

The Process of Language Learning

An EFL Perspective

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The Webheads Community of Language Learners Online

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Abstract

Writing for Webheads is an online language learning community-building project meeting weekly since 1998. At one meeting, EFL students from Turkey and China participated in synchronous text-voice, and video-enhanced chat for their first time, then repeated the meeting online before participants at the annual MLI conference. The Turkish students were surveyed regarding their attitudes toward joining an online community from a distance and showed generally positive attitudes categorized in this study under seven headings. The fact that the co-authors conceived and carried out this study entirely online is further evidence of the scaffolding power of virtual communities of practice.

Introduction

Writing for Webheads is an ongoing 'experiment in world friendship through online language learning' whose participants have been meeting on line each week since 1998. During that time, Webheads have experimented with numerous synchronous and web-based multimedia communications formats, and have presented at several live and online conference venues. Considering that the class is given free by volunteer teachers, its long-standing viability

suggests that participants are getting more out of it than they are putting in.

In the presentation forming the basis for this report, we demonstrated our use of the latest synchronous communications technologies, including live-online video and voice, while showing delegates around the Webheads community. A particular focus was on Turkey, where one of the co-presenters, Dr. Arif Altun, met us online to explain how he has involved his university students with the Webheads project. We were also joined in two of the three sessions studied here by a class of English language learners and educators from China.

At a prior ongoing regular weekly meeting of Writing for Webheads, Arif's class of EFL students was invited to join the group for the first time. Later in the year, his students agreed to re-join the group to participate in the present demonstration given before a live audience at a conference in Abu Dhabi. One week prior to that, a practice session had been held connecting two classes of non-native English speakers from Turkey and China live online in synchronous text-, voice-, and video-enhanced chat. All three events were archived with pictures from the three locations, and with reflections on the experience by the students from Turkey. In analyzing the qualitative data from these events, it was intended to observe how those newcomers felt about joining an online community from a distance.

Rationale for the study

Computer mediated communication (CMC) enables people to communicate with others by means of computers and networks. With recent advancements of Internet

technologies, there are now more opportunities for educators and their students to interact in cyberspace through CMC. These interactions can pave the way to the formation of authentic and communicative online communities which facilitate language learning in cyberspace.

Online communities provide the parties involved in computer-mediated interaction with possibilities to form communities of practice. A community of practice as defined by Eckert & McConnel-Ginet (1992) is "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations - in short, practices - emerge in the course of mutual endeavour" (p. 464). In such endeavors, online communities also attempt to develop a new way of thinking. According to Dede (1999), this process is best described as a new type of "cognitive ecology". Dede goes further to claim that communities of practice not only develop a mutual understanding but also attempt to create communities of mind.

The issues involved with the emergence and development of online communities have been investigated by various researchers from various standpoints (see Rintel and Pittam, 1997 for a detailed literature review). The effectiveness of these emerging communities both as communities of practice and mind, however, is subject to participants' approval and/or rejection.

In a recent study exploring the benefits and limitations of using the Internet for mentoring purposes, Seabrooks, Kenney, & LaMontagne (2000) analyzed teacher trainees' collaboration and interaction in a community of practice.

Based on content analyses and descriptive statistics, the researchers reported that online communication was perceived as a positive experience for teacher trainees to develop their intervention and teaming skills. In addition, the findings supported the idea that task-oriented online communication is a viable process which benefits pre-service teachers.

Another study conducted by Hrabe, Adamy, Milman, Washington, & Howard (1998) investigated how online discourse can serve to create community for education students. By facilitating web-based communication, the researchers reported several important indicators that respondents had a sense of participating in a shared community. They were (a) motivation for participation, which is primarily internal, (b) awareness of social context and perception of others as peer members, and (c) the ability to acknowledge and appreciate multiple perspectives.

The studies and assertions cited above conducted from social interactionist and computer mediated communication perspectives can be interpreted as providing a rationale for establishing and communicating within the continuity of online communities. Yet, the formation of such communities needs to be explored from new participants' perspectives since much depends on the perceptions of new participants toward joining an online community from a distance. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of EFL students of participating in an online community from a distance.

In this paper, we provide an overview of such an online community, called Webheads. We then give a background to the study and provide a description of its participants.

Third, we present findings pertaining to reactions of newcomers to a community of practice based on qualitative analysis of transcript data. Finally, we conclude by discussing how these results might bear on learner perceptions of such online communities.

The Webheads communities

Writing for Webheads (Stevens, 2002a) was inaugurated around 1998 when three online teachers –Vance Stevens, Michael Coghlan, and Margaret Doty– started meeting coincidentally in regular online "3-D" chat class sessions. Students were soon encountered who for their own reasons shared our interest in communicating online, and bonds were formed among participants. Many other students were steered our way by Dave Winet, coordinator of English for Internet (Winet, 1997-1998)

We have always striven to engage members of our group in motivating, communicative, and authentic interaction. Our language learning activities are purely constructivist and encourage the participation of other community members in the zone of proximal development. Over the years a community has formed that meets regularly, supports each other's goals and agendas, and makes and keeps commitments to one another. As an example of its commitment and continuity, the group continues to meet live and online each Sunday noon GMT as it has done since 1998. This community has been described more fully in Stevens (2001a).

The main reason for the group's cohesion is that it utilizes freely available technology to project its human side in as many modalities as the latest developments in CMC will

allow. One of the most basic technologies available is the transfer of digital photographs over the Internet either as email attachments or posted on web pages. Many Webheads have sent us their pictures, but one means by which group members perceive each other as tangibly fellow-human (other digitally transmitted artifacts include voice, video, and text —both chat and essays). The photos are arrayed in a gallery on the group's main page, where they catch the eye of a newcomer who hits on the Writing for Webheads website. There is also a students' page where a complete list of Webheads enrolled in the *efiwebheads* YahooGroup is maintained. Introductions sent by new members to the YahooGroup list are used to create web pages for each member, which can then be accessed through links on the Students' page. Before material is posted to the student web pages, it is corrected for grammar and usage by a native speaker of English, which is one reason we call this group Writing for Webheads.

In addition to encouraging group members to get to know one another and serving as a means for providing feedback on their writing, the Students' page serves to favor group cohesion. Participation in the group is tracked at the Students' page, as the listing is sorted on the most recent interactions of each member with the group. The students at the top of the list are therefore the more active ones (and those at the bottom the lurkers). Tenure in the group is also reflected through display of gif animated 'rainbow stars,' each representing a year of participation in Webheads (there are currently several 3- and 4-star members). This page also displays other information pertaining to each student, such as birthdays and anniversaries of joining the group, and links to web pages of members who have created their own.

Webheads have moved well beyond simply sharing voice and image files via email. The group has for the last couple of years engaged in regular synchronous online text- and avatar-based chat, augmented with voice and video events. As can be seen from our list of most currently used chat clients (Stevens, 2002b), the text-based chat client most favored by Webheads these days is Tapped In (n.d.). Tapped In is easily accessible, has an easily navigable interface, promotes a built-in community, keeps logs, and is well funded by its sponsors SRI International, Sun Microsystems, and National Science Foundation. For multimedia chat, Yahoo Messenger enables us to find each other online and provides multiple user voice- and video web cam-enabled chat as well as instant messaging. For one-on-one voice- and video-enabled chat we have also found it convenient to use Netmeeting, which we generally access through sessions already established in MSN Messenger.

More recently the community has been attracting teaching peers. Many of these have joined the Writing for Webheads group while others have formed their own community, Webheads in Action (Stevens, 2002c). While the focus of the WFW group is more on students, the WIA group is composed entirely of language-teaching peers. This group in particular has evolved into a community of practice, a support group for those interested in learning about and exploring CMC by doing it with each other. The goals of this community are forwarded through the maintenance of a virtual 'zone of proximal development' in which scaffolding continually takes place through synchronous and asynchronous online interaction. Whereas student Webheads tend to join only Writing for Webheads, several teaching professional Webheads are members of both

groups. The co-authors of this report, for example, are both active participants in both groups.

Teaching members of Writing for Webheads have occasionally involved the Webheads communities in their language learning projects. For example, classroom collaboration activities were organized by Arif Altun in Bolu, Turkey, and WFW participant Yaodong Chen in Liuzhou, China. On these occasions, the students in each country spoke and wrote to each other, and photos were taken in both Turkey and China and shared among all participants in the chats. These events have provided data for the study described here.¹

Methodology

This study is an interpretive case study. Case studies are considered to be very powerful when the researcher has no control over the environment and would like to focus on describing and interpreting the research from an exploratory perspective (Yin, 1994). The Webheads community is an open community for participants as there is no moderator to control the interaction between participants. In other words, the participants introduce themselves and join the practice on their own. Accordingly, the research focus for this study is to explore the perceptions of students joining the online community.

Content analysis as a component in case study is another powerful tool for exploring the patterns and themes emerging in the data (Patton, 1990). In order to examine the specific cases, a three-step process of case study, as suggested by Patton (1990) has been employed to analyze the data.

¹ See Appendix for urls of items underlined in this section.

According to the process of constructing case studies, the first step is to assemble the raw case data. In this step, the researchers organize all the available information collected about the participants and setting. In the second (optional) step, the researchers construct a case record. In the final step, a narrative is produced based on the case in question. The narrative can be either chronological or thematic, or both. In the present research, the case study method accommodates the research focus to explore the patterns emerging in students' perceptions on joining an online community from a distance.

Subjects in the study

A college-level EFL class in Turkey was offered an elective computer-assisted language learning course. One of the aims in the course was to give the students practice in joining synchronous text-based chat environments. Since the students had no prior experience with such chat environments, some of them raised the question where to go for practice. Therefore, the class teacher invited them to participate voluntarily in the Webheads community, where language educators meet language learners in a friendly manner in a variety of synchronous text-based chat environments (augmented sometimes by voice and video as well). A total of 12 EFL students, eight girls and four males, showed an interest in joining the Webheads online community from a distance and in participating in the study.

Data collection

Data were generated over the course of three meetings between the Turkish students and the Webheads

community. The first meeting took place May 27, 2001, during one of the regular weekly online, virtual meetings of Writing for Webheads. In order to experience participation in CMC by participating in this regular weekly Webheads session the Turkish students had to make a special trip back to school on their weekend. The next meeting was arranged after Arif had agreed with his class to assist with the demonstration Webheads would give at the Teacher to Teacher conference in Abu Dhabi on November 7th of that year. This second meeting, October 31, was set at the exact time of day of the conference presentation one week later. What went on at these three meetings is summarized briefly below.

First meeting, May 27, 2001

The first encounter of the Turkish students with the Webheads community started with Arif gathering his education students together in his office in Turkey just prior to their first synchronous online session with Webheads. Arif then got in touch with Vance in Abu Dhabi in ICQ (a chat client that allows its users to 'see' when others are online). Having established initial contact we moved to a text chat client allowing multiple users. Two other Webheads teachers, John and Maggi, arrived from Puerto Rico and Germany, respectively, and having found each other online, all went to Tapped In for convenience in keeping logs (Tapped In is a MOO environment for educators that emails transcripts of sessions to members who go there). We were joined there by Ying Lan, a Webheads student from Taiwan. Arif's students were very interested in our method of teaching, and they took turns asking questions from Arif's laptop. We experimented with GroupBoard, a free chat client that allows multiple users to share graphics on the same 'whiteboard', and Arif's students

sent pictures of themselves chatting, which we shared amongst the participants in the chat. Screen shots were made of web cam images during the event and a web page was set up with these images along with those of the students participating in Turkey (Stevens, 2001c).

Second meeting, October 31, 2001

The second meeting was a practice session for the live conference event scheduled one week later at the Teacher to Teacher conference in Abu Dhabi. In this session, Webheads managed to connect two classes half a world away from each other, as Arif's class of computer-assisted language learning students in Bolu, Turkey interacted with Yaodong's English language class in Liuzhou, China. During the session, both sides communicated via synchronous (live) multi-user voice and text chat, augmented with video web cams visible to all participants. Each side took photos depicting student interactants delighted with their first virtual encounters with peers from half a world away, and some of these and other records of the event were posted on the subsequent Webheads web page (Stevens, 2002d).

Third meeting, Nov 7, 2001

The third meeting was at the Webheads' presentation at the MLI's Teacher to Teacher Conference in Abu Dhabi on November 7, 2001. As the on-site demonstration was done in an auditorium at the conference facility in Abu Dhabi using conference computers working on an Internet connection installed only the day before, we had insufficient time to test at the conference venue all the software we had had available to us the week before, and we found during the presentation that some of our tools were not functioning. In particular, we were unable to get Yahoo Messenger working and therefore couldn't connect the two

classes in the multiple user voice and video linkup we had had the week before. Instead we had to resort to Netmeeting which reduced the scope of our interaction to one-to-one presentations, with others in the chat unfortunately unable to either see or hear what was going on between the conference site and the remote participants. However, we were able to get some kind of presentation working under pressure, and as far as our face-to-face audience was concerned, they were at least able to observe us communicating with individuals in the various locations (Bolu, Turkey; and Wuhan and Liuzhou in China).

Under these circumstances, in his presentation to our audience, Arif pointed out that the demonstration had been worthwhile despite technical glitches, which should not cloud the thrust of what we are doing ~ bringing global communities together for peaceful and scholarly purposes online. Arif gave some of his students the microphone and they introduced themselves via Netmeeting to our conference participants, and we also saw some of the Turkish students on Arif's web cam via Netmeeting. When the Chinese had their turn, An-Lian in Wuhan was able to explain eloquently to our audience via Netmeeting the importance of our collaboration from her perspective. A website with pictures of all the participants including shots of the audience in Abu Dhabi was created and placed on the Web (Stevens, 2002e).

Portions of transcripts of these sessions were analyzed, and the students in Turkey were polled for their reactions to joining these sessions from a distance. Patterns in the discourse were discerned, and the qualitative results are presented below.

Findings

The findings of the study yielded insight on many issues in online interactions such as the role of prior expectations, interest raising, and simply having fun on the quality of the experience for its first-time interactants. Furthermore, it was found that the audio-visual capabilities of the interactive communications used by Webheads seemed to draw both the students' and teachers' interest into a desire for further communications. The students' concluding remarks pointed in an encouraging direction: they wanted to try it again.

Examples of patterns emerging from transcripts of the written discourse are presented in the following table:

Category:	Supporting statements:
<i>Raising interest</i>	344 rf [guest] says, "what can we do" 345 Maggi [guest] says, "just talabout things that interest you"
<i>Hometowns</i>	1215 FanL asks, "Hi, Rif. which part of Turkey are you from?" 1226 rif [guest] says, "Bolu, Northern Turkey"
<i>Interpersonal exchanges</i>	1470 YaodongC [to Simple]: "i am here,watching the presentation." 1472 SusanneN says, "But I would rather hear more about Rif's university"
<i>Language skill development</i>	342 rf [guest] says, "we are good at reading and writing but on the other hand we are not good at speakig" 344 rf [guest] says, "what can we do" 346 rf [guest] says, "to improve our

	speaking skills"
<i>Audio-visual excitement</i>	1542 YaodongC [to Rif [guest]]: "we wish to hear u voice" 1546 YaodongC [to Ssfromtr2 [guest]]: "how can u hear him?"
<i>Leave taking</i>	I want to join this kind of communication again. In my opinion, it is useful for us and we are more active
<i>Unmet expectations</i>	if I need to be honest, I was not satisfied wit this conversation because I couldn't (typo here) do anything that I thought or imagined in my mind before.

Raising interest

The Webheads community offers to its members an environment where content is not predetermined; participants control and negotiate at any given moment what to talk about. As the Turkish EFL students entered the community for the first time from a distance one of their initial strategies was to explicitly attempt to acquaint themselves with the other members of the community. In the very early openings, one group of students (sitting around one computer) asked:

344 rf [guest] says, "what can we do"

345 Maggi [guest] says, "just talabout things that interest you"

Topic initiation was not limited to explicit statements. Some students also mentioned in their reflection journals that they had "tried to take attention to them" (*Oncel, Reflection journal*) and that they had wanted to "meet others by speaking English" (*Yurdagul, Reflection journal*). Generally,

students showed an interest in talking about each other's hometowns; about their personal curiosities, and about how they could develop their language skills.

Hometowns

Talking about one's hometown is a very common characteristic of computer mediated communication (Turkle, 1995). The following dialogues show evidence of topic initialization based on talking about hometowns.

285 hi [guest] says, "have you ever been to turkiye"

288 VanceS says, "I've been there a couple of times."

290 VanceS says, "Arif told me I drove through your city."

291 hi [guest] says, "why have you been in turkey"

In another dialogue, participants tended to initiate conversation talking about hometowns:

1174 FanL asks, "who is from Turkey?"

1175 LianA says, "rif"

1176 LianA says, "and rif's students"

1177 ssFromTr [guest] says, "I am from turkey"

1178 LianA says, "ssfromtr, hi how are you"

1179 VanceS says, "I have voices in turkish fillig the hall here"

1182 ssFromTr [guest] says, "I am one of rif's students."

Participants tended to greet each other by asking where and which part of the world they were from. Moreover, such endeavors helped maintain the discourse as in the following dialogue:

1215 FanL asks, "Hi, Rif. which part of Turkey are you from?"

1226 rif [guest] says, "Bolu, Northern Turkey"

1318 trss [guest] says, "hifrom turkey"

1331 VanceS says, "Thanks again. Let's meet again in Turkey."

1400 SusanneN says, "I live in Farum, north of Copenhagen, denmark. In our village we have

1401 many Turkish families"

1494 rif [guest] says, "where do you live in denmark"

1495 SusanneN says, "I live north of Copenhagen in a town called farum"

1497 SusanneN says, "Farum has 17 000 inhabitants, and many immigrants"

1498 ssfromtr2 [guest] says, "hi susanne where u from"

Interpersonal exchanges

Another implied characteristic of joining an online community from a distance was a tendency to engage in interpersonal information sharing. The participants, who of course could not see each other face-to-face, raised several personal questions to better know each other. In the very beginning of a conversation, the following dialogue is observed:

337 rf [guest] says, "who is maggi we wonder her"

338 Maggi [guest] says, "Maggi is the other teacher"

341 Maggi [guest] says, "I'm in Germany"

In another session, a similar conversation happened between the two participants:

1402 SusanneN says, "I have had many friends from Turkey but I never went to Turkey myself."

1404 rif [guest] says, "we are a full class here and can you introduce your self to us"

1469 rif [guest] says, "we wonder if you want to learn about our university" (Tapped In)

1470 YaodongC [to Simple]: "i am here, watching the presentation."

1472 SusanneN says, "But I would rather hear more about Rif's university"

1474 ssfromtr2 [guest] says, "really you're so beautiful."

1475 SusanneN smiles and elaves the talking stick to rif

1478 rif [guest] says, "thanks a lot"

In this conversation, the participants wanted to focus on a single person to initiate an interpersonal information exchange. It should be noted that hometowns and physical location are used to initiate conversation. In addition, pictures which had been posted on the web gave another impetus to maintaining the conversation.

Language skill development

One of the driving forces in joining an online community is the participants' expectations of developing and/or practicing their language skills. Learners of English as a foreign language rarely find a chance to use the language they are learning in communicative environments. Such environments can be especially valuable if they provide the students a chance to practice spoken skills. This is of course possible on the Internet, but in the following example, the students exchanged information in writing on the topic.

342 rf [guest] says, "we are good at reading
and writing but on the other hand we are not
good at

343 speakig"

344 rf [guest] says, "what can we do"

346 rf [guest] says, "to improve our speaking
skills"

347 VanceS says, "I just tried my telcopoint
site, but we have no place where we can all
meet and

348 speak that's private"

349 Maggi [guest] says, "oops...talk to each
other"

350 VanceS says, "You could post messages
on our voice board, though."

351 VanceS says, "There is a public speech
forum, at englishtown.com"

352 Maggi [guest] says, "find tourists to talk
to...there must be other speakers of English
living

353 there"

354 VanceS says, "This is our voice forum"

355 VanceS says,

"<http://www.chariot.net.au/~michaelc/wimba.htm>"

356 rf [guest] says, "we have not opportunity to chat on internet"

357 Maggi [guest] says, "don't be afraid of making mistakes and don't try to be perfect"

358 JohnSte says, "If you can find movies in English, watch them. That will help you improve

359 your listening."

We see that in this case, the conversation was maintained through information exchange on developing language skills. The community welcomed the participants' inquiries and provided information online to help them further explore on their own time.

In addition, suprasegmentals (i.e., accent) also initiated a conversation topic among the participants:

360 Maggi [guest] says, "an accent is very charming"

363 rf [guest] says, "thanks for your suggestions"

364 Maggi [guest] says, "if not talking to each other is next best"

365 VanceS asks, "Try Englishtown. Have you been there?"

366 rf [guest] says, "no we haven't been there"

367 Maggi [guest] says, "try eViews for interviews with people of different accents"

368 Maggi [guest] says, "read out loud"

Audio-visual excitement

Audio-visual components in online communications draw a lot of attention and generate excitement among first-time visitors to online chat rooms. When the community members initiated audio-visual enhanced CMC, the Turkish students showed an increased interest in being able to see and hear what was going on.

- 1368 YaodongC [helpdesk] feels delighted
 Vance will put on webcam now
 1369 LianA [to David]: "good luck"
 1370 YaodongC says, "ok"
 1371 SusanneN says, "By seeing both
 Yaodong's class and rif's om the Webhead
 homepage, I got
 1372 a clear impression you were connected
 :-)"
 1373 FanL says, "i can read words, but no
 sound getting into my ears"
 1374 LianA [happy] feels anxious about tardy
 invitation
 1375 VanceS says, "ok Lian, let's try it."
 1376 rif [guest] says, "but we could not see
 yours"

Since this was their first experience, they seemed very excited and eager to see and hear from a distance.

- 1424 rif [guest] says, "we are very excited since
 it is our first experience"
 1425 SusanneN says, "We need these
 experiments to find the best way to do this."
 1426 YaodongC [to Rif [guest]]: "can we hear

your students.pls?"

1427 rif [guest] says, "we hope so"

Other participants also showed a similar reaction to being able to hear others in the chat. Yaodong, for example, is a participant from China and he is very interested in hearing ssfromtr2 (another student in Turkey). Yet, due to some technical incapability, students at the Turkish end could unfortunately not make their voices heard from the other side at this point during the session.

1435 VanceS says, "the presentation is on now"

1436 VanceS says, "(to Yaodong, who asked)"

1437 YaodongC [to VanceS]: "it is a;pity we cannot hear it."

1438 VanceS says, "Lian's English is very good, Jim is impressed"

1476 YaodongC [to Rif [guest]]: "could u possssssibly invite us so that we can hear u/ur 1477 students?"

1480 ssfromtr2 [guest] says, "hi yaodong weare here"

1487 YaodongC [helpdesk] has disconnected.

1542 YaodongC [to Rif [guest]]: "we wish to hear u voice"

1546 YaodongC [to Ssfromtr2 [guest]]: "how can u hear him?"

However, this breakdown did not cut the conversation short. The participants showed an understanding toward each other's technical problems. They expressed their wishes for the next time.

1557 rif [guest] says, "next time our teacher will arrange it so that you can hear us"

1563 YaodongC [to Rif [guest]]: "how come we never heard yr voice?"

1564 LianA says, "i hear rif's voice this afternoon."

1565 LianA [to YaodongC]: "you can hear his voice later"

On reflection, two of Arif's students summed up their experiences this way:

The important thing was we succeeded to communicate and it was the first time for us. On that time, Anil came near us and said she had a chance to speak to Vance. Therefore, Eda and I decided to try to communicate with him again" (*Sema, personal reflection*)

This experience was useful for us because we talked them in English, so it was useful for our English" (*Emel, personal reflection*)

Leave taking

Concluding a conversation in computer mediated conversation shows quite a wide variety of forms due to the very nature of connections and non-face to face communication (Rintel & Pittam, 1997). However, for the first-time participants in the Webheads online community, this was not the case. There was a unique and single pattern in concluding remarks. Students showed an interest in repeating this event again to meet online. In the following lines, for example, it is the students who mention to meet again:

1528 rif [guest] says, "we want to meet again later if you want"

1539 SusanneN [to Rif [guest]]: "and his students Fine! just tell me when we can meet again?"

In their reflection papers, the students showed a similar pattern of desire to repeat this event later. In her personal paper, Sema wrote: "I want to join this kind of communication again. In my opinion, it is useful for us and we are more active". Instead of feeling as foreigners in the community, they seemed to find something in common to further carry on the conversation. In another entry, Oncel wrote: "What I was impressed most is that I talked to an English speaking person without having difficulties. I really had a joyful time while talking. I would like to do this again". From these examples, we find that the Webheads online community, communicating in English, provided a purposeful environment for EFL students to join in and be part of the community.

Unmet expectations

The Turkish students entered the community with pre-conceived notions. Before each meeting, we asked the students to prepare some questions about the EFL profession so that the community would provide responses. These questions were meant to guide the initial stages of conversation. For example, one of the students starts at the very outset of her joining the group with the following question:

428 rf [guest] says, "what are u thinking about question3"

430 VanceS asks, "What was question 3? Can you remind us?" (*MSN Messenger*)

As the above example shows, the students expected the remote teacher to be focused on the questions they had prepared in advance, but in reality, the remote teacher has his hands full juggling all the remote inputs to the session. The result was that some participant interactions got lost in a flurry of multiple threads which disappeared as the text scrolled off-screen. This is a characteristic of synchronous text-based communications that takes some getting used to (even for the native speakers in the chat). In a reflection paper, one of the students wrote:

We asked some questions but some of them were not answered and the others were answered late. I felt a bit angry ...if I need to be honest, I was not satisfied wit this conversation because I couldn't do anything that I thought or imagined in my mind before. (*Anonymous Student, Reflection*)

It is clear that students carry their expectations to the setting and use them to initiate and continue the conversation. If they do not see their needs met, they feel angry and aimless. However, this was not the case for others who had joined the community earlier. Although they carried expectations with them, they tended to enjoy the sessions for what they were rather than being angry about not achieving all their goals. In an email correspondence, Susanne, a relatively experienced member of the Webheads community, mentions that she is still not sure what to expect, but that it is an enjoyable experience for her to encounter surprises:

"I was happy that you shared the correspondence from last week with rif as I got a better understanding of the situation where I did feel a bit confused - I still never know what to expect, just that I usually enjoy surprises, too." (*Susanne, email correspondence*)

Conclusion

In this study, it was aimed to explore a group of EFL students' perceptions of joining an online community from a distance. The students showed generally positive attitudes in joining the online community from a distance. The main findings were categorized and presented under the headings of: raising interest, hometowns, interpersonal exchanges, language skill development, audio-visual excitement, leave taking, and unmet expectations.

Among these issues, talking about hometowns seems to be the most common way to initiate conversations. Regardless of gender and language origin, participants in the community of practice tend to be curious about where their peers are from. The moderators of such online communities might capitalize on this by requesting that participants introduce their hometowns from the very beginning to promote conversation.

The findings in this study support Seabrooks, Kenney, & LaMontagne (2000), who analyzed teacher trainees' collaboration and interaction in a community of practice. Based on content analyses, online communication was perceived as a positive experience for EFL students to develop their intervention and communication skills, as seen in initiating, maintaining, and leaving conversations.

The present findings, however, contradict Seabrooks et al. in that task-oriented online communication was not a viable process for the students in the present study. Although the EFL students from Turkey joined their first meeting having prepared a set of questions to raise, they couldn't introduce them; rather, they ended up following the flow of conversation, and this caused frustration.

The flow of synchronous online communications can be more along the lines of 'chaos navigation' than in traditional f2f communication (the term 'chaos navigation' was coined by Susanne Nyrop in online conversations with Webheads). This can present unexpected complications for first time participants in communities of practice from a distance. Some of these are documented in Steele's (2002) Ph.D. study of the Webheads community. Steele uses Stevens's (2001b) analogy of e-moderation being not unlike 'herding cats' to characterize the manner in which Webheads seemed to 'organize' (or decline to organize) its interactions through what initially appears as 'chaos navigation' (but which Susanne later redefined, once she'd gained more experience, to be 'intuitive' chaos navigation). In his study, Steele observed a similar pattern when students were asked to prepare questions to be asked in the chat sessions.

The effectiveness of these emerging communities both as community of practice and mind, is subject to participants' approval and/or rejection (Rintel and Pittam, 1997). Students' willingness to participate in the Webheads community indicates that the Webheads community received students' approval as a community of practice. However, the students in this study did not indicate any particular perception of others as peer members. This may

be due to the fact that the sessions were shorter and limited to three meetings, as opposed to those reported by Hrabe, Adamy, Milman, Washington, & Howard (1998). In their study, Hrabe *et al.* found participants in CMC to have a sense of participating in a shared community. In the present study, the EFL students were found to have motivation for participation with awareness of social context.

The Internet provides a media-rich environment for language learners. The Webheads community of practice makes utilizes to the greatest extent possible the textual, audio, and audio-video tools available on the Internet in hopes that these will enhance the experience of its users. However, the Turkish students participating in this community from a distance had relatively limited access to the audio visual equipment. These students had all indicated their willingness to participate in the study, but perhaps their motivation and participation would have been enriched if they had been provided the tools necessary to access all of the CMC tools used in these sessions. As developers of online communities, we should think not only about the possibilities of utilizing such tools to reach our goals and those of our students, but of their availability.

It is with these considerations in mind that the Webheads communities have been reaching out to language learners and teaching practitioners for the past several years. The CMC tools used in Webheads are the latest of those freely available. Free availability is indeed crucial to the Webheads concept. In other words, the communities of practice formed through Webheads have utilized the wide availability of free CMC tools in maintaining the cohesion and collaboration of a broad spectrum of student and teacher participants, who can download and use these tools on the

most common denominator computers available worldwide, and through average-speed (often under 56 kbps) Internet connections. As we saw at the third meeting in this study, there is a trade-off between free availability and reliability, yet the community members managed to pull off the presentation through genuine interest in its success on the part of all concerned. This study is of interest because it has given an insight into the reactions of one group of participants in describing how they coped with their first-encounters with experienced users in a chaotically evolving virtual community of practice.

Finally, although not overtly a focus of this study, the fact that this study was conceived and conducted at all is further evidence of the scaffolding power of virtual communities of practice. None of the participants in this study at any of the remote locations has ever met except online through participation in the various Webheads communities. The study was arranged and conducted entirely through use of the same CMC tools used with the students. These tools proved reasonably robust not only at the three meetings reported here, but particularly in the final stages of collaboration on this paper, as when Arif and Vance met in MSN Messenger, negotiated meaning, revised together, emailed revisions back and forth, and at times FTP'd documents to the master manuscript at the website in order to produce this document.

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Appendix A

Other URL's related to this document

Webheads document their activities in a number of ways. We have logged most of our chats since 1998, and these can be found in our [online Chat Logs](#). Reports such as the present one are linked from the [Webheads Reports page](#) and include a dissertation in 'Webheadery' by Webheads member John Steele (2002). Recent presentations in which Webheads have been involved are catalogued at <http://www.vancestevens.com/papers/>. These urls and others shedding light on this report and the Webheads communities are shown below:

- The Webheads in Action portal:
<http://www.vancestevens.com/papers/evonline2002/webheads.htm>
- The Webheads communities' most currently used chat clients:
<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/software.htm>
- The Writing for Webheads students' page:
<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/students.htm>
- The Writing for Webheads Reports page:
<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/chatlogs.htm>
- The Writing for Webheads online Chat Logs.
<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/chatlogs.htm>
- Transcripts and web cam shots of the first meeting of Webheads with Turkish students, May 27, 2001
<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/chat2001/wfw010527.htm>

- Practice session October 31, 2001, connecting live online in synchronous text, voice, and video-enhanced chat, two classes of non-native English speakers from Turkey and China - archived here with pictures from both locations:
<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/chat2001/wfw011031.htm>
- Transcripts and web cam shots of the conference demonstration Nov. 7, 2001:
<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/chat2001/wfw011107.htm>
- The handout for the demonstration Nov. 7, 2001:
<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/papers/t2t2001/webheads00.htm>
- The HTML version of this paper:
<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/papers/t2t2001/proceeds.htm>
- This paper is formatted as a single printable document here:
<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/papers/t2t2001/justext.htm>