Make Specific Means of Participation Optional.

- Provide a Means for Students (and Teachers) to Get to Know Each Other.
- Provide Extra Time for the Interviews.
- Consider Using Email as an Interview Technique.

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CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM

Premises

This study is based on two premises: 1) virtual language learning communities are possible, and 2) it is possible to generate data on virtual ESL/EFL classes by means of conducting virtual (online) interviews with the students. I establish the first premise first through a review of the literature (Chapter 2: Review of the Literature) and then through a naturalistic study of an online language learning community. The community I studied (Writing Through the Internet or WTI) developed from an asynchronous writing course offered through the Vander Online Writing School (VOES) into a fair sized (approximately 70 member) language learning community. It has been in continuous session for the past three years and appears to be able to continue for several years more.

My review of the literature and my study also partially support my second premise. In my review of the literature ("Chapter 2: Review of the Literature" and "Chapter 3: Methodology"), I show how researchers have started conducting ethnographic research within virtual communities. In my study, I was able to generate considerable data by

conducting online interviews. At the same time, I found I had to include both participant observation and analysis of written documents to generate sufficient data for developing an understanding of the community I was studying.

My Role in the Study

My role in this study was that of a participant observer. My participation in this study is outlined in detail in Chapter 4: Controlled Chaos. Basically, I felt that participation was essential for acquiring a working knowledge of the class/community I was studying. Only by participating in this community could I hope to understand what was going on in the class and develop interview questions that would lead me to a greater understanding of what it means for an ESL/EFL student to study in an online class.

Since this is an online class, I used what Hine (1998, 2000a, 2000b) and B. Mason (1999) call a virtual ethnography. A virtual ethnography is an ethnography in which the culture being studied is completely on-line. Most of my data generation was carried out through virtual interviews, but I also made use of participant observation as well as publicly available documents and logs of the

weekly chat sessions. Due to the nature of the medium, interviews that are carried out in the virtual world of the Internet have characteristics that are seldom found in interviews carried out in the physical world. These differences are described in detail in Chapter 5: Findings and Recommendations.

The basis of using naturalistic inquiry in this study fits what virtual researchers (e.g. Blanchard, 2000; Hine, 1998, 2000a, 2000b; B. Mason, 1996, 1999; Slater, message on online interviews posted to Virtual Methods discussion list, 27 Feb 2000; Waern, message on online interviews posted to Virtual Methods discussion list, 27 Feb 2000) consider the best way to generate data in an online community. It also fits in with the literature on qualitative research (e.g. Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Marshall and Rossman, 1995; J. Mason, 1996) that calls for the researcher to become a part of the community under study.

Statement of the Problem

The virtual ESL/EFL classroom appears to be gaining ground. Although dual mode classes (face-to-face classes with an online portion) are still the norm in ESL and EFL classes, virtual language classes are appearing not only in

free language schools and classes such as VOES and WTI, but also in universities around the world. Admittedly, most of the university sponsored virtual ESL/EFL classes require physical contact at some point (an orientation meeting, for example), enough virtual classes are appearing to make research into this type of community a more common experience than it was previously.

Meanwhile, there has been an increase in what Blanchard (2000), Hine (1998, 2000a, 2000b), and B. Mason (1996, 1999) call virtual ethnography or virtual methodology. While the problem was originally to study what ESL and EFL students went through in an online class, it soon became two-fold: 1) How does an online ESL/EFL class become a language learning community? and 2) How can data on this phenomenon be generated through a virtual methodology? The second question specifically addressed the concern on how online interviewing differs from face-to-face interviewing.

Evolution of the Problem

As mentioned above, my original purpose in this study was to answer the question: "What is it like to study in an online ESL/EFL class." This study does not attempt to answer the question about how much English the students

learn, or how they learn, but what they do in the class and how they do it. Specifically, the question can be reworded as "What happens in an online ESL/EFL community?" This question arose from seeing many teachers offer their services as online teachers/tutors for EFL students. The advertisements fell into groups that included individual teachers who were willing to offer their services for free, individual teachers who charged for such services, and a group of online language schools that either offered free courses or charged a small amount. My plans were to interview students in several virtual classes, making use, especially, of my connections as a teacher in the Vander Online Language School.

As my study developed, however, I found myself concentrating specifically on how one class (WTI) developed from a standard VOES writing class into a virtual language learning community. (For a description of the differences between the two, see the next section on *Significance of the Study*.) My original study, therefore, was modified by the addition of an additional question: How does an online ESL/EFL class become a language learning community?

An interest in carrying out online studies has also arisen. More researchers are carrying out virtual research

studies, especially in the area of virtual communities (e.g. Blanchard, 2000; Hine, 1998, 2000a, 2000b; B. Mason, 1996, 1999). I considered it important to see how face-to-face studies were different from virtual studies, as well as what problems researchers might face. My study was further modified, then, by the addition of a third question: What differences exist between virtual and "real-world" (face-to-face) interviewing? Although I retained my original plans to conduct virtual (online) interviews as my principal means of generating data, after modifying my research question to ask what happens in the class, I further modified my study by using virtual participant observation and analyzing publicly available written documents concerning this community.

Research on Virtual Classrooms

According to Condon (2000), most literature on virtual classrooms currently available is exploratory in nature. It describes attempts to use networked computer environments, either as a means of offering classes or as an adjunct to a face-to-face class. The vast majority of this literature simply describes how to set up a virtual ESL/EFL class or how to use the Internet within a teacher's regular

classroom. Further, Condon (2000) explains that the literature that is not related to using the Internet as an adjunct to the regular classroom, generally relates to email-based virtual classrooms. Almost none of the studies currently available deal with chat- and MOO-based classes. Of these few studies, most focus on the contrast between the traditional and the computer-equipped classroom.

Although most of the literature concentrates on the use of dual mode classes, the studies that deal with completely virtual classes generally focus on specific types of Computer Mediated Communication (Aitsiselmi, 1999; Baym, 1995; Cherny, 1999; Curtis, 1992; Donath, 1999; Frank and Davie, 2001; LaMonica, 2001; Reid, 1991; Smith, 1996). There is, as yet, very little literature that focuses on multimedia virtual classes such as WTI (e.g., Bicknell, 1998; Coghlan, 1999; Coghlan and Stevens, 2000).

Significance of the Study

As discussed below, this study contributes to the research in two principle areas: 1) distance learning in the area of virtual ESL/EFL courses and 2) synchronous interviews in virtual ethnographic studies.

While there is some research on the use of the Internet in language teaching, little has been done on its more recent use as the primary means of offering such classes. The findings of this study have implications for integrating the Internet into the curriculum and for the structuring of on-line ESL/EFL courses.

The concept of distance education (students taking courses from remote locations) at the university level is not a new one; in fact, instruction across much of the curriculum has been available via modem, satellite and public access television for years now. However, distance education in ESL/EFL has not traditionally been a viable option, as tools were not previously available to do more than deliver information (Berge & Collins, 1995). Until recently, distance education courses in ESL/EFL were limited to traditional correspondence courses, satellite transmission, video (both one-way and interactive), and audio-tapes.

Also until recently, the use of the Internet was limited to providing resources for traditional (face-to-face) classes (e.g. Dave's ESL Cafe <<http://www.eslcafe.com>>). Thanks to increasing opportunities for interaction on the Internet, however, it

is becoming possible to not only transmit instruction, but to facilitate communicative and collaborative learning for language students at a distance (e.g. English for Internet (EFI) at StudyCom <<http://www.study.com>>). Even now, though, the majority of ESL/EFL sites provide either resources for students (or teachers) in traditional classes, or lists of World Wide Web (WWW) links that can be used to find these resources. Except for a few schools, use of the Internet for offering ESL/EFL classes is limited basically to non-credit courses with volunteer teachers.

Virtual ESL/EFL classes are important to study first, to discover how they may become language learning communities, and second, because they will likely affect traditional F2F classes by allowing students another way to interact with either native speakers of the target language or with other learners of the target language. Further, according to Blanchard (2000), the naturalistic paradigm is appropriate in this type of study because virtual language learning communities are context dependent and have a history, a set of traditions and processes of interaction that can only be studied as they naturally occur.

Hine (2000a, 2000b) recognizes that studies on virtual space have demonstrated that online environments are

cultural contexts in their own right. By focusing on the social formations that emerge online, these studies have established this space as a context for doing social research.

A search of the literature on online ESL indicates that the Internet is currently used in TESOL in one of four specific areas:

First, the Internet as a means of interaction among teachers and for teachers to gather information: One of the major uses of the Internet by ESL/EFL teachers is as a means of gathering information, sharing ideas, and communicating with other teachers around the world. This includes the use of e-mail discussion groups such as TESL-L and NETEACH-L. Another use is to search databases such as ERIC, search online libraries, and visit World Wide Web ESL/EFL sites.

Second, the Internet as a means for students to interact with other students, to gather information and/or to receive tutoring: Students in ESL/EFL classes can use it to obtain authentic reading material, to gather information, and to communicate with other students around the world (either through such discussion groups as the student SL-Lists operated out of Latrobe, Australia or through keypal services found on many World Wide Web pages). They can also

post their own writing to on-line magazines such as WINGS or on their own (or a class) Web page. There are also a large number of Web sites that are basically tutorial areas for students who wish to improve their skills in specific language areas. Among these are the great number of ESL/EFL pages the student can go to for help in his/her language learning career. For examples of this type of site, go to the Tower of English at <http://www.towerofenglish.com> or Dave's ESL Cafe on the Web at <http://www.eslcafe.com>.

Third, the Internet as a means of offering additional tutoring/help to ESL/EFL students enrolled in face-to-face classes: Students in regular face-to-face classes can receive tutoring through e-mail, a world wide web page, or a chat room. While these tutors are sometimes attached to a language school, many of them are ESL/EFL teachers who want experience on the Internet and either offer their services as volunteers or charge a small fee for their services. Many of these are now advertising in such places as the Tower of English.

Fourth, the Internet as the primary means of offering ESL/EFL classes: The most recent use of the Internet for ESL/EFL purposes is the offering of complete ESL/EFL classes. While courses in reading, writing, and grammar

have been offered for a few years, there has also been a recent increase in the teaching of both listening comprehension and oral production through Web Based ESL/EFL courses. While these have traditionally been offered by volunteers who have an interest in helping ESL/EFL students, now language schools (both accredited and unaccredited) and institutions of higher education, are also offering these courses through the Internet.

Importance of the Study

This study is important in two areas: 1) virtual ESL/EFL classes and 2) virtual ethnography. Its first area of importance is in the development of virtual ESL/EFL classes. While many teachers are starting to offer tutoring services and online classes for ESL and EFL students, these services are usually asynchronous (web sites, email distribution lists) and do little more than offer grammar and writing tips or do editing and proofreading. Those classes that offer synchronous (chat, MOO) services, often do so as an adjunct to the asynchronous part of the class and not as part of an integrated whole. Most use of the Internet in ESL and EFL classes, in fact, are little more than adjuncts to the regular face-to-face class.

Further, this study points out the importance of building a sense of community in the virtual language class, thereby transforming the class from a mere language learning exercise to a true language learning community. As shown in my review of the literature (Chapter 2), there is little or no research done on Internet-based language classes. This is especially true in relation to the learner. The few learner-based studies that are currently being published deal principally with the necessity for building community in online language courses.

Virtual ESL/EFL classes are also important to study because they will likely affect traditional F2F classes by allowing students another way to interact with either native speakers of the target language or with other learners of the target language. Almost all studies related to this phenomenon are recent, having come out within the last two - three years (e.g. Bliss, 2000; Cherny, 1999; Coghlan & Stevens, 2000; Kasper, 2000; Weber & Lieberman, 2000; Yurgens, 2000). This study adds to the literature in this area.

The second area in which my study is important is in the field of virtual ethnographic studies. Virtual methodology is a fairly new area with relatively little

published research (e.g. Blanchard, 2000; Hine 1998, 2000a, 2000b; B. Mason, 1996, 1999; Paccagnella, 1997; Thompson, Straubhaar and Bolyard, 1998). This study demonstrates its importance in virtual methodology by providing insights on the use of synchronous interviewing as a means of generating data in a virtual study.

Hine (2000a, 2000b) recognizes that studies on virtual space have demonstrated that online environments are cultural contexts in their own right. By focusing on the social formations that emerge online, the research she mentions has established this space as a context for doing social research. This study adds to the literature in this area.

Research Questions

There are many possible questions related to studying ESL or EFL in a virtual classroom. For the purposes of my study, I selected the following overall question.

What happens in an online ESL/EFL community?

Note that this study does not attempt to answer the question about how much English the students learn, or how they learn, but what they do in the class and how they do it.

Arising from this question, however, were two more questions that guided my study.

How does an online ESL/EFL class become a language learning community?

What differences exist between virtual and "real-world" (face-to-face) interviewing?

Although I started with these questions, it should be remembered that naturalistic studies change as they progress. Naturalistic research, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), is emergent (See also Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). Therefore, these questions were just the starting point in my research. The following subsidiary questions emerged in the course of my study.

- What are the elements of a virtual community?
- How can these elements be fostered so that the community continues to grow?
- What changes occur in the community as it grows?
- What elements of the virtual world affect interviews?
- Can asynchronous interviews aid in increasing data generation?
- How can other means of data generation (e.g. participant observation) aid in developing a virtual study?

Findings

Six major findings/insights resulted from this study. While they are listed and briefly described below, a complete description of each finding/insight is located in Chapter 6: Findings and Recommendations.

1. Multiple means of interaction are important in virtual classes, but each student should be allowed to select which means of interaction he/she will (or will not) use.

Although the use of asynchronous communication (email discussion lists and bulletin boards) is a vital part of having a successful online language class, so also is synchronous communication (chat rooms, MOOs, IM clients).

2. Change is an inevitable and necessary part of virtual communities if they are to continue for more than a few months.

Change is a necessary adjunct to growth. Without it, any class or community will tend to become static, in which case the members often lose interest in participating and eventually drop out. Change in virtual language learning communities may occur in one of the following three areas: the programs used, the make-up of the community, the community goals.

3. Language learning communities take a conscious effort to develop and maintain.

Before a language learning class can become a language learning community, it needs a sense of community. While a sense of community may occur spontaneously in many virtual spaces, the planning for a virtual class should take this into consideration and plan for it from the beginning.

4. The context-poor medium of virtual interviews requires that the interviewer compensate by paying more attention to the text he/she receives.

The main media difference between virtual and face-to-face interviews is directly related to the amount of data that the interview carries. In face-to-face interviewing, the researcher gathers much of his/her information through non-verbal cues such as body language (gestures, posture, etc.) and tone of voice. The researcher and the informant see each other and can tell if the other is really interested, how the other is dressed or sitting/standing and the expression on the other's face. None of these cues are available in the virtual interview since it is completely text based. The text only data can be seen in both a negative and a positive light. While there is a lack of non-verbal cues, background data on the community being studied is generally available online.

5. Virtual interviews require attention to time, including the time it takes to conduct the interview, the time it takes to gain the trust of community members, and a consideration of what time zones are involved in any interview.

The virtual researcher needs to consider the time necessary to learn the mores of the group, to learn how to use the programs and chat clients used by the group, and the time it takes to type answers to online interviews. A major factor related to time is the existence of time zones. In a virtual study using synchronous interviewing, the researcher and informant may be as much as 12 hours in difference. If one is awake, the other may well be sleeping. If it is after normal working hours for one, it may be the middle of working hours for the other. Failure to consider this can make for problems in the interview.

6. Since the members of the community will have a wide range of technological equipment and experience, the teacher (or researcher) needs to adjust his/her plans to what is available to a specific student.

Other than audio and video recorders, there are no technical considerations in face-to-face interviews. Virtual interviews, on the other hand, are generally high-tech. They require the equipment, connections, and knowledge, to use the Internet. At a minimum, this means a computer with a modem, an account with an Internet Service

Provider (ISP), and some experience both in browsing the Internet and in using chat rooms. The following conditions are common in virtual studies.

- a. Different media use different amounts of bandwidth.
- b. Connection speed varies with the time and the amount of bandwidth being consumed.
- c. Internet connections may disappear for what appears to be for no reason at all.
- d. Sometimes a particular chat client is unavailable.

Assumptions

Every study begins with at least one assumption. The assumptions for this study are, first, that community building is possible within a virtual language class and second, that it is possible to generate useful data through the medium of a virtual ethnography.

There has been considerable research that supports the first assumption. Barber (1995), Blanchard (2000), Müller (1999), Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, and Shoemaker (2000), among others, all point out that virtual communities do exist. Further, they demonstrate that a sense of community within a virtual environment can be as strong as in a face-to-face environment.

There is also considerable research concerning my second assumption, that it is possible to generate useful data through the medium of a virtual ethnography. Among those who have reported on virtual studies are Hine (1998, 2000a, 2000b), B. Mason (1996, 1999) and Paccagnella (1997). It has become common enough that the posters on the virtual-methods discussion list commonly discuss how to use various ethnographic techniques. For example, during the month of February 2000, there was a fairly active discussion on virtual interviews. In this discussion, four posters, Bennett, Kendall, Slater, and Waern, discussed both the negative (as well as positive) aspects of virtual interviews, and how to overcome the negative aspects.

Limitations

I recognized four potential limitations to my study.

The first was the context-poor environment of virtual communication. As mentioned later, text-only communication lacks the non-verbal and paralinguistic cues that are found in face-to-face communication. In addressing this potential limitation, I agreed with Blanchard (2000) and Thompson, Straubhaar and Bolyard (1998) that, while text-only communication may lack many of the cues found in face-to-

face communication, in some ways, the lack of cues can be useful in forcing the researcher and informant to make an effort to be sure that they say what they actually mean.

A second potential limitation is the ability of participants in a virtual community to adopt any persona they wish. Participants in a virtual community can adopt whatever persona they need for the communication act of the moment. The question then arises as to whether the use of pseudonyms would affect the ability of the researcher to generate the necessary data about the community. I reasoned that, just as people adopt masks in face-to-face situations, so also, the use of pseudonyms should have no negative effect on a virtual study. People will adopt the persona necessary no matter what the environment is. At the same time, when a minor adopts the persona of an older person, it may lead to observation of or participation by informants who are legally protected, and therefore may cause problems for the researcher. The use of voice is only one way to protect against this type of problem.

A third potential limitation was the need for high-end technology to participate in both the community I was studying and in the interviews I had planned. I saw the possibility the requirement for fairly high-end equipment

and software might limit me to interviewing only those community members who had the requisite hardware. I reasoned that members of the community would have the requisite hardware and software since they were needed to participate in the class. I also reasoned that I could match the media used to conduct my interviews to the level of equipment and software of the participants.

A fourth limitation is based on my philosophy that language is best learned by using the language to communicate with others. This communication should be related to topics of mutual interest and be used in as natural a context as possible. To do this, it is important to develop communities in which the participants can discuss topics and learn about each other. Further, it is helpful for the students to use language to teach others how to carry out activities. In this way, meaning can be negotiated and the students can both improve their command of the language, but can also demonstrate their mastery of the communication skills they are trying to develop.

At the same time, community is not the only necessary element in language learning. It is also necessary for the teachers to provide both the needed comprehensible input (i+1) (Krashen, 1985), as well as the opportunity to produce

the comprehensible output (Pica, 1994; Swain, 1985) necessary both to practice language development and to evaluate whether that output is adequate for communication. Again, this is best done through communication activities that require negotiation of meaning.

Differences between a Virtual Class and WTI

When I started this study, I expected a regular class that had a beginning and ending date, and with set lessons and assignments. I found, instead, a class that had a beginning three years previously, but had no ending in sight.

Although a description of the WTI community that I studied can be found in Chapter 4: Controlled Chaos, the following is a brief description of what I expected to find as compared to what actually occurred. Experience in online teaching in ESL, as well as what I had seen in the literature related to online ESL courses led me to believe that I would find a more-or-less traditional class that had been transferred to the Internet. In other words, teachers would instruct students on the proper use of specific language skills (e.g. grammar, writing, reading comprehension). Students would enroll in a class for a set

period of time (a term) and carry out a set number of assignments. Teachers would correct the assignments and return them to the students with comments on how to improve. Evaluation would occur at various times, either through tests or through written assignments. At the end of the term, the teacher would give the student a grade or other means of certifying how much he/she had improved during the term.

That is not what I found. Students join WTI at any time and remain as long as they are interested in the class. While WTI officially has three assignments (participate in the chat sessions, participate in the discussion list, and create a Web page), students are expected to carry out a minimum of only one of these assignments. Even the "assignments" that are posted to the e-class are considered optional. But this does not mean that the students do not attend the class. Since the atmosphere is relaxed, with no evaluations, students tend to participate actively in the discussion list and, when their time zone permits, in the chat sessions. Students who cannot participate in the weekly chat sessions still participate in out-of-class sessions using one of the three most common Instant Messaging systems.

In the traditional use of the word *teacher*, the teacher holds some type of authority over the students. He/she is expected to evaluate the students and give them a final grade. Students and teachers are often seen as facing each other over a desk that places limits on what is and is not permitted. In WTI, there is no teacher-student dichotomy. Teachers are considered tutors based on 1) their knowledge of English, and 2) a demonstrated interest in participating in the community. Students are considered friends (not students) and are often teachers when a topic comes up that they are experts in. For example, if a student is also a computer programmer, he/she may be a teacher when the class starts discussing a topic related to computers. Further, many of the students are also teachers in their own countries. They are in the class not to learn English, but to improve it and practice "speaking" with native English speakers. I found, instead of a traditional class that had been transferred to the Internet, a group of friends who would meet weekly to discuss topics of interest, and who showed an interest in each others' well being. In other words, there was a sense of community present that my experience did not prepare me to expect in this type of class.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms are used throughout the study. These working definitions should make them easier to understand.

Asynchronous Communication

Asynchronous communication does not require that the communicators be present and online at the same time. The two main varieties are e-mail, where the message is delivered to the recipient's mail box to be read when he/she logs on, and bulletin boards (BBS) where the message is posted. In this case, the person who wants to read the message must go to the specific address of the bulletin board and log on to read it (Berge, 1993).

Bandwidth

Bandwidth is the amount of information that can be carried through a phone line, cable line, satellite feed, etc. As a means of communication becomes closer to face-to-face communication, it requires more bandwidth.

Bulletin Boards

Bulletin boards (also known as news groups) are an example of asynchronous communication (the other being email). While email is push media (the messages are

sent directly to the recipient), bulletin boards use pull media. The recipient must access the bulletin board to read and reply to the messages.

Chaos Navigation

Chaos Navigation occurs when people in a chat room are communicating in many channels, as well as in several threads of content at the same time. In this study, chaos navigation is also called *controlled chaos* and *intuitive controlled chaos*.

Chat

Chat refers to "synchronous communication between two or more people, using the keyboard as the means of communication" (Dudeney, 2000, p. 156).

Chat Clients

Chat clients are computer programs used for chat sessions. They may be based on text, voice, or a combination. Different chat rooms use different clients.

Comprehensible Input

Krashen (1985) defines comprehensible input as language that students are able to understand. If i represents students' linguistic competence, then $i+1$ is the language a bit beyond the current level, which still

can be understood with the aid of contextual, social assistance, or both. This is the linguistic parallel to Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development. Long (1983), Pica and Doughty (1987), Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos, and Linnell (1996), and Swain (1985), have refined Krashen's definition of comprehensible input to include an $i+1$ obtained by negotiated interaction. This parallels another of Vygotsky's concepts, stressing the basic social nature of learning. Without a caregiver (an adult or more advanced peer) trying to make meaning out of the students' output (oral or written), the students have little chance to improve current linguistic competencies.

Comprehensible Output

After Krashen posited comprehensible input as a prerequisite for second/foreign language acquisition, researchers began to focus on comprehensible output as an opportunity for students to attend to the various elements of the target language. Output that is not comprehensible calls for negotiation and for further input to help the student along the interlanguage continuum (Pica, 1994; Swain, 1985).

Distance Education

Distance Education is an educational process in which the majority of the instruction occurs when student and instructor are separated in space and/or time (Hoffman 1996; Keegan, 1990; Saba, 1997; Sherry, 1996; Steiner, 1995; Tripathi, personal communication, November 11, 1997; Verduin and Clark, 1991). Although Steiner (1995) explains that the terms *distance learning* and *distance education* are not interchangeable since "distance learning is the result of distance education" (p 1), many practitioners see them as synonymous. In this study, I will use these terms interchangeably. For the purposes of this study, I will use the definition developed by the Interregional Committee on Distance Learning, the committee charged with developing the guidelines for the regional accreditation of distance learning programs. This committee defines distance education as a

formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction occurs when student and instructor are not in the same place. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. Distance education may employ correspondence study, or audio, video, or computer

technologies (Interregional Committee on Distance Learning 1997).

E-Class

Short for Electronic Class. An e-class is a class offered via electronic means. While it may be offered using any online media, in the case of WTI, it is the discussion list portion of the class.

EFL

Studying English as a Foreign Language occurs in a non-English speaking environment. The students in an EFL class usually all speak the same first language so there is no natural reason to use the target language. In addition, students of EFL typically have exposure to English only a few hours a week, usually in the confines of an institutional setting (Brown, 1993).

Emoticons (Smileys)

Emoticons are "facial expressions made using punctuation. These are used in email and chat to communicate feelings or emotions. They must be viewed sideways to get the full effect" (Dudeney, 2000,p. 163).

ESL

Studying English as a Second Language occurs in classroom surrounded by an English speaking environment. Students must use English outside of school to function in the host community. In addition, the students in an ESL class often come from various native language backgrounds, so they must use English to communicate with the teacher and with peers (Brown, 1993).

F2F

Face-to-face. This is the common term for the traditional, or regular, classroom. In the F2F classroom, the instructor and students are physically present at the same place and time.

Instant Messaging (IM)

Instant messaging is a chat technology that allows two people to send short messages to each other thereby holding a synchronous conversation. After downloading the I. M. client onto the computer, the user adds the user-IDs of his/her friends. Each user of a specific I. M. client is able to see when his/her contacts are on-line and send them instant messages.

Internet

The Internet is an interconnection of computer networks covering the entire world in such a way that any computer connected to it can share information with any other computer also connected to it. While the most common impression of the Internet is the World Wide Web, it also includes other features such as file transfer protocol (FTP), electronic mail (e-mail), Telnet, and Chat. Each of these can be used in online teaching.

MOO

Multiuser Object Oriented. MOO is a form of synchronous communication among many people at the same time in which the communicators can "create" rooms, furniture, and other objects. It differs from other forms of synchronous communication such as IRC and Chat, in that anything created in any session continues to exist from that moment on and can be used by others who log on to the particular MOO in which this object or space has been created.

Lurking

To lurk is to subscribe to a discussion list or newsgroup but not post. Although the word lurk has

negative connotations in real-life situations, it is generally recommended for a person to lurk on a discussion list or newsgroup until he/she has learned the norms of the group.

Online Class/Course

For the purposes of this study, an online class or course is defined as a formal course of study either with or without credit, by an institution, accredited or non-accredited, in which the Internet is the primary means of instruction, as well as the primary means of communication between the instructor and the student, and/or between two or more students.

Sense of Community

According to Mann (1978) and McMillian and Chavis (1986), a sense of community comes from the feelings of belonging that members have to their community. This sense of community is unique to each community and is what makes a community different from more than just a group.

Synchronous Communication

Synchronous communication requires that the interacting communicators both be present online at the same time. This may be one-to-one communication as in the talk,

phone, or chat facilities that many systems offer or may be one-to-many as in Internet Relay Chat (IRC), chat rooms, and MOOs that are becoming common. (Berge, 1993)

URL

The URL, or Uniform Resource Locator, is an Internet address. It includes the exact address of every document on the Internet, including the type of document it is.

Virtual Community

Rheingold defines virtual communities as "cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace" (1993b, p. 1). Expanding on this definition, he states that a virtual community is

A group of people who may or may not meet one another face-to-face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks. In cyberspace, we chat and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, perform acts of commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games and metagames, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. We do everything people do when people get together, but we do it with words on

computer screens, leaving our bodies behind (1993a, p. 58).

Similarly, Blanchard (2000) and B. Mason (1999) see them as groups of people who interact primarily through Computer Mediated Communication and who have developed a sense of belonging and attachment to each other even though they rarely, if ever, interact with each other face-to-face.

Virtual Ethnography/Virtual Methodology

According to Hine (1998, 2000a, 2000b) and B. Mason (1996, 1999) a virtual ethnography is an ethnography that "treats cyberspace as the ethnographic reality" (B. Mason, 1996, p 4). What differentiates a virtual ethnography from a regular ethnography is that it occurs completely online.

Outline of the Chapters

This study is arranged as follows. Chapter 1 sets the background for the study. It begins with an explanation of why I selected my topic. Then it describes my role in the study, including an explanation of why I selected participant observation. It goes on to state the problem being studied and discuss the significance of the study.

After that, it gives an overview of the research questions and describes my assumptions and the limitations of the study. After giving a brief overview of the differences between what I expected to find and what I expected to find, the chapter ends with definitions of terms used throughout the study.

Chapter 2 is a review of the literature related to the use of the Internet in teaching Languages and to virtual ESL/EFL classes and virtual communities. It concludes with a review of the literature related to virtual ethnographies.

Chapter 3 describes the methodological approach behind my study. It describes the nature of my study and outlines my considerations as a participant observer.

Chapter 4 describes the community under study from the point of view of both my participation and from what I learned from interviews with some of the students in the class. It describes what happened in the class, and shows how the class developed into a community.

Chapter 5 discusses the six major findings/insights as related both to virtual language community building and to conducting virtual interviews. It ends with recommendations for both developing and managing virtual language classes and for conducting virtual interviews.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Chapter Layout

This chapter focuses on the literature related to the use of the Internet for offering classes in English as a second or foreign language and includes both print and online sources. Among the print sources I used were recent books and articles in the field, as well as searches of data bases such as ERIC database, the indices of publications in the humanities, social sciences, education and indices related to the teaching of foreign languages, the Dissertations Abstracts International (DAI) database. I also carried out online conversations with online ESL/EFL instructors such as Steven Haber, David Tillyer, Arun-Kumar Tripathi, Ruth Vilmi, and Kevin Wilkinson as well as with operators of online ESL/EFL schools such as Marsha Chan, Elaine Hoter, Debra Marsh, Jean Vermel, and David Winet.

At the same time, since my research was conducted completely online, the chapter also covers the literature related to virtual methodology.

I have divided my review of the literature into four major areas of research.

First, since my study concerns a virtual EFL class, the longest, section concentrates on research related to the use of the Internet in ESL and EFL Classes. In this section, I give a description of what the literature indicates about how the Internet impacts on ESL and EFL teaching. While research in this field concentrates on the use of the Internet as an adjunct to the regular face-to-face class, there recent studies related to virtual classes.

The use of the Internet in the ESL and EFL class leads directly into the second section that concentrates on the development of virtual communities. While most research in this area relates to communities that have developed in newsgroups and email discussion lists, there is also some literature on MOO-based communities. Since WTI uses both a discussion list and a MOO environment, much of this research is directly related to my study.

Section three covers research related to students in distance education courses, specifically online courses. The section describes what the literature says about these students. The section concentrates on adult learners because most students who currently take online courses are adults.

Finally, in the fourth section I concentrate on research related to virtual methodology. Due to its relatively new development as a field, there is little published research related to virtual methodology. The section deals specifically with virtual ethnographies and online interviewing.

Research on the Use of the Internet in ESL/EFL Classes

An intense review of the literature related to the teaching of ESL/EFL through the Internet reveals a dearth of published research in this area. Two years ago, in 1999, many postings on discussion lists related to teaching ESL online mentioned research that was currently being carried out but had not yet yet been published. Two years later, in 2001, much of that research still has not been published. In 1995, Frizler (1995) stated, "the body of published material which currently exists on the subject of using the Internet in the ESOL classroom is sparse at best" (p.9). If she was writing today, the same statement could be used. Most of the information for her thesis was "through online discussion lists and their archives, newsgroups, the World Wide Web, and e-mail communication and MOO discussions with international colleagues" (p. 9) and her own direct

experience. Conditions are somewhat better today, but still not ideal (Condon, 2000; Kern and Warschauer, 2000; Merisotis and Phipps, 1999; Warschauer and Kern, 2000).

In discussing the literature related to distance language learning courses, Boyle (1995) indicates that, a search of journal databases as far back as 1980 showed that there was almost no mention of distance learning in the leading journals devoted to language teaching. Almost no language teachers were familiar with the few distance learning projects in EFL and ESL that had taken place. In fact, as Merisotis and Phipps (1999) say, "the vast majority of what is written about distance learning is opinion pieces, how-to articles, and second-hand reports" (p. 1).

According to Condon (2000) most literature on virtual classrooms currently available is exploratory in nature. It describes attempts to use networked computer environments, either as a means of offering classes or as an adjunct to a face-to-face class. Further, most of what it describes is the virtual classroom that is based on the use of e-mail. Almost none of the studies currently available deal with chat- and MOO-based classes. Of these studies, most focus on the contrast between the traditional and the computer-equipped classroom.

Warschauer and Kern (2000) also support this. They found that

the field was long on pedagogical suggestions for exploring networking technology but short on research. Despite a growing body of general research on computer-mediated communication, relatively few studies have been published that deal specifically with second language learning contexts (xi).

Further, Kern and Warschauer (2000) also mention this when they state that

to date, there has been relatively little published research that explores the relationship between the use of computer networks and language learning. The simple question to which everyone wants an answer - Does the use of network-based language teaching lead to better language learning? - turns out not to be so simple (2).

Kern and Warschauer (2000) indicate that the reason there are few published studies is because this is an emerging field. They also find that there needs to be further in-depth studies on the contexts in which internet-based language teaching and learning occur. This is especially so in light of the fact that much of what has been published to date consists of informal reports by teachers concerning what they have done in their classes.

As mentioned above, most literature concentrates on the use of the Internet (in general) as an adjunct to the regular classroom (Berge, 1993; Berge and Collins, 1995;

Graus, 1997; Herron, 1998; Kitao and Kitao, 1996; Swaffar, Romano, Markley and Arens, 1998; Wang and Dalton, 1997; Warschauer, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1999, 2000; Warschauer and Kern, 2000; Warschauer, Turbee and Roberts, 1996). At the same time, there is also much literature related to the use of the Internet in specific Internet media. Almost all of this research is also related to the Internet as an adjunct to face-to-face classes and concerns asynchronous communication. The following is a list of research related to specific Internet media used as an adjunct to the regular classroom. While most of these deal specifically with ESL/EFL classes, two (Gonzalez-Bueno, 1998 and Cruz Piñol, 1997) relate to Spanish while others relate to classrooms in general.

Computer Conferences/Newsgroups: (Barber, 1995, 2000; Beauvois, 1992; Davis and Brewer, 1997; Davis and Chang, 1994-95; Kelm, 1992)

Email: (Aitsiselmi, 1999; Gonzalez-Bueno, 1998; Kroonenberg, 1994-95; Leh, 1997; Sayers, 1993; Shetzer, 1997; Soh and Soon, 1991)

Web-Based Instruction: (Cruz Piñol, 1997; Li and Hart, 1996)

Chats and MOOs/MUDs: (Boswell, 1997; Falsetti, 1995; Pelletieri, 2000; Turbee, 1996, 1997, 1999; Weber and Lieberman, 2000)

The only research related specifically to virtual ESL/EFL classes (not to the Internet as an adjunct to other classes) are Bicknell (1998), Coghlan (1999), Coghlan and Stevens (2000), Frank and Davie (2001) and Frizler (1995).

Bicknell (1998) studied and described an online ESL/EFL class for a paper for one of his classes. He spent some time in the class, interviewed the teachers, and described the class as he saw it.

Coghlan (1999) describes how to facilitate communication in an online class. To explain how the facilitating is done, he uses classes that he teaches or has taught in an online environment. At the same time, he suggests that, whenever possible, online classes should also incorporate an off-line (face-to-face) portion.

Coghlan and Stevens (2000) describe what students say about an online class they team teach. Some of their students were present in the conference and were willing to describe their experiences in the class.

Frank and Davie (2001) explain how they developed an online community. They then describe how this community assisted in the development of critical thinking skills.

Finally, Frizler (1995) developed an online writing class for her Masters thesis. In this thesis, she describes how the students participated in an asynchronous class that was taught completely by email and the World Wide Web.

This almost total lack of published research on virtual ESL/EFL classes may be related to the few such classes that are offered. Except for a handful of language schools (e.g., English Town, English for the Internet, English Learner, Peak English, and Vandar Online Language School (see "Appendix A: Internet Resources" for URL's)), most ESL and EFL teachers who use the Internet do so within their own classes. A few have web sites where the students can come and receive help, either through tutoring or through access to documents (e.g., Dave's ESL Cafe, Online ESL Palace, Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab, Tower of English, Web Enhanced Language Learning (WELL) (see "Appendix A: Internet Resources" for URL's)). All of these, however, are meant to be adjuncts to regular classes. They do not offer classes as such.

Research on virtual classes for first language students is a bit more numerous. Condon (2000), for example, describes the participation in an online writing class. Cogdill (2000) describes how students interact in flame wars in a virtual classroom. Hanson (2000) describes the pedagogical model used in an online advanced composition classroom. What all three of these have in common however, is their focus on describing the authors' experiences in their own classes.

In 1996, Warschauer, Turbee and Roberts (1996) found that the most popular forms of Computer Mediated Communication for language teachers were still e-mail and asynchronous conferencing, but it was still not used extensively for distance learning for ESL/EFL students. Supplemental activities such as cross-cultural exchanges, pen pal writing, long-distance interviews, shared research projects, joint student publications, and multi-class simulations were (and still are) the most common use of the Internet. While they saw synchronous conferencing, becoming popular with composition teachers, it still had not become very common in the second-language classroom. Today the use of synchronous language practice is common in IRC chat rooms and MOOs such as MundoHispano for students of Spanish,

MOOfraçais for students of French, and schMOOze University for ESL/EFL students (see "Appendix A: Internet Resources" for URLs), to mention the three most well known (Falsetti, 1995; Hall, 1998; Holmevik and Haynes (2000); Meloni, 1998; Turbee, 1996, 1997, 1999; Vilmi, 1998). Still, except in a very few cases, chat and MOO environments are generally used as supplemental activities in (or in addition to) regular face-to-face classes and not as a means of offering complete classes.

With the improvements in computer technology, synchronous (MOO- and chat-based) language classes have become more popular during the past two years. It is now common to find chat-based classes advertised on the Internet. In some cases, these are simple tutorial sessions for students who want a chance to practice their English. In other cases, they are full virtual classes that incorporate chat into their offering.

What the above literature about the use of the Internet in ESL/EFL class does show is that Internet-related language-learning activities can be beneficial to ESL/EFL students. Through the Internet, students write to communicate with a variety of people for authentic purposes. Therefore, students are motivated to write for a broad

audience, which extends beyond the classroom, and not just compose assignments for the teacher. Students using e-mail with keypals, for example, have a "real" audience--the keypal--to read what they write as well as having a purpose more in keeping with real-life writing--the need to communicate with their keypals (Bergs and Collins, 1995; Warschauer, 1996).

According to Warschauer (1996), second and foreign language teachers began to integrate electronic communication into language teaching in the late 1980s. For teachers of second language writing, the rationale and motivation were largely the same as for their first language counterparts, chief among these being that electronic communication can bring about more equal participation among second and foreign language students as well as offering an audience other than the teacher and a reason for writing other than a class assignment.

Ruth Vilmi, one of the leading proponents of online language learning activities, is constantly looking for distance learning language courses. Vilmi (1998) adds more to the usefulness of electronic communication. She found that there are 11 ways in which the Internet has been used in language learning.

1. reference and research
2. listening resources
3. finding grammar rules
4. interactive exercises, activities, or drills for vocabulary, grammar, listening, and reading
5. analyzing texts
6. concordancing
7. searching for structures by which the student can deduce rules
8. publishing writing with the opportunity for reader feedback
9. communicating internationally with e-mail keypals or newsgroups
10. communicating in real time
11. taking on-line courses, with tutor or teacher participation

Of the few distance courses specifically for language learning that Vilmi (1998) found, David Winet's courses were perhaps the first to be taught online, and he offers them free of charge on an experimental basis at English for Internet. That is not to say there are no other online language schools. Besides English Town, English Learner, and Peak English (see "Appendix A: Internet Resources" for

URLs), the University of Hull in the United Kingdom offers two online ESL/EFL classes in their site called Merlin: World Class. Since 1997, this school has been teaching 15-week, Internet-based, distance EFL courses in *English for Business* and *English for Communication*. According to the coordinator, however, the classes have had few students enrolled at any one time (Meloni, Personal Communication).

Even in the area of online courses in general, there is little to be found. As Schrum (1998) says,

The impact of online courses has only begun to be investigated. To date, the traditional distance education literature has focused on the design and implementation of correspondence, compressed video, or satellite broadcast delivery courses (p. 53).

While this literature may provide some parallels, it does not directly relate to on online courses.

Swan (1994) also found that students taking Interactive Video Network (IVN) classes in Spanish, College Algebra, AP English, and Calculus liked the IVN class and would take another one if offered. Further, they were well satisfied with IVN classes, thought they lived up to their expectations as well as to the expectations of their parents, and that they did as well in the IVN classes as they did in their traditional F2F classes. While this was

not a study of Internet classes, studies on the use of the Internet in education conducted by Goodwin, Hamrick and Stewart (1993) and by Valance (1998) found this same to be true of their students.

In discussing the use of online classes in general, Harasim (1990) summarized the characteristics of online courses as place and time independence, many-to-many communication, collaborative learning, and dependence on text-based communications to promote thoughtful and reflective commentary. Kearsley, Lynch and Wizer (1995) also found a high degree of interactivity, opportunity to see the work of others and to compare their ideas with those of their classmates, and ample time for students to reflect and compose their responses in the online classroom.

Even recent research that covers Internet-based language courses is limited. Again, most of the published literature consists of reports on how teachers or schools set up and operated their classes. Those reports that do relate to research into the students, deal with the need to develop communities in online classes instead of the learners' perceptions of what they go through in the class (Bliss, 2000; Cherny, 1999; Coghlan and Stevens, 2000; Kasper, 2000; Weber and Lieberman, 2000; Yurgens, 2000).

According to M. K. Barbour, (personal communication, July 28, 1998), Internet-based distance education appears to be becoming much more popular than the traditional audio conferencing or text-based material. This echoes Price (1996) who saw that the rapid growth in popularity of the Internet had made online teaching an alternative for colleges and universities and Shoemake (1996) who indicates that online teaching has dramatically increased in every discipline allowing students to even earn graduate degrees almost completely online. Research also sees distance education in all its forms as becoming more widely accepted in higher education (Eastmond, 1998). Hodgson (1999), for example, found that 58 percent of two-year and 62 percent of four-year public colleges offered distance education courses, with another 28 percent of two-year and 23 percent of four-year public colleges planning to start offering distance education courses within three years.

Today, books on how to set up and operate a virtual class are coming out every day. While many of these books are written by online teachers using their experience in online classes as the basis for their writing (while supplementing this experience with research into what other teachers and administrators have said), other books may be

written by a team of teachers from one school and is specific for how classes are set-up and taught at that place (e.g., Khan, 1997; Ko and Rossen, 2001; Palloff and Pratt, 1999; Ryan, Scott, Freeman, and Patel, 2000).

According to Berge and Collins (1995), computer-mediated communication (CMC), and specifically the online classroom, offers opportunities for mentoring/tutoring, project-based instruction (individual and group), retrieval of information from online archives and databases, course management, interactive chat, personal networking and professional growth, peer review of writing, practice and experience using modern technology. All of these are being used today.

According to M. K. Barbour (personal communication, July 28, 1998) and K. Severn (personal communication, February 26, 1998), studying online has several advantages. In classes these two graduate students have taken, they found that the online class permitted them to learn at their own pace, at their own time, and in the physical location where they wanted to study. Class preparation and learning happened on their own schedules and they were able to take breaks, including fixing meals, in the middle of the class.

There are also disadvantages to online courses, as both Barbour and Severn recognized. First, while there are some courses that purport to deal with oral-aural skills, it is difficult to promote speaking and listening skills since it requires the use of special software and additional hardware such as microphones and speakers that many students do not yet have. It is also easy to procrastinate about assignments. Further, many students are not mentally prepared for distance learning (M. K. Barbour, personal communication, July 28, 1998; K. Severn, personal communication, February 26, 1998). This view was further supported by communication with online instructors such as Begum Ibrahim, Ruth Vilmi, and David Winet. It takes adjustments in habits and attitude, leading many who begin a class to fail to complete it. However, once this adjustment takes place, distance learning can, in the words of Severn, "be a fuller experience."

Research on Virtual Community Development

Rheingold (1993b) defines virtual communities as "cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace" (p. 1). In expanding on this definition, he describes it as

A group of people who may or may not meet one another face-to-face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks. In cyberspace, we chat and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, perform acts of commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games and metagames, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. We do everything people do when people get together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind (Rheingold, 1993a, p. 58).

According to Palloff and Pratt (1999), "This reasoning seems to indicate that there are, in fact, such things as virtual community" (p. 21). Blanchard (2000), Frank and Davie (2001), Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, and Shoemaker (2000) and Müller (1999) also hold this view.

According to Blanchard (2000), there is significant debate as to the existence of virtual communities. This is echoed by researchers such as Cherny (1999), Harasim (1993), Q. Jones (1997) and McLaughlin, Osborne and Smith (1995) who ask if communities as we think of them in a traditional sense really can exist. The major problem with answering this question is one of defining community (See also, Müller, 1999). Most people feel they can identify whether or not a particular group of people is a community, but nobody has yet developed an adequate definition.

Blanchard (2000) indicates that the major obstacle to defining community is determining the need for a common physical location. She states, however, that "traditional communities do not necessarily have to share a physical location" (p. 3). Examples of non-physically located communities are the academic community and social and service clubs such as the Lions Club, and the Rotary club, where people share an interest, but not necessarily a common location. Blanchard then goes on to state that "Definitions of a community require a unifying characteristic for the community members. However, it does not have to be a location. It may be an interest or some sort of cultural identity" (p. 3).

The most important element in the definition of a community may be what Mann (1978) and McMillian and Chavis (1986) call the members' sense of community. This sense of community is the feelings members have of belonging to a community and is what makes a community different from just a group.

Blanchard (2000) sees the community as consisting of three components: a) some characteristic the members have in common (i.e., location or interest), b) a set of processes that help the community function, and c) a sense of

community). She then indicates that the only necessary requirement to apply this definition to virtual communities is to clarify that the common characteristic is an interest in a particular topic. That does not mean, however, that all groups that share a common interest are communities. If a group has not developed a sense of community, it is a group, not a community.

Müller (1999) also finds three criteria for a Community to exist: a) frequent communication among members, b) commonly shared norms, values and collective practices, and c) defined boundaries between members and non-members. Similarly, Cherny (1999), in looking at research on communities, found common characteristics in the various definitions. Among these characteristics are a) an area of interest or location, b) the need for social interaction, and c) common ties among the members.

Like the others, Frank and Davie (2001) also see a sense of community as important in community building. They are more specific, however, in stating that it plays an important role in helping students to express their views.

According to Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, and Shoemaker (2000) research reveals that building learning communities has a number of positive outcomes for

individuals. First, there is a greater chance of collaborative learning when there are strong interpersonal ties among group members. Second, these ties also increase the flow of information among all members. Third, by developing a sense of trust, it fosters support in times of need. Fourth, individuals experience a sense of well-being.

Although studies indicate it is possible to create and maintain online communities (See, for example, Baym 1995, 1997; McLaughlin, Osborne and Smith, 1995; Reid, 1995; Rheingold, 1993; Smith, McLaughlin and Osborne, 1996), this does not mean that all online groups that call themselves communities are, in reality, communities. Quite often they are just groups of people. According both to Blanchard (2000) and to Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins and Shoemaker (2000), it is important to ask if members feel a sense of community.

According to Kollok and Smith (1999), while critics of virtual communities often claim that online communities are more isolated than real-life groups, "their comparison seems to be an ideal of community rather than f2f communities as they are actually lived" (p. 16). Further, "one can find online groups that meet any reasonable definition of community" (p. 23). This view is also held by Wellman and

Gulia (1999) who state that "most community ties in the contemporary western world are specialized and do not form densely knit clusters of relationships. Most members of a person's community network do not really know each other" (p. 171).

As in the use of the Internet in teaching ESL/EFL (as mentioned above), much of the research on virtual community building is also specific to certain Internet media. Much of the literature discusses community within the confines of computer conferencing (also known as bulletin boards and newsgroups) (e.g., Baym, 1992, 1995, 1997; Blanchard, 2000; Donath, 1999). Other researchers look at community as it develops within a MOO environment (e.g., Bechar-Israeli, 1995; Cherny, 1999; Curtis, 1992, 1997; Frank and Davie, 2001; Reid, 1991, 1995). Finally, a few look at community as it is developed within a web-based class (e.g., Bliss, 2000; Carlson and Repman, 2000a, 2000b; Conrad, 1999; LaMonica, 2001)

In deciding if an online group can be classified as a community (or if it is merely an online group), Blanchard (2000), Frank and Davie (2001), and Müller (1999) identify four components that most communities have in common.

- a) Members share some common characteristic such as location or interest)
- b) There is interaction among the members of the community.
- c) There are defined boundaries between inside and outside, which leads to the development of a common identity
- d) Members share an identification with and attachment to this community (i.e., a sense of community).

This study looks at the WTI class from the point of view of these four characteristics.

Research on Online Distance Learners

Most research tends to agree that the online (Internet-based) distant learner appears to be older, more mature and share many characteristics in common. They tend to be self-directed (Biner and Dean, 1997; Buchanan, 1999; Cahoon, 1998; Carlson and Repman, 2000; Eastmond, 1998; Schifter, 1999; Schrum, 1998), believe that life experience is important for their learning (Cahoon, 1998; Eastmond, 1998; Porter, 1997), need to apply what they learn (Cahoon, 1998; Eastmond, 1998; Schifter, 1999; Schrum, 1998), able to manage change (Rogers, 2000), and are struggling to balance

their studies with their family and work relationships (Cahoon, 1998; Schifter, 1999; Porter, 1997).

According to LaMonica (2001), however, there is a lack of research on what students are really like in web-based courses. Of the research that exists, Conrad (1999), sees self-direction as a learned trait that may not be present in all students participating in web-based courses. While Carlson and Repman (2000) found that successful distance learning students are usually mature, highly motivated, and self-directed, they also state that these characteristics "may not describe our average student" (p. 12).

Although beginning and advanced ESL/EFL students often try to take online courses, Li and Hart (1996) indicates that "intermediate-level learners seem to be the audience who can profit most immediately from Web-based courseware" (p. 5). At the same time, those students who appear to be most successful in the WTI community are precisely the advanced students. This may be due to the manner in which the students are expected to participate (using what Nyrop (personal communication) calls chaos navigation. A complete description of this type of navigation can be found in *Chapter 4: Controlled Chaos*. When it comes to student success in finishing a course, researchers are just as

united in their findings. Eastmond (1998), for example, found that many of the characteristics about student success in traditional distance education programs are also applicable to Internet-based courses. Among the most important such characteristics are social and academic integration, student control of and responsibility for their learning, intrinsic motivation, and positive evaluations.

According to Priest (2000) successful online learners have two things in common: they are committed to their studies, and they have a willingness to learn. Further, she found that they share particular learner characteristics such as the ability to take command of and responsibility for their own learning, and the ability to tailor their learning for themselves instead of accepting something ready-made. Further, they have a greater zest for learning and make better use of their time.

Meanwhile, Schrum (1998) found from personal experience and interviews that the following characteristics are associated with success in online courses: Students had a strong reason for taking the course, moved through the lessons fairly rapidly, had support from their family, and began with a certain level of technical knowledge and experience. This agrees also with the findings of Biner and

Dean (1997) and Schifter (1999). The one point where Biner and Dean (1997) disagrees is in the relationship with age, gender or socio-economic status. While other authors indicate that there is a relationship, they found none.

Research on Virtual Methodology

In carrying out my study I used what B. Mason (1996) calls a virtual ethnography (See also, Hine 1998, 2000a, 2000b; B. Mason 1999), which is "simply an ethnography that treats cyberspace as the ethnographic reality" (B. Mason, 1996, p 4). What differentiates a virtual ethnography from a regular ethnography, then, is that it occurs completely online. The researcher becomes a part of the virtual community he/she is studying, but does not physically meet the other members of the community except by accident.

According to Hine (1998, 2000a), the essential features of ethnography are difficult to define. Most people would agree that the two principal characteristics of ethnography are the continuous presence of the researcher in the field setting and the researcher's engagement with the everyday life of the inhabitants. In a virtual ethnography, this means the active and continuous participation of the researcher in the virtual space being studied. Hine

(2000a), considers the Internet as a site for interaction that is ethnographically available because of the assumption that "what goes on within the Internet is social interaction" (p. 50).

As discussed below, there are conditions related to conducting online interviews that face-to-face interviewers seldom encounter. The email discussion list "Virtual Methods" (see "Appendix A: Internet Resources" for URL) deals with research using the Internet. In a discussion on this list, Waern and Slater discussed some of the problems with synchronous online interviews (Slater, message on online interviews posted to Virtual Methods discussion list, 27 Feb 2000; Waern, message on online interviews posted to Virtual Methods discussion list, 27 Feb 2000). Among the points they raised were:

1. The interface of most chats and MOOs are not interview-friendly. First, the channel may not be serious enough to be suitable for interviews. Second, most of these spaces need extra features such as a private room where you do not get disturbed and the ability to log the interview. Third, the people being interviewed are usually

involved in quite a range of other activities while you are talking to them.

2. It is difficult to gauge the dropouts from an online interview study.
3. The synchronous nature of chats makes it more difficult to find times that suit both the interviewer and the informant, particularly when the participants are from different continents.

Paccagnella (1997) points out another problem with virtual studies. The membership of any virtual community always consists of both people who actively participate and those (often the great majority) who merely read the messages without actively participating in most discussions. Further, as B. Mason (1996, 1999) points out, much of the communication that takes place in an online community actually occurs via private email. If a researcher merely observes what takes place in the public portions of the community, he/she will miss much of the give-and-take that occurs.

According to B. Mason (1996, 1999), there are three basic strategies for studying a text-based virtual community.

1. Save all the messages written to it.

Although this might look like the ethnographer's paradise (observing without being observed) the researcher should realize that many members of a virtual community also communicate via private email. By just reading the messages that are posted to the public space the researcher misses out on what goes on behind closed doors.

Paccagnella (1997) also finds problems with merely copying and reading the text (emails and logs). Logs lack at least two aspects of interaction. First they do not record the nature of turn taking, which can occur over a few seconds in chat or take several days in newsgroups and mailing lists. It also fails to record the time it takes to type a response, which helps to shape the collective mood of the community. Second, they ignore the actual experiences of individual participants at their own keyboards in their own rooms all around the globe.

2. Use an electronic survey.

Although such surveys, if they are properly done, can provide snapshots of attitudes and thoughts within the community, all surveys face one of two basic features of asynchronous virtual communities--the split between those who read only (lurkers) and those who are active members (Posters).

While Hine (2000a, 2000b) sees Web based surveys as useful for acquiring data on a predefined topic, she also sees them as facing the same problems as regular mail surveys--defining the sample population and low response rates. To combat the low response rates, she recommends that the researcher contact potential informants via email and ask them if they would prefer to answer by regular mail, email or the web.

3. Use email interviews.

While this may also seem like an ideal solution (send an email and wait for a reply), there is a danger of information overload. When too many informants are answering questions sent by email, it is sometimes difficult to remember who is answering which set of questions. This can be handled by setting the email into the context of an interview by making the subject of the email mention which set of questions is being answered. To do this, the researcher sends an email with three or four questions, and then waits for a response before posting the next set. In this way, it is possible to set up a semi-structured interview in advance while allowing for the necessary changes required by the informant's answers. Further, each set of questions should include the subject: "Interview,

part x" so that the relationship is defined within the communicative act.

According to Mann and Stewart (2000), text-based media "is not an appropriate method for research which seeks to observe the 'real' world" (p. 84). At the same time, they point out that recent research that focuses on virtual communities is challenging this idea. Further, they point out that most virtual interviews are carried out using email. They also found that "researchers who have carried out non-standardized interviews using asynchronous CMC are divided about their success" (p. 76). On the other hand, they note that Bennett (1998) used chat rooms to carry out in-depth interviews and preferred chat to either face-to-face or email alternatives because it allowed for a balance between the researcher and the informant as well as for negotiated meaning.

A further element of the virtual ethnography is directly related to the virtual space in which the research takes place. According to Thompson, Straubhaar and Bolyard (1998), ethnographies have always taken advantage of written materials from a culture. The use of written materials, however, has usually been only a part of the data examined. In the case of virtual research, the researcher has nothing

but text. The virtual ethnographer cannot observe people except through their text. Even in the case of online interviews, the data to be examined is text. Although this emphasis on text can be limiting in the amount of information the researcher can observe, it also presents the opportunity for the researcher to find more information since "all speech, behavior, community rules, and community history is, in principle, likely to be available online for the researcher's inspection" (Thompson, Straubhaar and Bolyard, 1998).

In carrying out online interviews, Bennett (message on "online interviewing" posted to virtual-methods discussion list, February 17, 2000) found success with one to one chat using programs such as ICQ. She also found that the quality of the data generated in this way depended on a sustained relationship of equals (not interviewer/informant) between both people.

On the other hand, Waern (message on "online interviewing" posted to virtual-methods discussion list, February 27, 2000) sees several problems with interviewing in a chat room.

- 1) The channel may not be "serious" enough to be suitable for "serious" interviews.

- 2) It is difficult to gauge the dropouts from an interview study.
- 3) The interface of chats and MUDs is not "user-friendly" for interview purposes.
- 4) The synchronous nature of chats makes it more difficult to find times that suit both the researcher and the informant.

Slater (message on "online interviewing" posted to virtual-methods discussion list, February 27, 2000) sees interviews as events embedded in much more complex relationships with people. He sees the interview-unfriendly nature of chat being the result of the range of other activities the informant is involved in while participating in the interview. He finds it important for the researcher to be able to flirt, banter, have fun with chat, be playful, use the lingo and conventions fluently, and slip in the questions as part of the ongoing events. This almost always means building up a personal presence over time.

Kendall (message on "online interviewing" posted to virtual-methods discussion list, February 27, 2000) agrees with Slater that it is important to be in the community for a long time, and to know when to ask questions. She sees the success of online interviewing as dependent on the

researcher's relationships with people there and the research topic.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the amount of research related to using the Internet in the ESL/EFL classroom has grown considerably in the past two to three years. What has not changed, however, is the paucity of research dealing with the use of the Internet to actually offer the ESL/EFL class. The Internet is still seen as an adjunct to the classroom, and is used as such. It is used much more than previously, and some researchers are also looking at virtual language classes but, as Coghlan (personal communication) explained to me when I described my study to him, most teachers still see dual mode (online and face-to-face) as the ideal way to offer ESL/EFL classes.

We have also seen that Internet-related language-learning activities can be beneficial to ESL/EFL students. Through the Internet, students write to communicate with a variety of people for authentic purposes. Therefore, students are motivated to write for a broad audience, which extends beyond the classroom, and not just compose assignments for the teacher.

In the area of constructing virtual communities, we have seen that the literature accepts the reality of virtual communities. But we have also seen that not everything that calls itself a community is one. I will go into this more in depth in "Chapter 4: Controlled Chaos" where I analyze the community characteristics of WTI using the definitions and characteristics found in the literature.

We have also looked at the characteristics of successful online learners as found in the literature. They are generally more mature and motivated, as well as having a strong reason for taking the course. In the case of WTI, another characteristic is that the students have a certain level of technical experience and technology/software that is close to high-end.

Finally, we saw that the field of virtual ethnography is beginning to gain more published research. As a field of study, research about the Internet, using the Internet appears to be finally coming of age. More researchers are carrying out research in virtual communities and using ethnographic techniques such as participant observation and interviewing. This is further developed in "Chapter 3: Methodology" where I discuss my methodological

considerations and explain why I selected a virtual ethnography as my means of generating data.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The principal aim of this study was to understand and describe an online ESL/EFL learning community. This fits in with one of the characteristics of qualitative research, which, as J. Mason (1996) states, is "concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced or produced" (p. 4). In particular, I carried out a case study which, as Stake (1995) says, was "expected to catch the complexity" (p. xi) of a group of ESL/EFL students who were participating in the online class known as Writing through the Internet (WTI)--a class offered under the auspices of the Vandar Online English School (VOES).

The term "case study" is rather imprecise and can be used to describe almost any form of research using a non-cross-sectional organization (J. Mason, 1996). The purpose for this methodology is to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events and to understand the specific case under study, as well as to *describe* in depth how things were at a particular time and place, instead of trying to *explain* why things are the way they are (Stake, 1995). Stake gives the time period involved in a case study as being an hour, a day, a week, a month, a year, or several years, depending on the case under

study. Since what I found in WTI was not a class in the usually accepted sense of the word--a group of students with a teacher who meet for a specific length of time, with a definite beginning and a definite end--I used an arbitrary five-month period, which corresponds approximately to a standard semester in most schools. I started my interviews on January 1, and ended them on June 1. In the next chapter I (Chapter 4: Controlled Chaos) will discuss the WTI class in depth, paying particular attention to how it has developed into a language learning community instead of being a normal VOES class. This development will be discussed more in depth in the section on *Context and time frame*.

In Lincoln and Guba's (1985) naturalistic paradigm, qualitative researchers carry out their research where the phenomenon naturally occurs, because a phenomenon's reality cannot be understood separate from the context in which it occurs. I decided to use the naturalistic paradigm for this study because, any community, virtual or otherwise, is a context dependent phenomenon with a history, set of traditions, and processes of interaction that must be studied as they naturally occur.

In carrying out my case study I used what B. Mason (1996) calls a virtual ethnography (See also, Hine 1998, 2000a, 2000b; B. Mason 1999), which is "simply an ethnography that treats cyberspace as the ethnographic reality" (B. Mason, 1996, p 4). What differentiates a virtual ethnography from a regular ethnography, then, is that it occurs completely online. The researcher becomes a part of the virtual community he/she is studying, but does not physically meet the other members of the community except by accident. According to Hine (2000a), the Internet can be considered a site for interaction that is ethnographically available because of the assumption that "what goes on within the Internet is social interaction" (p. 50).

As discussed below, there are conditions related to conducting online interviews that face-to-face interviewers seldom encounter. The email discussion list "Virtual Methods" <<http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/virtual-methods.html>> deals with research using the Internet. In a discussion on this list, D. Slater and Y. Waern discussed some of the problems with synchronous online interviews (Slater, message on Virtual Interviews posted to the Virtual Methods discussion list, 27 Feb 2000; Waern, message on

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actually occurs via private email. If a researcher merely observes what takes place in the public portions of the community, he/she will miss much of the give-and-take that occurs.

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B. Mason (1996, 1999) gives two strategies to help overcome these problems.

1. The electronic survey. While electronic surveys can provide information on the attitudes and thoughts of the members of the community, B. Mason (1996, 1999) also points

out that they are prone to one of the features mentioned above, the split between active participants and "lurkers" (those who do not actively participate).

2. Use of the email interview. B. Mason (1996, 1999) also points out that email interviews have the danger of leading to information overload due to the number of email messages being received. He recommends that, if a researcher uses this approach, he/she should, after receiving an informant's consent to be interviewed, send an email message with three or four short questions and wait for a response before sending the next set. This procedure would allow the interviewer to set up a semi-structured interview that can then be manipulated according to the answers received to each set of questions. Further, each set of questions should include the subject: "Interview, part x" so that the relationship is defined within the communicative act.

A further element of the virtual ethnography is directly related to the virtual space in which the research takes place. According to Thompson, Straubhaar and Bolyard (1998), ethnographies have always taken advantage of written materials from a culture. The use of written materials, however, has usually been only a part of the data examined. In the case of virtual research, the researcher has nothing

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Context and Time Frame

This study took place in an online ESL/EFL class originally offered under the auspices of the Vandar Online English School (VOES). The interviews and data collection/generation started on January 1, 2001 and ended on June 1, 2001.

VOES is a language school that uses volunteer teachers to offer free ESL and EFL classes to students from all parts of the world. Teachers in VOES are encouraged to develop their own classes using their experience as language teachers. While the teachers are supposed to have at least a Master of Arts in TESOL or equivalent, most of them work

for the experience in online education that it offers. At the time of this study, most VOES classes were asynchronous. The class I studied (Writing through the Internet - WTI) is one of the few that were offered synchronously.

Although at the time this study began, the WTI class still received students from the VOES administration, it had become basically autonomous, accepting any student who appeared in one of the class sessions and then sent an email subscribing to the e-class.

Although a complete description of the WTI class can be found in the next chapter, a brief description of the class is given here. VOES classes currently last 6 weeks. At the start of this study, most classes lasted for 3 or 4 months with the option for students to continue in the class for more than one term. WTI students, on the other hand, sign up for the class and automatically continue until such time as they notify the teachers that they wish to leave. For this reason, there are students who have been in the class from its beginning (and had been members of previous versions of the course). Another difference between WTI and other VOES courses is the lack of a specific set of lessons. Instead, each participant is expected to take part in three basic assignments: join and post to the e-class, participate

in the weekly chat sessions, and create a personal web page. Given the nature of the class, it is understood (and allowed for in the instructions found on the course web site) that not all students will carry out all three assignments. In particular, the chat sessions will be difficult for many of the students, either due to equipment and connection problems or due to time zone problems. Therefore, while it is hoped for that students will participate in all three assignments, they are expected to participate in at least one of them. A complete description of the assignments can be found in the next chapter.

The class has approximately fifty members of whom four are teachers and the rest are students, or, as the coordinating teacher prefers to call them, tutors and friends. The teachers are all native speakers of English and professional ESL/EFL teachers who volunteer their time and energy to the class.

Although the students are of all ages, most of them are adults between the ages of 20 and 60 with at least an undergraduate degree or currently studying for such a degree. There are both male and female students. The students come from various occupations. There are lawyers, engineers, college and high school students, business

people, publishers, factory workers, teachers, accountants, and employees of their government. Students in this class come from Europe, Asia, South America, North America, and Oceania. But all of them have some things in common. Their command of written English is, in general, advanced. While they often have problems with pronunciation, those who participate in the voice chat sessions generally have a good command of aural English (listening skills). Also, they have an interest in improving their English and at least some knowledge of computers and the Internet.

Data Collection/Generation

This study describes a virtual language learning community from the point of view of 5 ESL/EFL students during six months of their participation as part of this community. One of the informants consistently participates in the synchronous portion of the class; one never participates in this portion of the class; and three participate on an irregular basis. While my main data generation arose from online interviews with these five students, I also obtained data through publicly available data concerning the community, archived assignments that these students had posted to the e-class or the class web

page, publicly available (archived) chat logs posted to the class web page and, of course, my own observations as a participant in the community.

There is a general consensus that interviews are one of the best ways to generate qualitative data (Burgess, 1984; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; J. Mason, 1996; Meriam, 1988; Sommer, & Sommer, 1991; Spradley, 1979; Stake, 1995; Tellis, 1997a, 1997b; Yin, 1993; Yin, 1994). In fact, as J. Mason (1996) points out, many qualitative researchers use interviewing as their main method of generating data. The interviews are generally characterized by a relatively informal style, a thematic, topic-centered, biographical or narrative approach, and the assumption that data are generated via the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. They may involve one-to-one interaction or larger groups (pp. 38-39).

Interviews take one of three basic forms: open-ended, focused, or structured and can involve either one-to-one interaction or a larger group (Tellis, 1997a). The open-ended interview consists of questions that ask about opinions. The focused interview consist of questions designed to generate data about a specific event, and are usually based on information received from other sources.

Finally, the structured interview consists of questions with a choice of answers and is particularly useful in studies where a formal survey is required.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify two types of interviews: structured and unstructured. In the structured interview, the questions are in the hands of the interviewer and the respondent provides the answers. A structured approach is the mode of choice when the interviewer knows what he/she needs to learn. In the unstructured interview, both the questions and the answers are in the hands of the informant. An unstructured approach is the mode of choice where the interviewer does not know what he/she needs to learn. In other words, the structured interview is used when the interviewer has sufficient background knowledge, either through previous research or through previous contact with the culture under study, while the unstructured interview is used when the interviewer has little or no background knowledge.

Seidman (1998) recommends in-depth interviewing. The goal of this type of interview is to have the participant reconstruct his/her experience with the topic through a series of open-ended questions that enable the interviewer to build upon and explore the answers to each question. The

model Seidman recommends is straightforward. The interviewer has a series of three interviews with each participant. Each interview lasts 90 minutes and is scheduled 3 days to a week after the previous one, thereby allowing time for the participant to consider the questions and responses in the preceding interview. Each of the three interviews has a different purpose. The first establishes a context for the participant's experiences; the second allows participants to reconstruct the details of the experience, and the third encourages the participant to reflect on the meaning of his/her experience.

In this study, I used a modified version of in-depth interviewing to take into account the specific requirements of virtual research. In general, each synchronous interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was focused on one general area of interest. These general areas were related to 1) background of the informant, including how he/she became a member of the community, 2) The informant's view of the class and his/her participation in it, and 3) the informant's view of whether or not the class is a community.

In the asynchronous interview and the follow-up questions I asked by email (generally clarification

questions), each message built on the informant's response to the preceding email.

I used the following means of data generation.

1. *Participation in the WTI online language learning community.*

My participation in the class consisted mainly of participating in the regular Sunday chat sessions, but also involved posting to the e-class and synchronous meetings with individual students outside of class. These extra-class time meetings occurred when students asked for my help in one of their assignments or in proofreading/editing English writing that they had to turn in either in their work environments or their regular face-to-face classes.

2. *Online conversations/interviews with members of the community.*

Voice chat--When I first joined the community it used a voice chat room that was provided by HearMe.

Unfortunately, HearMe was discontinued about the time I started my interviews, so I was only able to hold one interview using this client. While there were attempts to find another client that would work as well, by the time we found one, most of the interviews had already concluded.

Text-based chat: At the request of my informants, most of the interviews were held using ICQ. The advantages of ICQ were threefold. 1) Everybody was already familiar with it since they use it in their class. 2) ICQ automatically saves all chat sessions, so both the informant and I had copies of the interviews. 3) ICQ time stamps each entry so there is a record of how long it took for a response.

E-mail based interviews -- Follow-up questions after the third interview were submitted by e-mail, thereby allowing the participant more time to consider their answers. In one case, the entire interview was by email.

3. *Publicly available documents that the informants had submitted to the e-class and/or placed on their class web pages.*

These documents were either sent through email to the e-class or were announced to the e-class by the coordinating teacher. In this second case, the coordinator also requested that members of the class read and respond to the posting. These postings were also placed on the web page.

4. *Publicly available chat-logs of the regular community chat sessions.*

All weekly chat sessions were logged and placed on the class web page together with a short analysis of what had gone on during that session. Once posted, the coordinating teacher would send a message to the e-class inviting the members of the community to read them and make comments on what was discussed in the session.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis go hand in hand to promote the emergence of substantive theory grounded in empirical data. For this reason, the researcher starts analyzing very early in the research process (Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Merriam, 1988; Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Swaffar, 1998; Stake, 1995; Warschauer, 1999).

According to Marshall & Rossman (1995), there are five modes in qualitative analytic procedures, each of which involves analysis and interpretation of data. These modes consist of organizing the data; generating categories, themes and patterns; testing the emergent hypotheses against the data; searching for alternative explanations; and writing the report. Of these steps, the generation of categories, themes and patterns is one of most basic. In this basic level of analysis, Merriam (1988) suggests using

an "unordered meta-matrix" (p. 155). This is a large chart organized by categories of interest to the researcher and contains illustrations of what the category includes. From this descriptive display, one can advance to higher levels of analysis.

Marshall & Rossman see qualitative data analysis as "a search for general statements about relationships among categories of data" (p. 111). They also see generating categories of data to collect, or cells in a matrix, as an important focusing device for the study.

Further, Rubin and Rubin (1995) see coding as the "process of grouping interviewees' responses into categories that bring together the similar ideas, concepts, or themes you have discovered" (p.238). This process proceeds in stages. First, by setting up a few main coding categories as suggested by the original reading of the interviews and the intended purposes of the study and then making a list of new codes while re-reading the interviews. Further, the researcher can code on anything he or she thinks may later help in the data analysis. In addition, coding involves "the development of conceptual categories, typologies or theories that interpret the data for the reader" (Merriam, 1988, p. 133) by looking for recurring regularities in the

data and asking which units of information go with each other by comparing one unit of information with the next.

After each interview, I formatted the session log for ease of reading and to aid in recovery of data from the session. After formatting the session, I began to analyze the log for the following elements: 1) questions that needed further exploration, 2) new questions that should be asked related to the topic, and 3) themes that could be seen as arising from the data.

I used the following categories in coding my data.

1. Reasons the informant decided to study online
2. Reasons the informant joined this particular class
3. Manner in which the informant learned about both VOES and WTI
4. Attitudes related to the e-class
5. Attitudes related to the synchronous chat sessions
6. Reasons for participation/non-participation in the synchronous chat sessions
7. Attitudes related to the assignments
8. Types of assignments the informant preferred to answer
9. Experiences the informant has had in the class
10. Elements of community that are present in the class

11. Attitudes related to usefulness of online ESL/EFL courses
12. Attitudes related to the use of the internet
13. Experience in taking online courses
14. Experience in using the internet
15. Problems the informant has in the class
16. Modifications necessary for online interviews

Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness suggests credibility in place of internal validity, transferability in place of external validity, dependability in place of reliability, and confirmability in place of objectivity (pp 281-84 and 289-331). According to Glesne and Peshkin (1992), a researcher has established trustworthiness when the participants agree that what the researcher has written is true. I established trustworthiness by triangulation.

According to Tellis (1997a), triangulation is the means the researcher uses to confirm the validity (trustworthiness) of the methodology he/she is following. The term comes from the multiplicity of methods of generating data or, as J. Mason (1996) says, "triangulation

involves using more than one method" (p. 42). Stake (1995) also indicates that the use of multiple sources of data is one means of triangulation. Further, according to Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg, (1991), Snow and Anderson asserted that triangulation can occur with data, investigators, theories, and even methodologies. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), triangulation consists of validating each piece of information against at least one other source, such as a second interview and/or another method, such as an observation as well as an interview.

Of the four types of triangulation identified by Denzin (1984), Data source triangulation, Investigator triangulation, Theory triangulation, and Methodological triangulation, I used Data source triangulation, which Denzin identifies as occurring when the researcher uses different contexts to obtain data and expects it to be the same in each context.

To triangulate my data, I used three contexts: first, participation-observation as a member of the class; second, synchronous and asynchronous interviews; third, analysis of publicly available documents related to the class.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

It is always important to protect the anonymity of any human participants within a study of this type. To protect the identity of the participants, I changed the name, nationality and pertinent personal information of each person. To avoid unconscious identification of names with specific nationalities, I used only English names. Further, for purposes of confidentiality, I changed the name of the school and the particular course I was observing.

The next chapter describes the WTI community in detail, paying particular attention to how it developed from a class into a community and how it changed over the course of the study. It also discusses how students interact in this community both within regular class sessions and outside of class time.

CHAPTER 4: CONTROLLED CHAOS

This chapter looks at each of the three main questions posed at the beginning of my study.

What happens in an online ESL/EFL class?

How does an online ESL/EFL class become a language learning community?

What differences exist between virtual and "real-world" (face-to-face) interviewing?

As mentioned in above (Chapter 1: The Problem), this study does not attempt to answer the question about how much English the students learn, or how they learn, but what they do in the class and how they do it.

To answer these questions, I first describe in depth what the Writing through the Internet (WTI) class looks like. Then I describe the characteristics of a community and show how WTI meets them. Finally, I describe virtual interviewing and methodology, emphasizing how it is different from the same study carried out face-to-face.

What Happens in an Online ESL/EFL Class?

The School

The Vandar Online English School (VOES) is an experiment in online learning developed by Samuel Granten, an ESL professor at a major American university. It uses

volunteer ESL/EFL specialists to offer free language courses to students from around the world who apply for the three or four month sessions. At the time this study was conducted, classes were offered at beginning, intermediate and advanced levels in Grammar and Writing, Pronunciation, English for Specific Purposes, and Conversation. Each instructor was expected to develop his or her own classes using prior teaching experience. All instructors were invited to meet in a monthly chat session to discuss common problems and share experiences. Further, instructors giving similar courses were encouraged to meet and discuss their experiences in the school. For this purpose, a special school/classroom/meeting place was developed in a chat site called The Palace. While being encouraged to develop their own courses, the classes are part of the VOES and, as such, are responsible to the school coordinator.

To join the school, students apply for the class they want, take a placement test, and then wait for their name to be sent to a teacher who has an appropriate section of the desired class. In general, courses are expected to last from three to four months and are offered in asynchronous mode, synchronous mode, or both. Most courses are asynchronous and are little more than email discussion lists

with an associated web page. There is a high drop out rate among students, about half losing interest in the school even before being invited to participate in a class. In an average term, less than half of the 50-60 students assigned to a class will generally answer the email invitation to enroll. Of those students who answer, between one and five will usually complete the entire term. The school coordinator has indicated that he feels a large part of the initial drop out rate is due to the fact that people will often take the placement test just to see what it is (Granten, Personal Communication). The drop out rate after the class has begun may be due to several factors: 1) the fact that the school is free, 2) the unexpected amount of work required in the class, and 3) a loss of interest. As one of my informants Karla commented, many of the students do not value what they do not pay for. Further, as the WTI coordinating teacher commented, it may also be due to the students just wanting someone to check their work before turning it in to either their boss or their teacher.

The Course

WTI is an outgrowth of this experience. Like most VOES classes, it started out as an asynchronous class. Unlike

most classes, however, the coordinating teacher Stonners was not content to just try to improve an asynchronous class. When the coordinator of VOES sent out a call for teachers to try their hand at synchronous classes, he was among the first to respond. Three other teachers and one student, who was asked to be student representative, also participated in the chat classes. Eventually, three of the teachers had combined their knowledge and students and started the class that eventually became what today is called Writing through the Internet (WTI). One of the key aspects of this class was eliminating the term system. Although the VOES coordinator may still assign students to the class using a 3 or 4-month schedule, in practice, once a student has joined the class he/she is encouraged to remain as long as there is interest. Some students appear and then disappear while others appear, disappear for a while, and then reappear. But there are also students who have been continually active in the class for two or three years. Students are from all parts of the world and all walks of life. While there are two or three high school students, and a handful of undergraduate college students, the majority of participants have completed at least an undergraduate degree, and many are either involved in or have completed graduate studies. There are government

employees, factory workers, self-employed workers, teachers, bankers, and unemployed members in the class.

As a class, WTI has three main means of communication between teachers and students as well as communication and interaction among the students themselves. According to the class web page, these means are called assignments. The assignments are to join the e-class, join the chat sessions, and start a web page.

The e-class is an email discussion list to which each member of the community is expected to subscribe. Nobody who participates in the chat session is really considered a member of the class until he/she joins the e-class. Since students are from all parts of the world, no chat session can have all members of the class present. During any given hour, some members are available to participate, other members are sound asleep, and others are at their places of employment. The e-class serves as a means of connection among the various members of the class. It also serves as a means of posting assignments for the students to answer. When an assignment is posted to the list, students reply either privately to one of the teachers or, it is hoped, to the entire list. Not only are students (and teachers and friends) encouraged to post their responses to this

discussion list, but they are also encouraged to post other topics. Some students send jokes and other items they have found in magazines and newspapers while others write about themselves and their interests, but most either just answer the assignments or post nothing. When somebody joins the e-class, he/she is supposed to post an introduction telling about themselves and why they are interested in the class. The other class members are supposed to write to the list welcoming the new member to the class. In other words, the e-class is meant to be the primary means of communication and interaction between and among class members.

The chat sessions are held for two hours once a week. Originally, there were three separate one-hour sessions--one for each of the three teachers--but these were finally reduced to the current two-hour session in which all three of the teachers participate. The sessions are not always held in the same place, or even in one single place each week. More often than not, there are two or even three separate venues for each session. Among the sites that chat sessions are, or have been, held are a Homestead text-based chat room on the WTI web site, The Palace visual chat client, the HearMe voice chat client, Tapped In (a modified

MOO environment) and the Yahoo! Instant Messenger conferencing system (for voice).

The reason for holding the session in such a variety of sites is to allow students who want to use a particular mode of communication to do so, as well as to allow students who cannot connect to one site the opportunity to connect, and participate, at another site. The closest to a universally accessible chat room is the Homestead chat client, and there are times that even Homestead is inaccessible to at least one or two participants. Of these sites, both The Palace and the HearMe voice chat client are no longer supported (and therefore no longer exist). Currently, the environments being used by the class are the Tapped In MOO Environment and the Yahoo! Instant Messenger (for voice and web cam conversations). This will be discussed in depth in the sections titled *Course development* and *Change in the community over the period of the study*, below.

Besides the regularly scheduled weekly chat sessions, members of the class also tend to communicate with each other using one of three Instant Messaging Systems. The first, and most common system used by community members, is ICQ. Almost every member of the community has access to ICQ and is a registered user. At the same time, some members of

the class prefer to use either MSN Messenger or Yahoo! Messenger. These informal and impromptu chat (or IM) sessions tend to usually be of a short duration--more of a "Hello. How are you?" type of communication, or a student asking for specific help from one of the teachers. At the same time, they are integral in developing the sense of community that is so important to this class. When one member of the class feels free to contact any other member just to ask how they are doing, it tends to develop a sense of trust and to reinforce a sense of community.

The third assignment is to develop a web page. This can be either a self-developed web page or one developed and maintained by the coordinating teacher. Almost all of the web pages are of this second type. In fact, even when a class member has his/her own web page, they also have one developed and maintained by Stonners for the specific purposes of the class. As a member sends in an assignment, it is corrected for grammatical errors and placed on this page. The student is then asked to look at the assignment as posted and compare it with the original assignment as sent. Since many of these assignments are posted to the e-class, any student can check and compare the two versions.

A more comprehensive explanation of these three assignments is discussed in the section on the course development below.

WTI Assumptions

WTI is basically a class for high intermediate and advanced ESL/EFL learners, although there are also low intermediate students who participate in the e-class on an irregular basis. In general, the students already have a basis in English grammar (as taught in the schools of their country). They are in the class to improve their English and, except in a very few cases, have little interest in taking a formal online class. Based on this, and on their experiences in previous classes for VOES, as well as in discussions with other VOES teachers concerning mutual problems with student retention, the WTI teachers have two overt language teaching assumptions. There is also an assumption that, while not overtly mentioned, can be inferred from the way the teachers and students interact in the class as well as from the types of activities found on the community web page. At no time has any teacher discussed the theoretical basis for any of these

assumptions. There is another inferred assumption that is not related to language teaching.

The overt assumptions on which the class is based are the following.

1) The class should be fun. To make a class fun, it should be conducted in a relaxed environment in which the students do not feel threatened. The lack of tests, the lack of detailed and set lesson plans, the lack of a set syllabus, and openness to the beliefs and ideas of the students support this assumption. The way class topics generally arise from the students also support/develop the assumption. Lately, it can also be seen in the activities such as virtual parties that occur in the class.

2) Grammar skills should not be emphasized nor taught in isolation. As mentioned earlier, the only grammar instruction consists of the revision of student writing before being placed on the student's web page with the intention that the student will look at his/her work and compare it with the revised version. The only other overt language instruction comes when a student requests feedback on something he/she says, or when a

student indicates he/she does not understand something else mentioned in the class.

3) A third assumption can be inferred through the class activities. This assumption is that language use, at least at the level of the students in WTI, is best developed when used for actual communication in a natural situation and using real language. Although words and phrases from other languages often pop up, they are used in a way that indicates the international flavor of the community. Also, the teachers (and often students) will ask a student to tell them how to say something in their own language. The use of non-English vocabulary is seen especially in the voice chat sessions, where it is possible to hear how a word in Chinese, for example, is pronounced.

Although this third assumption is one that is only inferred (that is, it is not stated overtly in any class document), The WTI coordinating teacher recently wrote to another member of the community, an EFL teacher who was going to be a co-presenter at a conference. Since he thought it would be of interest to the WTI community at large, he also sent a copy to the community at large. In this message, he expanded slightly on the idea that using a

language for actual communication is a necessary requirement for learning the language.

"One of the fascinating things about the Internet is this ability to get to know each other. I think our natural curiosity about each other, our natural desire for insights into foreign cultures, and the impetus for communication that these give us, are the great strengths for language learning of synchronous multimedia online communication (SMOC - I just coined an acronym!)" (Stonners, personal communication, November 1, 2001).

4) A fourth, non-language related, assumption is that all participants in the WTI class will have access to the necessary technology and the knowledge to use it. As Bicknell (1998) observes, WTI requires both high-end computer equipment and Internet connectivity. In the absence of the first, the student can still participate, but will miss out on much of the interaction that takes place in the course. Recently, for example, there have been a few students who could not participate in the voice chat session due to a lack of the required technology. In the absence of Internet connectivity, the student cannot even participate. One other thing that Bicknell does not mention is that the students must have access to the specific chat clients and rooms used by the community. If any of the sites being used are blocked, the student cannot participate fully.

Class Members

WTI is billed as an experiment in building world friendship through language learning. As such, it is a language learning class in which the students improve their English through interaction with native speakers, as well as with other non-native speakers who, in general, do not speak the same native languages. When I first joined this class, there were three teachers and approximately 40 students. By the time I started my study, the number of students had grown to over 45, and by the end of the data generation, had grown to 50. Today, there are four teachers, one student tutor and 59 other members from all over the world. Many of these students are teachers of ESL/EFL in their countries. The one thing they all have in common is an intense interest in online learning.

Most students in the WTI class are between 20 and 60 years old, are of both sexes, are from several different countries and have already finished at least an undergraduate degree. They come from Europe, Asia, South America, North America, and Oceania. Students in the class also come from all occupations. They are lawyers, engineers, graduate students, business people, publishers, factory workers, high school students, teachers, accountants, and

employees of their government. Further, most of the students have a fairly good command of both written and oral English and are able to use the computer, including the Internet to communicate both synchronically and asynchronously with native speakers of English. While they often have problems with pronunciation, both their written and their listening skills appear to be advanced as based both on their participation in voice chat sessions and their written participation in text chat sessions.

The three regular teachers are practicing ESL/EFL professionals, two in institutions of higher education and the third as a private teacher of business English. They are experienced in online education, one of them being a teacher trainer for online teachers. Further all three of them are native speakers of English. The fourth teacher is the researcher.

The Informants

Sally owns her own business and needs to communicate in English with potential clients outside of her country. Since she wants to learn to think in this language, she feels that she needs to have contact with native speakers. As there are no native speakers in her community, she

decided to find a language school on the Internet. While surfing the net, she found VOES and decided to enroll. She was accepted into WTI about a year prior to the beginning of this study. WTI is her first experience in an online course. At the same time, she is also thinking of taking another online language course (Japanese) in the future, especially if she can find one similar to WTI. Her previous experiences with studying English were in school, in a language school in her community, and with a private teacher/tutor. At one time she was a regular participant in the e-class and attended several of the synchronous chat meetings. However, raising a child, operating a business, and taking professional improvement classes at the university currently leave her little time for connecting to the Internet. Although she does not currently post to the e-class or join the weekly chat session, she does contact other members of the class on an irregular basis and asks how they are doing.

Sally likes the fact that she is able to get advice from native speakers in other countries as well as being able to do research for her business and classes in her free time. Further, she remembers a time when she had an appointment with the British consul and was unsure of what

to say. She communicated with one of the teachers in WTI and asked for advice. The teacher helped her plan and phrase what she wanted to tell the consul. There was another time when she had to make an oral report about her business and had to turn in a written version of the report. She was able to use the Internet to get advice and help in editing and revising her report from another WTI teacher.

George is a high school student who found out about VOES and WTI while reading a newspaper. He contacted VOES and enrolled and was assigned to the WTI course approximately six months before this study began. Although he writes excellent English, his reason for taking the course is to improve his English. His previous experience with learning English include his school, two language schools in his country, and classes offered in Canada and the United Kingdom. He has also studied Russian online and has taken a course offered by another online course (englishlearner.com). Due to time zone differences, George has never been a regular participant in the synchronous part of the class. He has, however, been a regular contributor to the e-class and has participated in synchronous text-chat sessions with each of the WTI teachers and with at least one fellow WTI student. He has also participated in voice chat

sessions with one of the teachers and one of the other students. Often, when he is online and finds one of the other class members online at the same time, he contacts them via ICQ. He thinks chat is important in online classes since a student can practice his English with native speakers. Further, he says that while a student might not be willing to tell a teacher he doesn't understand something, by using chat he demonstrates what he does or does not know.

Karla works in a financial institution where she often has to use English to communicate with clients. She is a college graduate who felt that her English was not good enough for her job. While reading a magazine she came across an article about how to study online, including mention of schools such as VOES. Since she could not afford to take a class in the United States or other English speaking country, she decided to study online. She contacted VOES and registered for a class with the school's coordinator. She has also participated in another online English class (PeakEnglish). When WTI was organized, she was one of the first students to sign up for it. She is a constant participant in both the synchronous chat sessions and the e-class. Further, whenever one of the teachers is

presenting in an online conference (or a conference with an online portion), she joins them online and talks about the student point of view of online learning. Recently, while she has continued to be active in the chat sessions, she has become less active in the e-class due to finding her "mind in blank." She especially likes the chat sessions since participation in these sessions forces her to use English and has helped her improve her English ability quite dramatically. She likes the voice chat portion because it aids in improving her pronunciation.

Frank is also one of the original members of the WTI class. He is a recent college graduate who teaches EFL in his country. He was looking for native speakers to practice his English when he chanced upon VOES while surfing the Internet. Like Karla, he first took the class with the school coordinator and later joined WTI when it was organized. While he seldom participates in the e-class due to time constraints, he tries to participate in the weekly chat sessions whenever he is near a computer at the appropriate time and can be considered a semi-regular member of the chat sessions. He likes the freedom that the class offers for studying, although he wishes there were more language-oriented discussions (grammar and reading

exercises, for example). He also likes the voice chat sessions since they bring people closer together. He says that it is more exciting to know you are talking to a real person instead of writing to a machine. His previous experience in English learning was in school. When asked if he would take another online course, he mentioned, quite frankly, "only if it is similar to WTI."

Thomas, a computer specialist who works in the tourism industry of his country, is another of the original students in WTI. Although he studied English in school, he felt his English was not good enough and searched for a way to practice with native speakers. While surfing the Internet, he found VOES and signed up for classes. Eventually he met Barnes and was recommended for WTI. When the class was organized, he was invited to join them and did so. He finds the lack of pressure of this type of class one of its best aspects. He feels that his writing has improved considerably through the practice he has received in WTI and is now a regular participant in the voice chat sessions. He hopes to put voice chat to use in improving his speaking ability and listening comprehension.

My Participation in the Course

Although my study actually began in December, I joined the WTI class at the beginning of the previous September. The teachers openly discussed, in various chat sessions and in the e-class, my plans to eventually invite members of the class to participate in my study. This discussion was frank and indicated that all three teachers were supporting my plans. The class members present in these sessions were not only open to participating in my study, but also often asked me when we could start. Some of them asked me if we could start even prior to my obtaining permission from the IRB. I consistently explained that I could not gather any data prior to receiving permission. The coordinating teacher also placed a description of my study, together with all the communication related to it on my class web page. There was no secret to my carrying out research in the class, and it was often mentioned to new members and guests. In more than one case, I was also pointed out to other prospective researchers as someone they could get information from.

When I first joined the class, I expected it to be like other VOES classes--a class with a definite start and finish date (generally 3 months). What I found instead was a community of language learners and teachers who had been

meeting constantly since 1998. This, of course, colored the development of my study in several ways, not the least of which was leading me to do a description of this particular class instead of a general study using students from several classes at the same school. Further, it led me to observe what actually happened in the class instead of simply interviewing the students. I will explain this more in depth in the section titled Change in the community over the period of the study, below.

Although I joined the class for purposes not related to the study (as a teacher for VOES, I was (and still am) interested in participating in this type of community), I feel the fact that I did so join it, as well as the fact that I was completely open about eventually doing research involving the class, helped to develop the trust that is so necessary in conducting qualitative research in general and interviews in particular. By the time I started my data collection, I was considered a regular member of the weekly chat sessions. By the time my data collection was half completed, my participation was consistent enough for the other teachers to invite me to join them as a teacher. After the end of my data collection, I have continued as a

member of the class, and will continue to participate as long as the WTI class continues.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize the importance of the researcher becoming thoroughly acquainted with the site being studied. Such acquaintance is especially important in virtual studies since the use of media such as chat rooms and MOOs usually have their own codes of conduct. What is acceptable in one room is often unacceptable in another and what is unacceptable in one room may be the norm in another. Further, a researcher's presence in a physical ("real-world") community may often be noted without his/her active participation in the site (other than presence). A researcher can often show his/her interest in an event through body language observable to any member of the community. On the other hand, in the text only environment of a virtual site, a person's presence is only noted through active participation. It is extremely difficult for a person who lurks (does not actively participate) to develop the trust necessary for carrying out interview studies.

Qualitative researchers are unanimous in the need for researchers to repay (give back to) the community for allowing access to its members for purposes of the study (see, for example, Glesne and Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln and

Guba, 1985; Marshall and Rossman, 1995; J. Mason, 1996; Merriam, 1988; and Stake, 1995). I see the opportunity to continue as a teacher in WTI as both a chance to pay back the access I had to the community, and as a chance to continue in a project that I find both stimulating and of importance to the educational community. Being asked to join the ranks of the teachers (being one of four instead of a guest of three) was a great honor. I saw it, and still see it, as indicative of the trust I had obtained, not only from the teachers, but also from the students, because I know I would never have been asked if the students had shown any reluctance to see me as such. Unlike teachers in many other (traditional) classes, the teachers in WTI are seen more as friends and equals one can go to for help rather than as authority figures. The teachers do no evaluating, nor do they exercise any "power" over the students. Being a teacher in WTI simply means you are knowledgeable about English and have shown a willingness to be available to help others. Further, as previously mentioned, by being a teacher I am able to repay the community through my time and knowledge.

Of course, being invited to participate as a teacher also has its negative aspects for researchers. In many

normal classes, a teacher is seen as an authority the students have to obey. There exists a teacher-student dichotomy in which the teacher exercises power and authority over the student, usually by being responsible for evaluating the student's progress. Therefore, by becoming a teacher, there is often the danger of losing the complete trust of the students. However, as mentioned above, WTI is not a class in the normal sense of the word. Although there are members of the community who are called "teachers," in practice, the "students" are as much teachers as are the teachers. Many of the members of WTI are also teachers who use the community either as a means of improving their English, or as a means of communicating with native speakers. It is, in fact, seen more as a community of equals than as a class that consists of teachers and students. As students gain experience, or discussion relate to the students' experiences, they become the teachers and the teachers become the students. Today (five months after finishing the data collecting/ generating part of my study), the number of native speakers and teachers who have joined the class is almost equal to the number of active non-native speaking students. More dangerous than the loss of trust of the community members is the danger of loss of objectivity

in my study. Instead of saying "you members of WTI," I often say, and feel, "we members of WTI." But this had already started occurring while I was still considered just a "friend" of the community. So I saw, and see, no negative affect arising from my designation as teacher, a designation that merely made overt what many of the community members had already indicated through their actions. I had become a teacher merely by my active and continuous participation and willingness to help other members of the community whenever they asked.

Course Development

Writing Through the Internet is an excellent occasion to develop our English in a socially interactive group while also learning about new technologies for language learning (Frank).

During the time I have been a member of the WTI community, it has used several programs and environments in the class. Often, these are used concurrently, thereby allowing members who cannot participate in one environment to do so in another. This means that at least one of the teachers (and, if possible, all of them) should be in all of the environments to permit continuity of the discussion. While some of these environments have ceased to function, or

have been relegated to an area of secondary importance, most of them are still used to some extent. The following is a description of each of the environments used officially by WTI with emphasis on how they are used in the community. It is divided into four sections: chat Rooms, instant messaging, asynchronous communication, and Web pages.

Synchronous Communication (Chat Rooms)

There are four chat rooms that are, or have been, used consistently by WTI. Of these, two are text based, one is voice-based, and one is a MOO environment. Each of these is described below.

- *Homestead Text-based Chat Room:*

Description: Homestead, at one time a free web page hosting service (currently a pay service), allows people who construct web pages at their location to have chat rooms by copying the necessary code to their page. Unlike sites such as Yahoo! Chat and Excite Chat, where anybody can enter any of the chat rooms, each Homestead room is autonomous and is accessible only to people who know the URL of the page on which it is located. WTI has made use of this service since switching to this host from Geocities. As a text-based

chat client, the Homestead chat room allows participants in the session to type in their message and send it to all others in the chat room. It updates automatically, so as soon as a person types a message and presses the enter key all other participants can read it. It permits logging the session only through copy and paste (a person copies what he/she wants to save and pastes it into a word processing program). Unfortunately, the Homestead buffer is not large, so someone must continuously copy all new text and paste it into their word processor. By the end of this study, although not used as much as previously, Homestead was still an option for members of the community. As a web-based chat client, no specific software is required to reside on the user's computer. Any graphical web browser, such as Netscape, Internet Explorer, or Opera, will allow access to and participation in this chat room.

Use: When I first joined WTI, the Homestead chat room was the starting place for the weekly chat sessions. Each week, the members of the class/community would log onto the Homestead room in order to decide where the class would meet that day.

Often, the participants decided, for one reason or another, to remain in this chat room. At other times, they decided to move into the Palace or into HearMe. Even when the community decided to meet in one of these two places, someone always stayed in the Homestead site to inform others where the class was meeting. It is still a primary means for new members, or people who are interested in joining, to leave a message indicating their interest.

- *The Palace Visual Chat Room:*

Description: The Palace was a visual chat room with a graphic that showed what the room looked like, and each participant had an avatar (a small picture) to indicate what he/she looked like or felt at the moment. This avatar was often a picture of the actual participant. Besides the standard avatars that the program itself provided, each participant could create as many avatars as he/she wished. When a participant in the session typed in his/her comments and pressed the send key, the text would appear both in a text window and in a bubble next to the person's avatar. In that way, the participants could see who was talking at any particular time. It was possible to save a log of the

entire session by copying and pasting the dialogue at the end of the session. It was always a good idea to copy and paste at various times, however, since all dialogue was lost as soon as the client disconnected or closed for any reason (including the server going down, as often happened). Since VOES had a palace (personalized chat room) within The Palace network, WTI, as a VOES class, was able to make use of this environment. This same was true of all VOES classes. At about the time that I actually began my data generation, this environment was discontinued.

Use: The Palace was the room where classes seemed to be more formal. The community would meet in this site and discuss whatever topic the students wanted to develop that day. But it was also a site in which the teachers could use English in order to teach something else, such as how to make an *avatar* or use the tools found in the Palace environment. Since the disappearance of the Palace, this aspect of the class has basically been taken over by Tapped In.

- *HearMe Voice Chat*:

Description: HearMe was the third synchronous environment in use at the time I joined the community.

The free HearMe client allowed anybody with a web page to copy the code onto their page and have an autonomous chat room. To participate, a user would go to the designated web page, click on the HearMe button and, once connected, participate in the chat session. Communication was by voice, which meant for full participation the user needed both a microphone and speakers (or even better a microphone-earphone headset). At the same time, since voice was not always available to all participants (for example, I lost my microphone just prior to one session), there was also text capability. This allowed students to type words of which they were unsure, or for teachers to type in the correct spelling of a new word. While the voice portion of the session could not be logged (without connecting a tape recorder to the computer or having specific software for recording voice, something nobody in WTI had) the text portion could be copied and pasted at the end of the session. As with The Palace, however, all text was lost at the moment the client was turned off for any reason. Like The Palace, the HearMe chat client was discontinued at about the time I began

my data generation. It was replaced by TelcoPoint Voice Chat.

Use: HearMe was an excellent resource for practicing pronunciation. Anybody who had a microphone and speakers could participate in whatever discussion was taking place at the time. Like The Palace, HearMe was used for actually giving class. In this site the accent was on pronunciation. Like grammar instruction, however, pronunciation was never an overt purpose of any class. It occurred when a student asked the correct way to pronounce a word. And it was not only for practicing English pronunciation. Many times, the students would demonstrate to the teachers how to pronounce a word in their own language. This client was also used to allow teachers and students to type an unfamiliar word and explain how it was used and/or pronounced. When this client disappeared at the end of the year 2000, there was an attempt to replace it with the *TelcoPoint Voice Chat*. This particular voice chat client was never really able to replace HearMe. It was difficult to connect to the server, and chat rooms that were "registered" in the service often never appeared.

It took several months to find a suitable replacement in the Yahoo! Messenger (see below).

- *Tapped In MOO Environment:*

Description: Tapped In is a modified MOO environment that is free to all educators. Like all MOOs, Tapped In allows for the creation of objects that remain from session to session and with which the participants can interact. While VOES has no official connection with Tapped In, and WTI does not have a specific office space there, several of the WTI participants have personal offices there. For the last couple of months of my study (and increasingly since ending the study itself) WTI has been meeting in this environment. Besides allowing for interaction with objects, the environment allows all registered participants to have their own recorders. Everything that is said in the same room with the recorder is logged and sent to the participant in an email as soon as he/she has logged off. One side benefit of the use of Tapped In is that participants in the WTI sessions can meet new people who just drop in to say hello. Often, these visitors remain and become a part of the weekly sessions, thereby allowing for students to

interact with other native speakers (as well as other non-native speakers) both informally and in a more formal class-like environment (as when one of the members explains how to perform an action in Tapped In).

Use: Tapped In has become the normal meeting place for WTI. Like the Palace, it is used not only for informal chat sessions and meeting new people, but also for more formal classes, such as how to create an object in Tapped In, how to interact with an object, or how to modify a room. The one thing all the lessons in Tapped In have in common is that they use English as the language of instruction.

Synchronous Communication (Instant Messaging)

The WTI community makes use of three different Instant Messaging services. These are used both to see if another member of the community is online at a specific time and to have informal chat sessions. All three of them have certain elements in common: On the downside, 1) they must be downloaded and installed in the computer in order to work, 2) the only way to communicate with another person using instant messaging is by knowing the person's user identity,

something many people do not willingly reveal, and 3) they are not really secure. On the bright side, 1) they all allow for automatic (or semi-automatic) logging of all sessions, 2) they all allow for the users to have a list of contacts with whom they can communicate with a click of the mouse button, 3) they allow a user to see if any of his/her friends are online, and 4) they allow at least partial voice chatting.

WTI uses three instant messaging programs, ICQ, MSN Messenger Service, and Yahoo! Messenger in the same ways. First, they are a means of informal chatting outside of the regular chat sessions. In this way, students who are unable to attend a weekly chat session can still interact with other community members. Second, they are used as a means of communicating with other members who wish to find out where the class is meeting that week. It is also a means of communicating with another member of the community when the two people want to have a private conversation. In the case of Yahoo! Messenger, it is also the replacement for HearMe, allowing for voice chatting during the regular weekly chat sessions. Since each of the services is similar in use and function, the following descriptions will emphasize their outstanding differences.

- *ICQ:*

ICQ allows for automatic logging of all sessions. To see what has been said to a specific contact at any time, a user need only click on the contact's name, select "History," and read everything they have said to each other since they began communicating. Further, ICQ automatically stamps all messages with both the date and time so that a user can see on what date and at what moment a contact made a particular comment. ICQ is the principal means of initial communication among members of the WTI class. Almost all members of the community have an ICQ number and user identity.

- *MSN Messenger Service:*

There are only two real benefits of MSN over the other IM services. First, it allows a user to see when he/she has received an email in their Hotmail account. Second, it indicates when the other person in a chat session is actually typing. While it allows for voice communication, voice is only available on a one-to-one session, not in a conference mode. It allows for logging of any session by going to the File menu and selecting save. Unlike ICQ, which automatically saves chronologically all sessions with a specific user, MSN

Messenger will overwrite any previously saved sessions with any user unless you give the file a unique name. Also unlike ICQ, which can be disabled, or in which a user can indicate that he/she is not available for communication (or even indicate that they are not connected to the Internet) and unlike Yahoo! Messenger, in which a user can automatically connect in an "Invisible" mode, the MSN Messenger user must select "appear offline" every time he/she logs on. Further, if the user exits this IM, it will automatically reconnect if the user connects to Hotmail or Outlook. It is the IM service that is least used by WTI.

- *Yahoo! Messenger:*

The main benefit of Yahoo! Messenger, and what is making it an integral part of the WTI sessions, is its recently acquired web cam service as well as its ability to provide for voice conferences. Recently, several members of the community have purchased web cams and have been using them to show each other what they look like while participating in the chat sessions. Unfortunately, the use of web cams and voice at the same time uses so much bandwidth that it often causes systems to crash.

Its voice chat capabilities are similar to HearMe in quality, and, like HearMe, the number of users who can participate in a voice chat conference is theoretically unlimited. Like MSN Messenger, selecting Save from the File menu can save chat sessions. However, every time a session is saved, the name must be changed from im.txt to another name or it will overwrite whatever has previously been saved with that name. It also allows for voice chatting in which a user can open a conference, invite others to participate, and thereby open a voice conference. Until recently the members of the community thought that a conference had to be closed before adding a new member to the conference. Quite by accident, a member of one conference found how to invite people to attend an existing conference.

Asynchronous Communication

There are actually two type of asynchronous communication used by the WTI community. The first is an email discussion list that was originally hosted by the *e-groups* service and is currently hosted by *Yahoo! Groups*. Like most discussion lists, all members are allowed to send

an email to the list. All messages sent to the list are automatically forwarded to all other subscribers. Further, list members can choose to read the email by going to the WTI Yahoo! Group page and selecting the message they want to read. All messages are archived according to the date in which they are sent to the list. A list subscriber can also post an email from this page. Only subscribers (community members) are allowed to post messages to the list. By subscribing to the list, a person becomes a member of the e-class and is expected to participate actively. To subscribe, the person sends an email to the corresponding address. The list is used as the primary means of communication between/among members of the class as well as for posting assignments to the e-class.

The second type of asynchronous communication used by the WTI community is the Wimba Voice Board. This is a bulletin board type of communication in which the user connects to the WTI Wimba Conference and records a message for other members to hear. Unlike the pay service, the free Wimba service to which WTI subscribes does not have indefinite archiving. All messages are deleted after a short period of time (30 days). Further, the number of messages allowed as well as the number of participants

permitted to be present at any one time are also limited to 30 messages and 5 participants at any one time. The service also has a text-based area for those who either do not have a microphone or who wish to leave both oral and written messages. This service is seldom used by members of the WTI community, but does exist for those who wish to leave voice messages for others to hear and respond to.

Unlike discussion lists, where the member just sends an email from his/her account and that is automatically forwarded to all list members, bulletin boards require that participants go to the server to read/listen to/post messages. This often makes it less used since there is that extra step (It is easier to just receive a message and read it than to actually go and find the message). At the same time, while discussion lists generally require subscription, bulletin boards (such as Wimba) are open to anybody who wishes to visit it and read/listen to messages or who wishes to post messages for others.

Web-based Communication

The fourth type of communication in the WTI community is the web page. The WTI class has a web site that consists

of three types of web pages: the community pages, the chat logs, and the personal pages.

The first is a series of pages with information about the community. This set of pages allows visitors to get a feel for how the class is organized, what activities are required and recommended, and who the members are. This last gives not just names but also pictures, email addresses, nationalities, and other pertinent information useful for contacting the person. Further, each name and picture is linked to the student's personal page. The Homestead chat room (as well as links to recommended and/or required software) is also located in these pages. This is often the first contact a prospective new member has with the group. Further, the coordinating teacher constantly invites other language teachers who are interested in online education to visit these pages and get a feel for what a successful group can do.

The second set of pages is the compilation of all the logs of the class chat sessions from almost the beginning of the community. Generally, the coordinating teacher places an exact log of the previous chat session on this site within one week of the session (although he occasionally takes a little longer). He also includes a short synopsis

of the high points of the session. If the session took place in more than one location (as is often the case) there are links to the particular section of the logs that deals with that location.

The chat logs are divided into three main parts: a list with pictures (where available) of the participants in that week's session, a short analysis/synopsis of the high points of the session, and the logs of the session itself. This last is obtained, in most cases, through the cut and paste copies (that the teachers have made) of the original session or, in the case of Tapped In, from the email copy of the log that is sent upon the end of each session. The teachers recommend that the students read these logs to see if they have any comments.

The third section of the Web site consists of personal pages for each member of the community. As people sign up for the class, they are asked to send a short introduction for the other members of the group to read and, if they are willing and it is possible, a picture so the others can see what the person looks like. The Webmaster (coordinating teacher) then edits the introduction for grammatical mistakes and posts it on a web page that he creates for that particular student. After the web page has been made,

Stonners sends a message to the e-class informing the community of the new page and inviting everybody to come and meet the new member. If a member of the community has his/her own web pages, the Webmaster also places a link to their site. Every time a student answers an assignment, the answer is corrected for grammar and placed on his/her page. A message is then sent out asking the students to read the answer and respond. Further, the student who posted the answer is asked to read the corrected version and compare it to what was originally sent. When enough members have responded to a specific assignment, and especially if they respond to each other's comments, that particular assignment is then given its own page, with links to it from the pages of each of the participating members. In this way, the students are encouraged to exchange their views on diverse topics and read how other views are also possible.

Taking the WTI Class

WTI - Chat Sessions

As mentioned above, the WTI class has two principal means of interaction between and among participants (as well as the web pages). Each week the teachers and those students who are available and interested in doing so,

connect to the chat sessions. These sessions last two hours and often appear to be chaotic. In fact, one recent participant has labeled it *controlled chaos*, a term that the community has since made its own. In any single session, there may be as many as three different chat rooms open at once. Some participants, especially teachers, may be in all the chat rooms while others may be in only one or two. Sometimes the class then settles down so that most of it is carried out in one room or another. At other times, all of the chat rooms may be busy. Usually, two rooms are in use. One of these is a text-based room, while the other is usually a voice-based room.

This section will describe what happens in a normal session. In this session, the class takes place in two places, the Tapped-In MOO environment and a Yahoo! Instant Messenger voice conference.

It is shortly before noon GMT on a Sunday. In several different countries around the world, members of the WTI community begin to connect to the Internet. By the end of the session, ten participants have shown up.

Stonners, Jarce, and Barnes - WTI teachers

John - Researcher and recently appointed WTI teacher

Karla, Frank and Thomas - Three students who usually attend the sessions

Mary - a student who has recently become active after a time of inactivity

Genevieve and Karen - two new participants

As Stonners connects to ICQ, he notices that Jarce and John are already connected. Jarce and John have been chatting in the class chat room for the past 15 minutes while waiting for the others to show up.

Stonners sends a message to John: "Is anybody in the chat room?"

John replies: "Just Jarce and me. We've been there for 15 minutes." As he is sending this message, Karla appears online and enters the chat room.

John: "Karla has appeared."

Stonners joins the chat room.

Stonners: "Hello, Karla. Good to see you again. Hi, Jarce, John"

Jarce: "Hi, Karla. So you finally showed up Stonners?"

John: "Morning, all."

Karla: "Hi. Has anybody else come yet?"

Karen joins the chat session.

Karen: "Morning, everybody"

(The members of the session welcome Karen to the session.)

This series of greetings occurs every time somebody joins the chat session. Occasionally, a guest will appear, sometimes because they have heard about the group; other times by accident. In this way, the community draws in new members. Both Karen and Genevieve were people who had joined a session by accident and had signed up for the e-class.

As the greetings continue, John and Stonners both receive Yahoo! messages from Frank inviting them to join a voice conference. Both accept the invitation and join the conference. They inform Frank about who is in the session. Frank sends invitations to Karla, Karen and Genevieve. Jarce doesn't have Yahoo! Messenger so she is not invited to the conference. Karen turns down the request because her microphone isn't working. Genevieve joins the conference. There are now two chat sessions occurring at the same time. Frank, John, Stonners, Karla, and Genevieve are in the voice chat talking about what each has done during the past week. John, Stonners, Karla, Genevieve, Jarce, and Karen are in the text chat talking about arranging a virtual party for the next class.

John now notices Barnes on ICQ and sends him a message:
"We are in Tapped-In and and Yahoo!."

Barnes: "I'll be right there. Send me an invitation to Yahoo!."

John invites Barnes to the Yahoo! session. He appears and joins in the discussion. He also appears in the text chat room and sends greetings to the others.

Stonners: "Mary is online. I'll invite her."

Mary soon joins the others in the Yahoo! session, but not in the text session.

Now, Thomas joins the text session. His connection today does not allow him to connect to both the text and voice sessions. As soon as he finds out that there is also a voice session, he leaves the text-based room and joins the voice conference.

An hour of the class has passed and the topics have been changing in each room. Genevieve is now commenting in the text session about how it is difficult to pay complete attention to both sessions at the same time. Usually, people tend to pay more attention to one of the sessions for a while, and then change to the other session for a while. They continue changing back and forth as the topic being discussed in one session becomes more interesting than the

topic in the other session. Meanwhile, Stonners, and sometimes Genevieve, comment in one session about what is happening in the other. These comments are for the benefit of those who are participating in only one chat room.

After an hour, the topic in the voice chat alternates between Mary's plans to visit the United States and a visit Thomas received from another WTI member. In the text room, there is another topic about traveling. Karla is also going to visit the United States and is asking for advice from Karen and John, both of whom are currently there, and from Stonners and Jarce who are originally from there. By the end of the session, the text-based room has practiced writing and has planned a party for the following week. The voice-based room has practiced speaking and listening, but has not had any specific topic.

After two hours of chatting, the participants who have not already left due to either the late (for them) hour or because there are other things they have to do, start saying their good-byes.

My informants have all mentioned the chat sessions as an important part of the class. George never attends the regular weekly sessions because he lives in a time zone that makes his participation difficult. At the same time, he has

indicated that he feels the chat sessions allow the students to see how much they have learned, and allow for a type of practice that is impossible in an asynchronous class. They are able to communicate in real time with both native and other non-native speakers. Sally is another member of the community who chats with members at other times, but does not participate in the weekly sessions. Like George, she emphasizes that chat sessions are important. Her non-participation, however, is due to a lack of time. While it is too early for George to participate, Sally is working during class time.

Of my other three informants, Karla, Thomas, and Frank, all three tend to be regular participants in the weekly sessions. In one case, Karla, participation is so regular that the members comment on any absence, usually wondering if she is well. Both Thomas and Frank are less regular participants, depending on what they are doing during the class time, including whether or not they have access to a computer at the moment. Although Frank says he feels the chat is helpful in itself, he tends to prefer participating in the voice chat. On those days that he is unable to connect to both, he connects to the voice session. Thomas also insists that the chat sessions have been of great help

to him, especially in improving his writing ability. He says that now he wants to participate in the voice chats to improve his pronunciation. Karla usually participates in both the voice and text-based chat sessions. She sees the chat sessions as important in developing the sense of community that is so important to the WTI community.

There are other members besides the ones mentioned here who attend regularly for a while and then drop out of sight, only to reappear again at a later date. This ability to drop out of sight for a short while and then reappear, and be sure of a welcome, is one element of the class that has made it into such a success for as long as it has existed.

What topics are covered in the chat sessions? That depends on what the people present want to talk about. One aspect of what the community is now calling *controlled chaos* is that the class takes place in two or more chat rooms at one time, but another aspect is the lack of set topics. By meeting in two chat rooms, with some members being in one room, other members in another room, and others in both rooms, it is exceedingly difficult for any specific topic to be discussed by everyone.

In general, the session starts, as mentioned above, with greetings. Occasionally, the topic is a continuation

of one that was going on before the session officially began. For example, in the first session in which I participated, I showed up early and was being interviewed by a student who was present. When the other class members showed up, the class turned into an interview where all the members present in the session asked me anything they wanted to. At another session, I was chatting with a student about a book she was reading. When other members of the class showed up, we continued discussing the book. The session then turned into a discussion of several books by the same author.

On the other hand, topics also occur after the session has already started. In one session, for example, there was no topic until a student showed up who was having problems with his computer. Most of the rest of the session dealt with various computer related problems (something that was so common that all the people present wanted to explore it) and how to solve them. Other topics that have been covered include international affairs, health, the environment, how to perform certain operations on the computer, and (to show that topics are not always serious) how to help one of the participants solve her love-life problems.

In general, however, the sessions seem to change topics at the whim of the participants. Even when there is an attempt to have a set topic for the session, the participants tend to go their own ways, paying little attention to the set topic. This has led Stonners to describe the class as a case of "herding cats." As anyone who has ever owned a cat knows, they are impossible to herd. In the same way, it is impossible to herd the participants in these chat sessions.

Of course the chat sessions is only one means of interaction in the class. Another means is the e-class that is described in the next session.

WTI - the E-Class

The e-class is basically a continuation of the original idea of the asynchronous class that eventually developed into WTI. In this part of the course, students and teachers can communicate and interact in an asynchronous mode. The e-class allows those members who live in time zones that make participation in the chat sessions difficult feel like part of the class. One of the purposes of the e-class is to allow the teachers to post assignments. Although any of the teachers (or even one of the students) can post an

assignment, most assignments come from Barnes. To see how students reacted to the assignments, I asked each of my informants to explain 1) how they decided which assignment to answer, 2) how long it took them to decide to answer the assignment, 3) what they did to answer an assignment, and 4) whether or not they did any editing or revising.

Karla - When Karla receives an assignment, she reads it, decides if it "grabs her heart", and then immediately answers it. She sits at her computer and writes what she feels. As soon as she has answered the assignment she sends it without revising, editing, or proofreading. While she used to answer almost all assignments, she has recently found herself unable to become interested in almost any assignment. Although she usually decides whether or not an assignment is worth answering immediately upon receiving it, she told me that she sometimes gets an idea for an answer at a later time. In such a case, she answers it if she is near a computer and not too occupied with work. At the same time, she seldom answers any assignment that she doesn't answer immediately.

Frank - Like Karla, when Frank receives an assignment, he reads it and almost immediately decides if it grabs his interest or not. He then sits at his computer, writes his

answer at one sitting, and sends it with no revision or editing (although he mentioned that he knows this is an important step in writing). While he used to try to answer all assignments, he has recently found himself too busy to do much more in the e-class than read the assignments and postings. Frank shows a good command of English writing ability. His extemporaneous writing (e.g. in the chat rooms or IM messages) is generally of high grammatical quality.

Sally - Although Sally also uses interest in the topic to decide whether or not to answer it, the amount of time she has is more of an overriding factor. Again, like the others, she decides immediately if the assignment is worth answering or not. If she has the time to answer it, she sends a short answer to the e-class. She does no editing or revising. Unlike both Karla and Frank, she has never tried to answer all the assignments.

Thomas -Like the other informants, Thomas selects only those topics he finds of interest, but he mentioned that there are few assignments that he does not find interesting. He also answers the assignments as soon as he receives them. Unlike the others, however, he generally proofreads what he has written to verify that he has not made any simple typographical mistakes. He does not try to edit his grammar

because he feels his grammatical ability is not adequate for this purpose. Like both Karla and Frank, Thomas was also a constant poster to the e-class. Unlike the others, he still tries to post whenever possible. What I have seen of his writing as posted to the class (before editing by the teachers for placement on his web page) and what he has sent me is of very good grammatical quality. He mentioned that, although he was unable to write simple sentences when he first joined the class, the e-class has helped him to improve his English writing ability dramatically.

George - Like the others, George generally decides on what assignments to answer based on how interesting he finds it and on how much time he has. He also answers as soon as he receives the assignment. He was the only one of the informants, however, to tell me that he does not just write without stopping. If he is unsure of a word, he stops and looks it up in the dictionary. He also looks over his writing before sending it. He told me that he likes to make sure that he doesn't have simple grammatical mistakes and that he has said everything he wants to say. The first time I had an interview with him, his fluency and writing ability in English struck me as being almost of native speaker quality.

Why did only one informant admit to carrying out at least some simple editing? My informants mentioned that they did not feel confident in checking their own grammar. At the same time, while no informant admitted to this, I cannot help but feel that the fact that the teachers will correct their grammar before placing it on their web pages may also have something to do with the lack of revision.

Change in the Community over the Period of the Study

As mentioned above, when I first joined the WTI class, I expected a class that consisted of teachers and students who met together for a set period of time. My experience as a VOES teacher led me to believe there would be only a few students and the class would last 3 months. Further, I expected there to be lessons on writing and grammar, and possibly on reading. What I found was the community of language learners and teachers described above. Although officially there are four teachers and approximately 50 students, in practice there are no teachers or students. The members of this community consider each other equals. Although some are called teachers and others are called students, they consider themselves tutors and friends. Also, some of the students are teachers in their own

countries, and some of the teachers are also students. All of the members of the community are willing to share their expertise and teach others in the community. At least four members of the community besides myself are also researching virtual education, either as part of a class or as a thesis or dissertation topic.

Like all communities, there have been changes over the past year-and-a-half of my participation. At the beginning there were more non-native speaking participants and, occasionally, something closely related to an actual class. Currently, the community has more of an informal atmosphere, with new participants coming into the community and participating actively as members. Almost every week has a visitor drop by and then decide to join the class. But there have also been more specific changes in the organization of meeting sessions and the environment in which the community meets. These changes are explained more in depth in this section.

A community that does not change is usually a stagnant community. Growth is a requirement for any living entity, and true communities are alive. Therefore, like any true community anywhere, WTI has changed over time. This change can be seen in the logs of the chat sessions, and is

recounted in the history of the community as written by the teachers. Also, I have personally observed changes in the relatively short time I have been a member. I joined the community approximately 6 months before I started my study. During the six months of the study, as well as during the six months prior to beginning it and the months since finishing my data collection/generation, I have noticed many changes in the community.

One reason virtual communities like WTI change is the very nature of the Internet itself. Since the Internet is constantly growing and changing, much of what this community does varies over time. For example, when I first joined this community, the synchronous part of the class was held in three locations: a text-based chat room at Homestead, a room at the visual chat space The Palace, and a room at the voice-based chat client called HearMe. The community had been using both the text-based Homestead chat room and the chat room at The Palace from the beginning and had just started using the HearMe chat client a couple of months before I joined them. Over the course of the next few months both The Palace and HearMe ceased to be supported and disappeared. While Palaces can still be found, they are usually of a social nature and the difficulty in finding the

necessary software make them hard to use with a growing community. HearMe developed a new product called TelcoPoint HearMe, but this also had certain limits that the original client did not have. First, instead of installing the chat room on one's own web page and allowing people to use it from there, it became necessary to connect to the TelcoPoint web server itself. Second, where HearMe allowed, in theory, practically unlimited people in each chat room, TelcoPoint HearMe allows a total of 50 participants spread over 5 chat rooms. Third, the TelcoPoint chat client was difficult to connect to.

Immediately, the community began a search for another voice-based chat client that would work as well as HearMe had done. It also began a search for another regular meeting place. While, due to the nature of this client, Homestead is always available for use, somebody in the chat room needs to constantly copy and paste the logs of the session. While this does not interfere with normal use of the room, it does mean that the coordinating teacher, or someone else, or even two of them, have to pay attention more to how much had been said than to what had been said. This sometimes inhibits the amount of participation of that particular member.

Over the course of the next few months, (most of the time of my study) the community tried several new chat clients. Many of these clients would be used in one session, found lacking, and not used again. One, the Wimba Voice Board, was acceptable enough for asynchronous messages, and is still occasionally used by community members.

Currently, WTI uses the MOO environment at Tapped In for its weekly chat sessions. It has become a normal enough meeting place that several of the regular members of that space have joined the WTI community. This has given a new flavor to participation, with more involvement in meeting new people, discussions on how this environment can be used, and discussions on education, and with less discussion based on student topics. While most students seldom participated regularly in the chat sessions, with this change, even fewer students started attending the sessions.

For voice chat purposes, the community now uses Yahoo! Instant Messenger. This client has both many of the benefits of HearMe (voice quality, unlimited number of participants in a session, secondary text-based communication for people without microphones or for misunderstood words) and a benefit that HearMe never had--

web cam support. Also, HearMe was web based, which meant the participant only had to go to the page where the room was located and log in. The Yahoo! client, on the other hand, must be downloaded to the participant's computer. Participation is by invitation from one of the conference participants who has the invitee on his/her contact list. The use of this client does, however, seem to be attracting some of the older students to return to the sessions.

For one-on-one conversations, which occur during the week, the participants use one of three clients, ICQ, Yahoo! Messenger, and MSN Messenger. Only a few of the participants have more than one of these, so they are generally limited to chatting only with those who have that particular client. Although most participants use only one of these clients, some members have all three clients, which allows them to chat with any other member of the community who wants to talk.

While not mentioned specifically as one of the three major assignments, this one-to-one communication is an integral part of the community. Through this medium, those participants who are unable, for one reason or another, to attend the weekly chat sessions can get help with

assignments, practice their English with other members of the community, and build community bonds.

A second integral part of the class-community is the asynchronous e-class. Since many members of the class cannot participate in the synchronous sessions, their participation in the e-class has been extremely important. Members have posted introductions, answered assignments, sent jokes, and sent messages they thought would be of interest to the others. Stonners uses the e-class also to send reminders of the weekly sessions, to inform the class when there has been a change to the web site (such as the posting of the weekly chat logs), to welcome new members, and to send congratulatory messages on a member's birthday and membership anniversary. From the beginning, this was seen as the primary means of communication within the community. The chat sessions, in fact, were originally considered an additional activity (and not the primary focus) of the class. When I first joined the community, the discussion list was active and interaction among the members was constant. Most weeks there were five or six messages per day from members, which is fairly active for any discussion list of this size (less than fifty members at the time). By the time I had concluded my study, there were only two or

three messages a week, usually an administrative message from Stonners. After I had finished the data generation portion of my study, a new group of members started posting messages to the e-class. This seems to have drawn at least a few of the original members back into using the e-class.

As with the synchronous portions of the community, part of the change in participation appears to be from the actual nature of the Internet itself. Just as services disappear (as happened with both the visual chat client at The Palace and the HearMe voice chat client), so also services change owners. While these changes often have little or no effect on the user of the service, there are times when it may cause problems. For example, the e-class is hosted on a server that has gone through both a change of name and a merging with another service. The objective of the service was always to allow and encourage the development of discussion lists about almost any topic. The service has always been free of charge and anybody who wished could subscribe to a list. Only list owners had to be registered members of the service. The first change, a change in name from Onelist to E-groups, actually took place before I joined this community. I had been using the service to host discussion lists for my regular classes, and received a

message telling me of the change in service. Many of my students informed me that they had also received this message. This message told the list members that the service had changed names and gave them the new address to use for posting messages. When I joined the WTI community, the e-class was hosted by E-groups. During the time I was carrying out my study, there was another change. E-groups merged with Yahoo! groups. E-groups sent a message informing the list owners and members about the change in the service, but also included information in the message that was specific to list owners. Starting at about the time of this change, the amount of participation in the e-class dropped off dramatically. While two of my informants said they thought it was due to members losing interest (as Karla put it, becoming "less passionate about the class"), my own experience with having trouble posting to the e-class shortly after the change in owners leads me to wonder if this is the cause of the problems. In the first case, there was simply a change in name. The rest stayed basically the same. In this change, the groups had to be converted to the Yahoo! system. One of my informants lost contact with the e-class for a while when his email service was blocked by Yahoo!. In many cases, a student who has been having

problems of the sort will eventually give up and stop all participation. This particular informant, however, due to his strong interest in the community, found out how he could become active again. He changed his email service and rejoined the list. There was also some doubt about whether or not a person had to register with Yahoo! to subscribe to a list (they didn't) and about associating an email address with an account. After Stonners sent a message to all the class members in which he explained how to participate, that only list owners had to register with Yahoo! groups, and that associating an email address with a Yahoo! groups was not necessary, participation appeared to increase.

As with both the synchronous sessions and the e-class, the web pages have also undergone changes. However, since the pages are under the direct management of the coordinating teacher, there has been little disruption in that part of the class. Basically, the changes have been in the location (links) to the pages as the community switched services. These changes in services were generally because China would block the sites and was for the specific purpose of allowing the Chinese members of the community continue their active participation.

How Does an Online ESL/EFL Class Become a Language Learning
Community?

WTI: A Language Learning Community?

Is WTI a virtual community? As mentioned earlier, Blanchard (2000), Frank and Davie (2001), and Müller (1999) identify four components of most communities.

- a) Members share some common characteristic such as location or interest)
- b) There is interaction among the members of the community.
- c) There are defined boundaries between inside and outside, which leads to the development of a common identity
- d) Members share an identification with and attachment to this community (i.e., a sense of community).

To find if WTI is a community, we need only see if it has these components.

Do the participants in WTI share a common characteristic? In answering this question, we should remember that a location can be physical, as in a village or a college campus, or may be virtual, as in a chat area, a MOO, or other virtual space. WTI does have a virtual space it calls it own. As mentioned above, the class includes meeting places at Homestead, Yahoo! Chat, and Tapped In.

Also, there is a set of web pages that bear the WTI name, and that the participants in this class use as a means of sharing what they have written. So we can say that WTI does have the component of sharing a common location. The members of the WTI class also share a common interest in the learning of English. All members of the class originally signed up for this class because they wanted to improve their English communication skills. That there are new members in the class who are joining more because they are interested in developing their skills in teaching online ESL is just another sign of change that most communities undergo.

Is there interaction among the participants? A look at the class shows that there are several ways in which interaction is encouraged and takes place. First, the e-class is a means of communication/interaction that the members are expected to use to share their views with other members of the community. While there are many times in which a member of the class will post a comment and nothing else will be heard about that topic, there are also many times in which participants post responses to what others have posted, thereby leading to threads that can later be posted on the web site. There is also interaction in the

weekly chat sessions where participants interact with each other in real time, sometimes using text and other times using voice. This is such an integral part of the class that the coordinating teacher Stonners has arranged for a weekly message to be sent to each member reminding them of the chat session, where it meets, how to connect to it, and who to look for when they get there. A third form of interaction is the informal IM sessions that occur several times each week. In these sessions, members of the class who happen to be online at the same time often send instant messages to each other, thereby opening a chat session between two members. These sessions may be recorded and included in the weekly chat session log (especially if one of the two participants is one of the teachers), or may never leave a public record. Often, the only way the rest of the class knows that a session occurred is when somebody mentions that he/she had met somebody on one of the IM spaces and had had a short conversation. Finally, there are also individual emails that are often exchanged between two members of the class. Again, while these are private messages, they occur because the two people met in the class.

Is there a defined boundary between inside and outside, leading to the development of a common identity? While it

is possible that anybody can show up at a chat session, and that this person may show up on several occasions, it is only when a chat participant joins the e-class that he/she is considered part of the class. People in WTI are members of the community only when they subscribe to the e-class and have their name and email address listed on the class web page. This class web page includes a list of class members with pictures (where possible) and email addresses as well as link to the member's personal web page. Anybody who does not appear on this page, and who does not have a personal WTI page, is not a member of the class. Therefore, we can say that there is a boundary between who is and who is not a member of the community.

Is there a sense of community? Throughout the interviews with my informants, they always insisted that WTI is more than just a class. They pointed out that the members show a sense of trust in each other in the sharing of pictures, not only of themselves, but also of their houses and families. Further, except in one or two cases, members of the community do not use pseudonyms (or at least do not admit to it). In one case, a member of the class used a pseudonym until he realized that he could trust the rest of the members of the class. This person was the first

to post a picture of his house on his web page and to use a web cam to show the rest of the class what he looks like at a regular weekly chat session. The other occurrence was a visitor who used an obvious pseudonym, but who also appeared only twice in the class, and never joined the e-class. My informants also indicated that the use of voice chat was another means of developing a sense of community. As Frank put it, "the use of voice makes me realize I am really talking to a person." A sense of community is also seen in the exchange of birthday greetings on members' birthdays and indications of worry when a natural disaster occurs in an area where there are class members. In fact, if a person does not show up or send a message after a disaster, members of the community will often write to the e-class asking if anybody knows if the person had been affected or not.

In looking at the descriptions of the four components, the answer to whether WTI is a community, instead of simply a group of students who are enrolled in the same class, must be in the affirmative.

How did the Class Develop into a Community?

Another question that arises, and which should be answered is "how has this class been able to develop into a

virtual community?" This is easy to answer. It has been a conscious effort on the part of the teachers, especially Stonners. Early experiences of VOES instructors indicated that free asynchronous ESL/EFL classes seldom worked. As mentioned earlier, at least half the students who took the placement test failed to answer the email invitation to join a class. When enough students had replied to form a section, most instructors would send out another email informing them of where, when, and how to join the class. Usually less than half of the students who had indicated interest in the class actually came to the first session, or participated in the first assignment. Further attrition was usually quick, with only 1 or 2 students actually finishing any one term. While many teachers tried to make their asynchronous classes more interesting, the three teachers who finally developed WTI decided that a new focus was needed. Therefore, when the coordinator of VOES called for volunteers for synchronous teachers, all three of them were among the few that answered the call.

Meanwhile, Stonners was also experimenting with other ideas. Having finally decided that one of the main problems with the classes is that the students who took them basically just wanted someone to look over their work and

correct it, Stonners decided to try developing a new concept for the class. The concept as finally developed took the following form. First, the three-month terms were eliminated. Students were invited to join at any time and stay as long as they wished. This meant, of course, that the traditional idea of a class that discussed specific grammatical points, or that tried to discuss a previously assigned reading or writing assignment, was no longer plausible. If a student could come to the class at any time, then not all students would have the assignment or know what point was to be discussed. Therefore, the set assignment part of the class was replaced by floating assignments. The teachers also established one basic rule for the class: the class had to be fun for the students.

Since one of the problems he had seen with his previous attempts at this type of class was a lack of focus, Stonners decided to look for one. He finally decided the class should focus on the use of different technologies in the teaching and learning of languages. The idea behind the class became to play with various programs as they became available and see how they could be integrated into language education.

Since community requires interaction and a sense of trust, the teachers decided to foster student-student communication instead of the usual student-teacher interaction. To do this, they integrated the asynchronous (email) discussion list, the synchronous (chat) sessions, and a class web site into three basic assignments. These assignments were, as mentioned above, 1) to post answers to writing assignments on the discussion list, with the expectation that other members of the class would then reply to what had posted, 2) to participate in the weekly chat sessions, and 3) to create a web page so the members could learn about each other. At the same time, realizing that not everybody would be able to participate in the chat sessions, or would know how to create a web page, he made all of the assignments voluntary--except that everybody had to carry out at least one of them.

To build a sense of trust among people who come from all parts of the world and will, in all probability, never meet, was the next step. To do this, everybody who joined the class was expected to send an introduction. When possible, they were to either send a picture of themselves or point to one that already existed on the Internet (such as one in a web page they had already developed). All of my

informants agreed that being able to see a picture, as well as read an introduction, is a very important part of the class.

The introduction and picture were placed on a web page that was created specifically for the member. His/her name and picture, as well as their nationality, email address(s), web page address, ICQ number and ID, the date of enrollment in the e-class, and the last date and method of participation were also placed on the class web page. In this way, any community member can know who the members of the class are and communicate with them. Further, as each student completes a year in the group, he/she receives an email congratulating them on a year's participation and a star next to their name on the class list. Some students find this so important that at least one person has written to the list to ask why they were forgotten on the few occasions that Stonners failed to mention them.

Besides using the e-class, the chat sessions, and the web site for building community, the teachers also encourage students to communicate with each other and with the teachers using one of the three commonly available instant messaging programs. This allows participants who are unable to join the chat sessions to interact with others in the

class in a more informal and personal way than the e-class allows for.

What Has Kept the WTI Community Together for so Long?

The answer to this question is one that has been of interest to the community itself since before the beginning of my study. The most logical answer may be the one provided by the Stonners in a personal communication

Basically, the community engages its members in motivating, communicative, and authentic interaction. Language learning activities are purely constructivist and utilize other community members in the zone of proximal development. The members of the group contribute to each other's projects and goals and make and keep commitments to one another (Stonners, Personal Communication).

At the same time, there appears to be other conditions that have helped the community to last for so long. One of these is that more than one type of interaction is fostered. By using both synchronous and asynchronous communication, members of the community are able to interact even when time zone differences do not allow for all to participate in the chat sessions. The use of IM clients allows for the possibility of synchronous communication among community members outside of the weekly chat sessions.

Until recently, the type of chat rooms used by the community also enabled it to continue functioning for as long as it has. While the weekly chat sessions often appear to be social in nature, they have always been in private chat rooms. To enter the community's Homestead chat room, a participant has to access the community's main web page. To access the avatar based chat room at The Palace, the visitor has to either use the exact address of the room or access it through the community's web page. Similarly, the HearMe voice chat room was accessible only through the group's main page, or the web page belonging to Barnes, one of the three teachers.

An acceptance of change is another characteristic of the community that has enabled it to last for so long. Change relates not only to the chat clients and programs being used, but also to the community make-up. While the community originally started as a group of teachers and EFL students, its make-up has recently been changing to include more native speakers of English who are interested in online education. While most of these new community members are language teachers, many of them are also interested in other fields.

From the point of view of the students, the class has lasted so long because it is interesting. In the words of one informant, Karla, "we are passionate about it." Further, students find the chance to interact with people from other parts of the world to be valuable in itself. At a recent online conference where several WTI students were present, a member of the audience asked what it was like to interact online with students from another part of the world. Some of the students who were present gave the following answers. "Wonderful." "We can transcend time and space." "The world is smaller." "Miraculous." "I have friends all over the world."

The elimination of any one of these characteristics (multiple means of interaction, privacy of chat-rooms, and acceptance of change), could threaten the ability of the community to continue as it has. Of course, eliminating the group focus would also cause it to disappear. A lot of the group's success is due to the sense of community that derives from the interaction and the willingness of the members to contribute to each other's projects and goals.

What Differences Exist Between Virtual and Real-World (Face-to-Face) Interviewing?

Online Interviewing as a Method of Data Generation

While, as discussed earlier (chapter 2), the existence of a "virtual" as opposed to "real world" methodology is one that is still being discussed (see, for example, Blanchard, 2000; Hine, 1998, 2000a, 2000b; B. Mason, 1996, 1999; Müller, 1999; Paccagnella, 1997; Thomsen, Straubhaar and Bolyard, 1998; as well as the discussion on online interviewing on the virtual methods list (February 2000), particularly Bennett (February 17), Kendall (February 27), Slater (February 27), and Waern (February 27)), there are differences in conducting interviews in each case. This section will describe the considerations that are necessary to carry out research (especially interviews) using the Internet.

Considerations Related to the Medium

The first major difference between virtual and real-world interviewing is related to the type of medium--rich or poor. Real-world interviewing--that is, interviewing that is conducted in a face-to-face environment--is a rich medium. The interviewer has access to both what the

informant says and how he/she says it. Further, there is a plethora of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, posture, and gestures, as well as the volume and tone of voice. If the informant is distracted, the interviewer can note this. Also, the informant can begin answering the question as soon as the interviewer asks it and continue answering until finished. If he/she has to pause to consider the answer, the interviewer can tell this from the non-verbal cues. The interviewer can also give encouraging sounds (such as "uh huh" and "I see") or through non-verbal cues such as the way he/she looks.

Opposing this is the context-poor medium of the virtual interview. Since the virtual interview is completely text based, there is no non-verbal or extra-verbal cue for the interviewer to rely on for much of his/her information. Even in multimedia interviews that take advantage of voice chat rooms or web cams; unless both participants in the interview have a high-speed connection and sufficient bandwidth, this type of feedback can also be misleading. For example, a web cam that also uses voice requires so much bandwidth that systems often freeze. This reliance on a text-only medium can be helpful to some extent. Since there are no non-verbal and extra-verbal cues, the interviewer has

to pay particular attention both to how he/she phrases the questions and to the answers the informant gives. If there is any doubt about what the informant meant, it needs to be clarified immediately. Some informants make use of extra comments, smileys, and shorthand to aid in clarification. For example, I asked Karla what she did when she received an assignment from Barnes. She replied, "Ignore. . .lol." and then sent another comment "Just kidding" to ensure that I knew she was trying to be humorous. Other informants might have used a smiley (such as :-) to indicate this information. At the same time, the interviewer *can* pay this extra attention to the interview itself because there is no need to take notes or any tape recorder to worry about. Since the questions and answers are automatically recorded in text, the interviewer knows he/she will have an exact transcript of the interview as soon as it is over. Further, since the interview is automatically saved, there is no need to try to transcribe a tape with the problems that result from poor pronunciation or problems with accents.

Problems that occur in this type of medium are mostly related to the lack of non-textual cues. Once the interviewer types a question and hits the "send" button, there is no immediate response. In the face-to-face

interview, as mentioned above, the informant can start answering immediately, and the interviewer can hear this answer. In the case of the virtual interview, however, the interviewer has to wait for the informant to type in his/her answer. So the questions start: Did the informant understand the question? Is the informant still there or did he/she lose his/her internet connection? Is the informant typing the answer? Is the informant thinking about the answer? And so on. If, as is often the case, the informant is a slow typist, this wait can seem interminable, even when it is only a few seconds. After the answer arrives, however, there are still questions that occur to the interviewer. Is the person finished? Should I go ahead, or wait to see if there is more? In more than one case, I decided to ask either a follow up or the next question, only to have the informant continue answering the previous question. Another problem that occurs due to this type of interview is the interviewer interrupting the informant with questions such as "are you still there?" or "did you understand the question?" Usually, the informant is still there and did understand the question, but has to take his/her time typing it. In the case of informants who normally do not use a Roman alphabet, they may be very slow

typists. But even informants who do use a Roman alphabet are not necessarily fast typists.

Another question of interest is what else the informant is doing besides answering your questions. For example, one of my informants would often pause for a few minutes and then come back to the interview and say, "Sorry, I had to answer the telephone." Another informant generally scheduled our interviews for the time between finishing work and waiting for her son to pick her up. I tended to wonder if she was also straightening up her desk and workspace while answering my questions. But even in cases where the person is not at work, and there is no telephone, many people who are in a chat environment also have a television or radio on in the background. Or they have family who come in and interrupt. Or they have other people in the room who are having a conversation that he/she is also paying attention to. Or, as happened to me on more than one occasion, they may be involved in more than one chat session at a time. All of these must be taken into consideration in carrying out virtual interviews.

Considerations Related to Obtrusiveness

Related to this difference in rich and poor medium is the amount of obtrusiveness that is necessary in observing interaction in a classroom and finding possible informants. In a real-world context, an investigator can sit in the back of a room and be basically ignored. After a while this person may become a fixture that the students basically ignore. At the same time, they can make some judgments about the researcher based on such non-verbal cues as manner of dress, age, gender, and his/her interaction with the teacher. When the time comes for the researcher to look for informants, he/she has probably developed some idea of who is or is not a good candidate, and the students have seen him/her enough to have developed some sense of the researcher belonging to the class. In a virtual class, on the other hand, a person who just appears in the class and sits there becomes only a name on the list of people present. Since everything is based on text, there is no way to form any judgment about the researcher unless he/she participates actively in the class.

Considerations Related to Time

Finally, a third aspect of virtual interviews that must be taken into consideration is time. This section can actually be divided into three sub-sections: 1) time to learn the programs used by the community and community norms, 2) time to become known and trusted, and 3) problems related to differences in time zones.

All communities have their norms, and online communities are no different. Further, all virtual communities have their own set of software and chat clients they prefer to use. Anybody who has attended chat sessions run by different groups will probably have noticed this, and usually spent a little time getting used to it. In the case of norms what is acceptable in one group may not be acceptable in another, and what is unacceptable in one may be the norm in another. For example, most informal chat rooms rely on pseudonyms. Most formal, professional, and educational groups do not approve of them. In the case of WTI, this led to problems in convincing my informants that I had to use pseudonyms since they normally did not use them.

Besides learning the norms of the community, something that may take several sessions, the researcher needs to learn what software the community normally uses. In some

cases this can take a large amount of time. Not all MOOs use the same interface, and if the researcher is used to one interface, another may cause him/her trouble. Further, many chat clients are different in how they post. In some cases, the chat room occupants must constantly use the "update" key to see what has been posted. In others, the chat page is automatically updated every time someone posts. In some cases, pressing the <ENTER> key will automatically post the message that is being typed; in other cases, the poster must press the "send" key. In the case of MOO environments, some have one set of commands; others have a different set. What works in one environment, then, will not necessarily work in another. Time to learn the programs works not just for the researcher and new members of the community. The WTI group started using Yahoo! for voice conferencing in late May - early June. At the end of October, the members of the community learned, just by accident, how to allow new participants in a conference without first closing the conference and then opening a new one.

Besides the time needed to become familiar with the norms and software, the researcher also has to spend enough time in the community to become known as a regular participant. While in many informal groups, this means the

researcher has to be present in the particular chat room every day, in groups such as WTI, it means he/she must be present in every weekly chat session, post weekly to the e-class, and be available to chat with group members at odd hours when they find the researcher online. This is similar to the need for researchers of "real-life" environments to be present in that environment.

The major time factor that needs to be kept in mind is not a length of time, but the need to take time zones into account. If two people in New York make an appointment to meet for an interview at 3:30 in the afternoon on June 6, they can both take for granted that 3:30 in the afternoon means 3:30 Eastern Daylight Time. This does not work in a virtual environment. Using the same time (3:30 pm) the following questions must be answered.

1. Where is it 3:30? (Where the researcher lives or where the informant lives)
2. What is the time zone in each of these places?
3. Is either place on Summer (or Winter) time?

As an example, let's take an interview that is set up for March 1 where the researcher is in Puerto Rico (-4) and the informant is in Brazil (-3). However, since Puerto Rico does not have Summer or Winter time, while Brazil does, the

informant may actually be in zone (-2). The question that needs to be answered is: "Should I (the researcher) be available at 3:30, 2:30, or 1:30?" In other words, if the researchers is not aware of Brazil being on Summer time, he/she may arrive in the chat room either one or two hours late, or one or two hours early. There is a way to overcome this problem. In most cases, the WTI community uses GMT for all time-related matters. However, in the case of arranging for interviews, there is still the need to take the time zones into account since both the researcher and the informant should be aware of the approximate time at the other place. Failure to realize this may mean arranging for interviews at such times as one or the other will either be asleep or working.

Considerations Related to Technical Matters

Finally, there are technical considerations that should be taken into account. In a "real-life" environment, if the tape recorder fails to work, the researcher can always fall back on the use of paper and pen. In a virtual interview, however, if either participant loses his/her connection to the Internet, or cannot access the agreed upon chat client, the interview cannot be carried out. In one interview, an

informant and I had agreed to meet in a chat room that became inaccessible. Fortunately, we found each other online and decided to use ICQ. There were two cases in which one or the other of us was unable to connect to the Internet. In these cases, all we could do was send each other email messages explaining why we missed an appointment. This definitely has to be taken into consideration by any researcher who decides to use the Internet to carry out interviews.

In the next chapter, I will discuss my findings, including recommendations for further research in this area.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

As I mentioned earlier in both my literature review and my discussion of the class, research on virtual ESL/EFL classes is almost non-existent. Most of this lack of research is because there are few schools that make use of the Internet as the sole means of offering ESL/EFL classes. As Coghlan (personal communication) mentions, "most ESL students prefer a dual mode class." Dual mode classes make use of both the Internet and face-to-face meetings. Part of this lack is also due to online ESL classes being a relatively recent phenomenon. There are a growing number of online ESL/EFL classes and research is being carried out in many of them, but little of this research has been published yet. Further, these studies generally cover a specific medium in which these classes are offered (e.g. asynchronous classes, MOO-based classes, web-based classes, chat-based classes). As yet, there is no published research on what happens in a class that uses more than one medium. To carry out this research, I decided to focus on the following question. "What happens in an online ESL/EFL class?"

With this question in mind, I decided to carry out a naturalistic study of online classes using virtual

interviews as my primary means of data-generation. Since I had previous experience with the Vandar Online Language School (VOES), a school that offers free ESL/EFL classes using volunteer teachers, I decided to study classes in this school. At the time I made this decision, most of VOES classes were using an asynchronous medium (discussion lists) augmented by the use of World Wide Web sites. Writing Through the Internet (WTI) was one of the few VOES classes that had incorporated a synchronous portion into their class.

While there is a wide range of students in WTI, most of the students have upper-intermediate to advanced English skills. They are generally adults, and come from every continent and many walks of life. Some students have been in WTI since the class was first organized over three years ago; others have just recently joined the class. This mixture of old and new students, as well as the presence of three teachers and the concurrent use of two and three chat rooms for each weekly class session, leads to an interesting class which has been characterized by one member of the community as *intuitive controlled chaos*.

Since this is an online class, I used what Hine (1998, 2000a, 2000b) and B. Mason (1999) call a virtual

ethnography. As mentioned earlier, this is an ethnography in which the culture being studied is completely on-line. Most of my data generation was carried out through virtual interviews, but I also made use of participant observation as well as publicly available documents and logs of the weekly chat sessions. Due to the nature of the medium, interviews that are carried out in the virtual world of the Internet have characteristics that are seldom found in interviews carried out in the physical world. These differences are described in detail in the section titled "Details of the Findings" later in this chapter.

Questions that Guided my Study

The basic question that guided my study was:

What happens in an online ESL/EFL class?

At the same time, it should be remembered that naturalistic studies change as they progress. Naturalistic research, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), is emergent (See also Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). Therefore, this question was just the starting point in my research. Other questions developed through the course of the study. The following additional questions that emerged in the course of my study are especially worthy of note.

Given that most VOES classes had problems retaining students for the entire three-month term while WTI not only retained its students but even increased in size and has existed continuously for more than three years, the following question became of interest early in the study.

1. Why has WTI been so successful?

Arising from this question are the following subsidiary questions:

a. What elements of the class attract students?

b. How would the students describe the class?

After joining the WTI class, I soon learned that it was not a class as traditionally defined. There was no set term of studies with a beginning and ending date. There were no lessons, with evaluation activities to ensure that the students had successfully mastered the skill. There were no assignments that the students had to turn in and have evaluated. In short, what I found was a community in which the members all considered themselves friends instead of teachers and students. Given that the class had become a language learning community, I asked the following question:

2. How does an online ESL/EFL class become a language learning community?

This question, in turn, gave rise to the following:

- a. What are the elements of a virtual community?
- b. How can these elements be fostered so that the community continues to grow?
- c. What changes occur in the community as it grows?

Finally, since my interviews were conducted completely on-line, a question arose related to what elements of the virtual world most affected how interviews are carried out. I, therefore, asked the following questions.

3. What differences exist between virtual and "real-world" (face-to-face) interviewing?

This gave rise to the following questions:

- a. What elements of the virtual world affect interviews?
- b. Are synchronous interviews adequate for data generation?
- c. Can asynchronous interviews aid in increasing data generation?
- d. How can other means of data generation (e.g. participant observation) aid in developing a study?

Summary of Findings

I joined the WTI class approximately four months before I began my data generation. During this time, I noticed that there was much posting on the asynchronous e-class portion of the class as well as a group of students who

participated in almost all of the chat sessions. In the e-class, students would post everything from jokes to problems they had with English, while in the chat sessions they would talk about any topic of interest. These topics varied from discussions about books the students had read and were interested in through discussions on topics related to technological issues, to discussions on how to date in different cultures. Both the asynchronous e-class and the synchronous (chat) sessions were very active. As mentioned earlier, during the course of my data generation, the two most used chat clients disappeared from active use in the Internet. With the loss of these two clients, and the subsequent search for a replacement, the community began to become less active. While nobody in the community has an answer as to why the sessions (as well as the e-class) became less active, several suspect it was due to the loss of stability within the community. This suspicion is supported by the fact that lately, after the community selected a new home at Tapped In, both the amount of activity in the chat sessions as well as the number of postings to the e-class appear to be increasing again.

The student activity within the class translated into an interest in participating in my study. When I sent out

my call for participants to be interviewed, I received seven responses (six positive and one negative) from the participants in WTI, and only two responses from students in other VOES classes. The one negative response I received was from a "student" (EFL teacher) who was researching the use of chat rooms in teaching EFL. In her response, she indicated she was willing to participate, but questioned whether she was the type of student I wanted to interview since she was not in the class to learn English but to learn how to use the technology in her teaching.

As with everything else, there are negative aspects to virtual classes such as WTI and with virtual research. On the downside, virtual classes, unless they are simple e-mail and/or text-based chat sessions generally require high-end equipment. Also, most classes that are simple asynchronous discussion lists, as is often the case, seldom last for more than two or three months. When I was actively teaching for VOES, the teachers constantly complained about the lack of participation by most students and the high dropout rate. Most students in these classes appeared to be interested only in receiving help on specific problems related to assignments they had in their regular classes or in

receiving help in writing reports and letters for their jobs.

Another downside is related to the type of chat rooms that are available. Unless the school is willing to charge students for the classes and pay for the use of password protected chat clients, decent private rooms no longer exist in the quantity previously available. In the case of free classes such as WTI, the disappearance of "private" rooms at sites such as The Palace means that the class must make use of sites that are less than private. Whereas, before, visitors had to be told specifically how to access the sites being used, in WTI's new home, visitors and guests can drop in at any time, and often do so quite by accident. While this can be positive since many of these visitors later join the class and contribute to the weekly sessions, they have led to a change in the community make-up. There are now more community members, including those who post in the e-class, who are more interested in online education than in language learning. While some of the original students still participate, a shift seems to be occurring in the emphasis from language learning to technology and online education.

Details of Findings

While much of what I found in my study appears on the surface to be limited to free ESL/EFL classes, there are six general insights that can be drawn in relation to online ESL/EFL classes, building language learning communities, and in conducting virtual interviews.

Findings Related to Virtual ESL/EFL Classes

- 1. Multiple means of interaction are important in virtual classes, but each student should be allowed to select which means of interaction he/she will (or will not) use.**

Although the use of asynchronous communication (email discussion lists and bulletin boards) may be a vital part of having a successful online language class, so also is synchronous communication (chat rooms, MOOs, IM clients, etc.). In carrying out virtual studies, Frank and Davie (2001) indicate that chat is not very useful for in-depth discussions because the participants do not have time for considering their answers. At the same time, they also suggest it is an excellent medium for the social interaction that is a requirement of community formation. Further, according to several researchers (see, for example, B. Mason, 1996, 1999; Warschauer, 1996a) students tend to

produce more in asynchronous communication such as email than in a chat session. This is due to the amount of time the student is able to dedicate to his/her answer in each medium. For this reason, a method of asynchronous communication, either through an email discussion list or through a bulletin board, is a necessary adjunct to any successful online class.

In WTI, the asynchronous portion of the class was the e-class discussion list. Although the postings on this list would vary in quantity, (sometimes being as active as five or six messages a day and at other times as slow as two or three messages a week), the list was always an important part of the class. Towards the end of my study, the community also incorporated a voice bulletin board for those students who wanted to leave an oral message and receive feedback on it. This client is not used as much as either the e-class or the chat sessions, probably due to the nature of the bulletin board. As mentioned earlier (Chapter 1), bulletin boards differ from email in that the participant must visit the bulletin board to receive any messages while the email message is sent directly to him/her.

The use of asynchronous communication, however, is not sufficient. My informants were unanimous in their opinion

that students need to know that they are communicating with a real person, and not just a computer program. For this reason, chat sessions or other means of synchronous interaction are important. The teachers at WTI found that the use of chat aided in developing a sense of community. While text-based chat clients are helpful, they are not as effective in building the necessary sense of community as are voice-based clients. Voice-based clients allow the group members to hear what the others sound like and add an extra dimension to the chat session. In a voice-based chat room, the data is no longer just text. With voice, the participants can hear the tone of voice and other extra-verbal cues that add so much to meaning. As in the importance of chat clients in general, all of my informants were in agreement on the importance of hearing the other person's voice in developing a sense of trust and community.

The weekly chat sessions are only part of the synchronous portion of the class. Another important part of the class is found in the Instant Messaging (IM) clients. Since many members live in time zones that do not permit them to attend the weekly chat sessions, the IM clients allow them to participate synchronously with members of the community who they find online and available for chatting.

This multiplicity of media of interaction is one of the main reasons that a virtual class becomes successful. Of course, merely allowing for different means of interaction and communication is not enough. There must be a conscious effort made to integrate them into a whole. Each medium should support the others.

2. Change is an inevitable and necessary part of virtual communities if they are to continue for more than a few months.

As mentioned earlier, change is a necessary adjunct to growth. Without it, the class is in danger of becoming static, in which case the members often lose interest in participating and eventually drop out. In the case of virtual language learning communities, change usually occurs in the programs used, in the make-up of the community, or in the community goals.

With the disappearance of two primary meeting places (The Palace and HearMe), WTI had to search for a new place to meet. While this took time, it allowed the community to practice with different types of chat clients and decide if they were of use to them or not. While the programs the community practiced with were seldom of acceptable quality, a home was finally found in Tapped In with Yahoo! Messenger as an acceptable voice conferencing space. But the change

was more than in a move from The Palace to Tapped In and from HearMe to Yahoo! Messenger, it involved, also, a move from a private meeting place (The Palace) to a less private meeting place. Even when the group meets in one of the offices, visitors can, and do, drop by to see what is going on.

There has also been a change in the make-up of the community. Originally, WTI was a group of teachers and EFL students who met for the purpose of improving their language ability. While this is still the core of the WTI community, its make-up has recently been changing to include more native speakers of English who are interested in online education. While most of these new community members are language teachers, many of them are also interested in other fields. This, in turn, is leading toward a change in some of the goals of the group. While language learning/improvement is still the basic goal of the group, a secondary goal of learning the technology of Tapped In is also developing. Further, there appears to be an attempt on the part of a few of the new members to limit the "intuitive controlled chaos" that has characterized the community almost from its inception so as to allow for a more

structured class-like environment during the second half of the weekly chat session.

Further, students find interacting with people from other parts of the world to be a valuable learning experience. For example, at a conference where several WTI students were present, somebody asked what it was like to talk to students from another part of the world, online. Some of the students who were present gave the following answers. "Wonderful." "We can transcend time and space." "The world is smaller." "Miraculous." "I have friends all over the world." But they also see it as an excellent occasion to develop their English in a socially interactive group while also learning about new technologies for language learning.

3. Language learning communities take a conscious effort to develop and maintain.

Although virtual language learning communities are possible, they take a conscious effort to create and maintain them. As mentioned earlier, Blanchard (2000), Frank and Davie (2001), and Müller (1999) identify four components that communities usually share. These are a) a sharing of some common characteristic (i.e., location or interest), b) interaction between/among the members of the

community, c) defined boundaries between inside and outside which leads to the development of a common identity, and d) members' shared identification with and attachment to this community (i.e., a sense of community). Further, there should be some equality among the members of the community. While there may be experts in language learning, and these experts may be called teachers, there should be some means by which both the teachers and the students communicate as equals. These are not characteristics that normally occur spontaneously in a virtual ESL/EFL class as taught by VOES. Since most of these classes are still little more than email discussion lists or classes that offer tutoring, there is little chance for these characteristics to develop. Even in those classes that are offered in synchronous mode, unless a conscious effort is put into developing these characteristics, they will seldom occur of themselves.

As was explained and described in the previous chapter, community was developed in WTI through a four-step process. First was the incorporation of a focus based on exploring different technologies for language learning. All members of the community were expected to be interested in technology based language learning (otherwise they would probably not be taking a virtual language class). The next

step was to encourage interaction. This interaction was fostered by requiring all community members to participate in either the synchronous (chat) sessions or the asynchronous (email discussion list) e-class. The third step was to develop a sense of trust. To build this sense of trust everybody who joined the class was expected to send an introduction and, if possible, a picture of themselves and their community. These were then placed on a class web site where each member had his/her own page. Community members were encouraged to add to this page so that other members could learn about them. The fourth step involved sending announcements to the e-class whenever a community member had a birthday or other good news. This last step also included announcements and questions about natural disasters that occurred in the country of a group member. In that way, members of the community were encouraged to think about their classmates and consider them as part of a community.

Another means of community building used by the WTI community is seen when group members show a willingness to contribute to each other's projects and goals. One way in which that has shown itself is through community members being present at and actively contributing to online

workshops and other presentations that sometimes occur. While it might be expected that these workshops and presentations were offered by the community teachers, students in the group have also presented conferences. In these cases, not only did other students appear and show their support, but the teachers also participated in the presentations.

Findings Related to Virtual Interviews

- 4. The context-poor medium of virtual interviews requires that the interviewer compensate by paying more attention to the text he/she receives.**

The main media difference between virtual and face-to-face interviews is directly related to the amount of data that the interview carries. In face-to-face interviewing, the researcher gathers much of his information through non-verbal cues such as body language (gestures, posture, etc.) and tone of voice. The researcher and the informant see each other. Each can tell if the other is really interested in what is being said. Each knows how the other is dressed or sitting/standing. Further, each can see the expression on the other's face, and can hear the tone of voice that the other uses.

None of these cues are available in the virtual interview. The virtual interview is completely text based. Text only data can be seen in both a negative and a positive light. For example, the lack of non-verbal cues means that the interviewer does not have access to information such as the informant's gestures or tone of voice. At the same time, since virtual studies are text-only, background data on the community being studied is generally available. For example, in this study, I was able to take advantage of publicly available documents regarding the history of WTI as well as publicly available chat logs from the weekly chat sessions. This allowed me to make use of information I received from these other sources in preparing my interview questions. I was also able to make use of these sources both in interpreting what my informants told me and in describing the community itself.

Because of the text-only quality of the virtual interview, certain questions and conditions arise as described below.

- a. Has the informant finished answering the question?

This question specifically relates to the physical aspect of answering the researcher's question. In the face-to-face interview, once the researcher asks a question the

informant either begins answering it immediately, or indicates in some way (verbally or non-verbally) that he/she is thinking over the appropriate response. Even when the informant pauses in the middle of an answer, there is usually some type of cue (e.g., tone of voice or a gesture) to indicate that he/she has not yet finished. In the virtual interview, on the other hand, the researcher has to wait while the informant types in his/her response. This wait can cause the interviewer to start asking him/herself several questions. Is the informant is answering the question? Is he/she thinking about the answer? Did the informant understand the question? Is the informant a slow typist? Is he/she still online? In the case of a slow typist, this may be a long wait. But even after the respondent replies, there is still the question of whether or not this is the entire reply. In many chat and IM clients (e.g., Homestead, Yahoo! Messenger), simply hitting the <ENTER> key (by accident or on purpose) causes the message to be sent to the chat room or IM contact. In other programs (e.g., ICQ), the typist must actually press a send key. Since most of my interviews took place using ICQ, this particular problem did not occur.

There are, however, other reasons an informant might post part of an answer and then continue to answer the question. One is to let the interviewer know that the informant is answering the question. If the informant is a slow typist, for example, he/she might send an answer in two, three, or even four parts. Another reason is the length of the answer. When the informant is sending a long answer, he/she may break it into more than one section either so the interviewer can start reading the answer, or because it is too long for the chat client's buffer. While ICQ, for example, has a fairly large buffer (in relation to other IM clients), a long answer may still overflow the buffer, thereby erasing the first part of the answer. Further, an informant may send part of an answer while considering what else he/she wants to say about the question.

An interviewer who does not take this into consideration may interrupt the informant without realizing it. On more than one occasion, for example, I received the continuation of an answer after asking a follow-up question. This can lead to the informant either feeling rushed or deciding to send only partial answers. One of my informants began to include phrases such as "more" and "wait" at the end of partial answers so I would know she was still

answering. At times, she also included cues such as "thinking" before answering the question.

- b. What else is the informant doing besides answering the interview?

In the face-to-face interview, the researcher can see what the informant is doing. Also, the researcher has usually made arrangements for the informant to be able to pay attention to the interview by scheduling it at a time or place in which interruptions should not occur. Seldom do face-to-face interviews take place in conditions where the informant is paying attention to other activities at the same time as answering the interview. The interview seldom takes place, for example, at a time and place where the informant is also taking part in another conversation or watching television. This cannot be said about virtual interviews. Since there is no way to see what the other person is doing (unless the interview takes place with a web cam), the informant may actually be listening to people around him/her, watching television, eating, or working. What is more, the informant may actually be taking part in more than one chat session at a time. Although most of my informants appeared to be paying attention to the interview, one of them usually participated in interviews while

preparing to go home from her place of employment. There were also cases where an informant received telephone calls while participating in the interview. In one case, however, it was not the informant who was otherwise occupied. I had accidentally scheduled two interviews at the same time and did not realize it until both informants paged me and told me they were ready to have the interview. Fortunately, IM clients generally allow chats to take place in two or more windows at the same time without any of the participants realizing that one of them is involved in more than one session at the same time. In the previous chapter (*Controlled Chaos*), I described how this type of activity occurs in almost every weekly chat session. If I had not previously participated in the weekly chat sessions, I am not sure I would have been able to successfully complete this particular interview.

- c. Since it is text only, there is a complete record of everything that was said.

In a face-to-face interview, the researcher/ interviewer has to keep a record of what is said, how it is said, and what other (non-verbal) cues were also involved. While part of this (the verbal part) may be tape recorded, the interviewer must still pay attention to whether or not

the tape needs to be changed, or if the batteries are good. He/she must also pay attention to keeping notes on the non-verbal parts of the interview. In a virtual interview, on the other hand, there is a complete record of what was said. Since there are no non-verbal cues to be considered, the interviewer can pay closer attention to what is said. He/she also needs to make sure that his/her questions are stated clearly, since the informant will not have non-verbal cues to help decipher the question. At the same time, while the face-to-face interviewer will have to transcribe his/her notes and tapes, the virtual interviewer should format the interview into an easily readable form. Anyone who has seen a raw chat log will realize that it is difficult to read without prior formatting in a word processing program.

5. **Virtual interviews require attention to time, including the time it takes to conduct the interview, the time it takes to gain the trust of community members, and a consideration of what time zones are involved in any interview.**

In a study that takes place in a virtual space, the researcher needs to consider the time that needs to be dedicated not only to learning the rules of the community, but also to learning how to use the particular programs and chat clients used by the class. No two chat clients or programs are identical. While some clients may be more

similar than others, it still takes at least a little time to learn to use them. A person who is used to Yahoo! Messenger, for example, will find ICQ quite different. Even MSN Messenger will be somewhat different. While the researcher who knows one of these programs will not need to spend much time learning to use any of the others, if the client used in the community is vastly different, he/she may have to spend much more time learning how to use it. For example, a researcher who knows how to use ICQ may need to spend a large amount of time learning to use a MOO. Further, in participating in a virtual class, the researcher needs to know the different programs used. WTI used The Palace, Homestead, and HearMe. Each of these was different from the others, and the commands used in one would often interfere in one of the others. For example the function key F4 in HearMe was used to talk. In The Palace, that same key was used to change the person's avatar. Since WTI used both of these environments in most weekly sessions, and usually at the same time, this interference was something the participants had to learn to cope with. Once these two clients disappeared, the community had to learn to use new clients. A researcher who decides to study a class in which

this condition exists must expect to spend a little time learning to use the programs.

Of course, besides learning to use the specific clients, if it is the first time the researcher has participated in a chat room, he/she may be scared off the first few times. At the same time, since the researcher also needs to become familiar with the community norms and rules, the time spent learning the programs (and getting used to chat in general, if necessary) is usually also spent in getting to know the community.

As mentioned above, the informant in a virtual interview has to type his/her answer into the chat client before the interviewer can receive it. This can take a little time (if the informant is a fast typist or the answer is short) or a longer time (if the informant is a slow typist or the answer is long). But it is time that the interviewer must take into consideration in planning his/her interviews. An interview that would last one hour in a face-to-face environment can easily last ninety minutes or more in a virtual environment.

Of course, one aspect of time that may appear self-evident is also that aspect that is often overlooked. The world is divided into 24 time zones. If a researcher and

informant in a face-to-face environment in New York City make an appointment for 3:00 P.M. January 5, for example, they both understand the time to be 3:00 P.M. Eastern Standard Time. In a virtual environment, however, they cannot take the time for granted. If this same researcher is in New York and the informant is in Caracas, Venezuela, for example, the following questions need to be answered.

3:00 PM where? In New York? In Caracas? What time zone is Caracas in? Is either of the sites using Summer (Daylight Savings) Time? If the researcher does not answer these questions correctly, the interview might never take place.

A similar problem did occur in my study. It took three attempts before we finally clarified the time zone problem. In WTI it is common for the participants to use Universal Time (UT or GMT). In that way, every member in the community can make an appointment with any other member without worrying about specifying "My time or yours." In virtual interviews the researcher needs to keep this time zone difference in mind.

- 6. Since the members of the community will have a wide range of technological equipment and experience, the teacher (or researcher) needs to adjust his/her plans to what is available to a specific student. interviews.**

Other than audio and video recorders, there are no technical considerations in face-to-face interviews. Virtual interviews, on the other hand, are generally high-tech. They require the equipment, connections, and knowledge, to use the Internet. At a minimum, this means a computer with a modem, an account with an Internet Service Provider (ISP), and some experience both in browsing the Internet and in using chat rooms. Virtual researchers should keep the following online conditions in mind.

- a. Different media use different amounts of bandwidth.

Bandwidth is related to the amount of information that can be sent/received in a particular situation. Stated simply, the closer the environment comes to replicating a face-to-face environment, the more bandwidth is needed to carry the information. In the case of virtual interviews, a text-only interview uses the least amount of bandwidth. After that, in ascending order, comes voice, video with text and video with voice. The main condition that should be considered in relation to bandwidth is the necessity to match the medium the interviewer wishes to use with the bandwidth that the informant has available. If the interviewer wishes to use video with voice, but the

informant has the bandwidth for only text, the interview will need to be carried out in text.

- b. Connection speed varies with the time and the amount of bandwidth being consumed.

There is a saying that the Internet slows down everywhere else after 8:00 on a California morning. This is simply a way of saying that as more people connect, the available bandwidth must be divided among more users. But a computer connection can also seem slow because computer resources are low. If a researcher has scheduled an interview during peak hours, the speed with which he/she and his/her informant communicate may be quite slow. This also happens if the person is trying to run too many programs at one time. In one example that took place during a regular WTI chat session, two of the members decided to use their web cams while also communicating in voice chat and taking part in a text chat at Tapped In. When I tried to view the two web cam videos, the voices became choppy, one of the videos froze and the other became jerky, and text in the Tapped In session began to take several seconds to appear in the screen. Finally, my computer froze and had to be restarted. This appeared to be a case of system resources

being used up. This is a condition that should be taken into consideration when planning any virtual interview.

- c. Internet connections may disappear for what appears to be for no reason at all.

A third problem that needs to be taken into consideration is the possibility of either the interviewer or the informant being disconnected from the Internet. During two interviews, I lost my connection several times during the course of the interview. In many chat clients, a loss of connection will empty the buffer, thereby causing a loss of data. One reason I preferred using ICQ for most interviews was that all sessions with a particular informant was saved in chronological order. All I had to do was open the history folder and the data was there.

Related to this problem is the inability for either the interviewer or the informant to connect to the Internet. The few times this occurred during my study, it meant using email to reschedule the interview.

- d. Sometimes a particular chat client is unavailable.

Related to the above problems is the inability of either the researcher or the informant to connect to a specific chat client. This inability to use a particular client may be due to equipment problems, due to the chat

client's server being shut down for maintenance, or due to the client being blocked by the researcher's or informant's server. The one time this occurred during my study, I was fortunate to have made plans to use an alternate chat client, so my informant and I were still able to connect and have our interview session. This supports the old rule to always have a back-up plan.

Recommendations

The virtual ESL/EFL classroom appears to be gaining ground. Although Coghlan (personal communication) mentioned that the researchers he has read all indicate that ESL/EFL students prefer dual mode (face-to-face classes with an online portion), virtual ESL/EFL classes are appearing not only in free language schools and classes such as VOES and WTI, but also in universities around the world. Admittedly, most of the university sponsored virtual ESL/EFL classes require physical contact at some point (an orientation meeting, for example), enough virtual classes are appearing to make research into this type of community a more common experience than it was previously.

At the same time, more researchers are carrying out virtual research studies, especially in the area of virtual

communities. For this reason, it is important to see what problems these researchers might face and to give recommendations on how they might be met.

The following are specific recommendations for virtual ESL/EFL teachers and students as well as for virtual researchers. I have divided these recommendations into three groups depending on whether they are specific to the virtual classroom, or virtual methodology, or if they apply to both the virtual classroom and virtual methodology.

General Recommendations for Virtual ESL/EFL Classes and Virtual Interviews

Have a Back-up Plan

Teachers must not assume that the virtual classroom will always work. Numerous technical problems can, and occasionally will, occur without warning, thereby causing the class to hang up for the day. The same is true of virtual interviews. Technical problems can cause an interview to either be cut short or cancelled altogether. For this reason, back-up plans are indispensable in both teaching and research.

Imagine planning for a class in which you will use an overhead transparency projector, but when you arrive in the

classroom, you find that the projector is not working. In such a case, you can use the chalkboard or some other lower-tech means of giving your class. If something similar happens in a virtual ESL/EFL class (you've prepared PowerPoint slides and placed them on a WWW page, but the students cannot access that page) however, it takes much more time to change to another form of presentation. This should be considered and planned for from the beginning. One way might be to put the presentation on more than one site; another might be to have a text-only presentation also available. But, without a back-up plan, the class may have to be cancelled for the day.

Imagine, also, that you get to your class only to find your room locked, and nobody knows where the key is. A similar occurrence often occurs in a virtual class when a specific site where the class normally meets is unavailable. This can occur for a variety of reasons including (but not limited to) the server being down for maintenance, bandwidth problems (too many people trying to access the site at the same time), or the site may have been blocked for some reason. It is important, therefore, for the teacher and students to have (and know about) at least one additional site they can access for the class.

In virtual interviews, it is often common to find that the site or program being used is unavailable (or that one or the other person cannot connect to the internet). In this case, the researcher should have made arrangements with the informant on additional sites to meet, or to meet at another time. In some cases, it may even be useful to plan for an asynchronous (email) session to take the place of the session that had to be cancelled due to technical problems.

Establish Ground Rules at the Start

One problem in both classes and research is when the teacher (researcher) and the student (informant) make up the rules as they go along. By establishing ground rules before beginning either the class or the research project, both parties can dedicate more time to the task at hand without worrying about what rule would cover it. For example, in a class, is the student expected to remain on-topic, or is it permissible to change topics at will? How long will each class session last? In an interview there are similar questions that need to be addressed. How many interviews will there be? How long will each interview last? What mode of interviewing will be used (voice, text, video, a mixture of all three)? Will the interview be formal

(question and answer format) or informal (conversation format)? Answering these questions at the beginning will allow both participants to know what to expect.

Allow Sufficient Time

As mentioned above, time is a very important part of any virtual class or research study. Students and teachers (as well as informants and researchers) need sufficient time to get to know each other. But they also need time to get to know the programs being used in the class or study. While many people may feel that a virtual class or study is easier or takes less time, they are really much more time consuming than might be expected.

By allowing sufficient time for everybody to be comfortable with the class or study, both the class and the research project can be more useful and interesting to all involved.

Take Time Zone Differences into Consideration

While this may appear to be self-evident, many teachers and researchers seem to forget that it is a different time at different places in the world. By keeping this in mind, both the teacher and the researcher can make plans to use

this in their favor. In the case of WTI, this problem is handled by using GMT as the basis for time, making active participation in the chat sessions optional, and incorporating the use of IM software for one-to-one sessions among students (and teachers) who are on-line at the same time. Something similar can often be included in many classes. Further, the time difference needs also to be taken into consideration in planning virtual interviews. It makes little sense to plan for a 3:30 p.m. interview, for example, if it means one of the two participants will either be working or asleep.

Recommendations for Offering Online ESL/EFL Classes

Provide for Multiple Means of Participation, but Make Specific Means of Participation Optional

Time zones will often result in some students always being unable to participate at a particular hour. This problem can be countered by planning for both synchronous and asynchronous participation. However, if students are required to participate in both modes, the problem can actually be compounded, and students may find themselves dreading the class. Unless there is a large amount of money involved, those students who find participation onerous will

tend to drop out of the class. By allowing students to participate in either mode (although preferably in both), however, they class can become an enjoyable experience in which students are eager to participate.

WTI arranged for this time zone problem by making the e-class (asynchronous) portion of the class the mode that decided if a students was really in the class or not. Since the synchronous portion is so important, however, the teachers also encourage those students who are unable to attend the chat sessions to communicate using IM programs and by reading (and commenting on) the weekly chat logs.

Provide a Means for Students (and Teachers) to Get to Know Each Other

When a course is offered completely on-line to people in all parts of the world, face-to-face meetings become difficult, or even impossible. Allow some means for the students to get to know each other. One way to allow for them to get to know each other is by encouraging them to hold individual chat sessions outside of class time. It is also possible to design writing assignments (to be posted to the class discussion area) in which the students describe something about themselves or the culture they live in. The

use of voice chat and video is another way to allow students to get to know each other. Hearing a voice or seeing a video of a classmate can go far in allowing students to realize that the person he/she is talking to is really a person and not just the computer. Finally, consider placing pictures on a web page. Like participation in the chat sessions, however, this should be done on a voluntary basis, where students who want to can send in their pictures for the teacher to place on the page.

Recommendations for Conducting Virtual Interviews

Provide Extra Time for the Interviews

As mentioned earlier, the informant in a virtual interview has to type his/her answer into the chat client before the interviewer can receive it. This can take a little time (if the informant is a fast typist or the answer is short) or a longer time (if the informant is a slow typist or the answer is long). But it is time that the interviewer must take into consideration in planning his/her interviews. An interview that would last one hour in a face-to-face environment can easily last ninety minutes or more in a virtual environment.

Consider Using Email as an Interview Technique

As mentioned earlier, B. Mason (1996, 1999), Slater (message on Virtual Interviews posted to the Virtual Methods discussion list, 27 Feb 2000), Waern (message on Virtual Interviews posted to the Virtual Methods discussion list, 27 Feb 2000), and Warschauer (1996a) all point out that people tend to write more in asynchronous communications than in chat rooms. Further, as Waern points out, chat rooms are not the most interview friendly places that exist. Judicious use of e-mail, at least for follow-up questions and as a back-up plan in case the chat room becomes unavailable, can go a long way to allowing an interviewer to gather the data he/she requires. At the same time, these should be used judiciously since, as B. Mason (1996, 1999) points out, email interviews have the danger of leading to information overload due to the number of email messages being received.

Possibilities for Future Research

Among the many possibilities for future research in this area, I point out four studies that I find of particular interest.

Although this study is based specifically on the development of a community from an ESL/EFL class, it does not consider either how the student learns the language within the community nor how well a student improves his/her English. Therefore, one study I find of particular interest would focus on how students learn in a virtual language learning community. This study could easily be carried out through interviews with students in which they describe how they participate in the community, especially in the relation to how they answer assignments and prepare for participation. It might also be helpful to interview the teachers about how the students in general participate and answer assignments. Related to that is a second possible study that evaluates the learning outcomes of ESL/EFL students in virtual language learning communities. This could be carried out through an analysis of the student's work (both assignments and chat room participation) and improvement over a period of time.

Two other possible studies would analyze these same area in both virtual language classes that are offered in a more traditional manner. My study specifically describes a community in which students do not have a series of lessons to be learned with evaluation activities that are carried

out. How would students participate in a class that included these elements? Related to this would be a study in a virtual language class as offered by an institution of higher (tertiary) education.

Herding Cats

Throughout my participation in WTI, the coordinating teacher, Stonners, kept saying that online classes, especially WTI, are a lot like herding cats. Anybody who has ever owned cats knows how independent they are. Cats have a mind of their own. Try to make two or more cats go where you want them, and you will find they each go their separate way, no matter what you do. I found this to be the perfect metaphor for understanding what goes on in this class/community. Students (and teachers) insisted on opening their own topics, changing topics, switching chat clients, and in general doing their own thing. I would like to express my appreciation of Stonners for allowing me to use his term as my metaphor.

I also wish to thank Genevieve, another researcher who takes part in the TappedIn MOO environment for permission to use "controlled chaos" as my title for chapter 4. She is

studying online interaction and uses this term to describe how people interact in chat and MOO environments.

Both controlled chaos and herding cats are very descriptive of the WTI community. The classes are definitely chaotic (although the members are able to navigate through this chaos as though it made plain sense). But just like cats, the students (and teachers) are independent, self-confident people, who cannot be herded. They are not sheep or cows that will follow the directions of a leader. This freedom of thought and action is, in my opinion, the community's greatest strength.

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APPENDIX A: INTERNET RESOURCES

Below is a list of Internet resources that are either mentioned in the text or may be of interest to online ESL/EFL teachers and/or virtual researchers.

Web Pages

These World Wide Web sites may be useful for ESL/EFL teachers who wish to incorporate the Internet into their classes.

Dave's ESL Cafe

<http://www.eslcafe.com>

The Online ESL Palace

<http://www.eslpalace.net>

Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab

<http://www.esl-lab.com>

The Tower of English

<http://www.towerofenglish.com>

Web Enhanced Language Learning (WELL)

<http://www.well.ac.uk>

The following World Wide Web sites offer virtual ESL/EFL classes.

EF EnglishTown

<http://www.englishtown.com>

English For the Internet (EFI)

<http://www.study.com>

EnglishLearner.com

<http://www.englishlearner.com>

PeakEnglish.com

<http://www.peakenglish.com>

Email Distribution Lists

The following email distribution (or discussion) lists are for teachers who are interested in interacting with other teachers in the specific areas to which the lists are dedicated.

NETEACH-L

A discussion list for ESL/EFL educators that have incorporated the Internet into their classes
To subscribe, send the following message to:

listproc@ukans.edu

sub neteach-l <your name>

Do not include anything in the subject space.

Substitute your name (without the angle brackets (<>)) where it says "<your name>"

TESLCA-L

A discussion list for ESL/EFL teachers who are interested in Computer Assisted Language Learning. Before subscribing to this list, you must first subscribe to TESL-L.

To subscribe, send the following message to:

listserv@cunyvm.cuny.edu

sub tesl-l <your name>

sub teslca-l <your name>

Do not include anything in the subject space.

Substitute your name (without the angle brackets (<>)) where it says "<your name>"

The following four lists belong to the JISCmail system (the site that maintains most educational email distribution lists in the United Kingdom). Most public JISCmail lists have open archives (you can read messages without subscribing to the list). To access the archives, go to the list homepage (instructions below).

DISTANCELEARN-LANG

A discussion list for educators interested in distance language learning.

Subscription information is below

TEACHING-ON-LINE

A discussion list for educators interested in online teaching.

Subscription information is below

VIRTUAL-METHODS

A discussion list for educators interested in online research.

Subscription information is below

WELL (WEB ENHANCED LANGUAGE LEARNING)

A discussion list for language educators interested in using the Internet in the classroom.

Subscription information is below

Subscription information for the previous four lists:

1. Go to the JISCmail home page.
(<http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk>)
2. Click on the first letter of the list name.
3. Scroll down the resulting page until you find the list.
4. Click on the list name.
5. Select "subscribe" to the list.
6. Fill in the required information and submit the form.

To view the archives, step 5 would be to select the month that interests you.

Language MOOs

LinguaMOO

Language teachers
<http://www.lingua.udallas.edu:7000>

MOOfraçais

Students and teachers of French
<telnet://moo.syr.edu> 7777

MundoHispano

Students and teachers of Spanish
<http://web/syr/edu/~lmturbee/mundo.html>

schMOOze University

Students and teachers of ESL/EFL
<http://schmoose.hunter.cuny.edu:8888>

TappedIn

Free office space and MOO environment for educators
<http://www.tappedin.org>

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I used the following interview protocol as the basis for developing my interviews. While I asked all my informants most of these questions, I sometimes eliminated a question due to either the informant volunteering the information before I asked, or because the answer to a previous question either contained or implied the answer to the next one. I also added questions based on an informant's answers.

Background Information

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself and how you became involved in WTI.
2. How long have you been studying English?
3. How long have you been taking English courses on the Internet?
4. Why did you decide to study English using the Internet instead of another means of distance learning or in a traditional classroom?
5. Have you taken other Internet based courses? (Follow-up: What were they?)
6. Do you participate in other online classes or groups? If yes, how is WTI similar to or different from the other class?
7. Do you take any other English courses (not through the Internet)? What are they? How does the course you are taking on the Internet supplement the other English courses you are taking?
8. How did you find out about WTI?
9. How do you access WTI?
10. Where do you typically access WTI?
11. Considering your experience in this class, would you take another Internet based course?

The WTI Class

12. How would you describe WTI to someone who knows nothing about the Internet?
13. What do you think is the purpose of WTI?
14. What purpose does WTI serve for you?
15. What do you do in WTI?
16. What happens in WTI? If you had to describe to someone what happens in WTI, how would you do so?
17. If you had to compare WTI to someplace or something in the real world, what would it be?

18. Describe the activities the course includes. Which ones do you feel are most important? Why?
19. Describe what you think are the positive (negative) aspects of your class.

Communication with Other Members

20. Describe the type of communication that exists among the members of the class. How does this communication take place?
21. Describe what happened the first time you joined this class? Did anybody do anything in particular that helped you to feel welcome? What was it?
22. How do you form an impression of someone when they first join WTI?
23. How do you get to know other people in the group? How did you get to know people when you first started?

Participation in the Class

24. Describe what you do in a normal class session.
25. Describe your participation in the class. (What does your participation consist of?) How do you participate? How Often? How long have you been participating?
26. How do you decide how or when to participate?
27. How do you decide what assignments to answer?
28. Describe what you do when you answer one of the assignments.
29. Is there a particular assignment you found very interesting? Can you tell me about it? What happened?
30. What class activity do you feel is the most important for you in learning English. The text chat? Voice chat? The Palace? Assignments? Student Web Pages? Something else?
31. What is important to you about the class?

WTI as Community

32. Does WTI feel like a community to you? Why/Why not?
33. What does the word "community" mean to you?
34. Can you describe what you think is a virtual community?
35. Do you think WTI is a community?
36. How important is being able to put a face or voice to other WTI?
37. Do you think trust among the members is important? Why(not)? Describe how WTI fosters or develops trust among its members.

38. Do you feel that the other members of this class are friends of yours? Why?
39. The first time you joined the WTI class, did anybody do anything in particular that helped you to feel welcome? (If so, what was it?)