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THE SKILL OF COMMUNICATION:
Technology brought to bear on the art of language learning.

By Vance Stevens, Petroleum Institute, Abu Dhabi

Wed, Jan 21, 16:00-16:45 Cairo time: Plenary address at Ewart Hall

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Abstract: Communication is now possible over the Internet in text, voice, and video, using freely downloadable software and relatively low-end computers. Accordingly, for the first time in history, language teachers almost anywhere are able to expose students to authentic language and even put them directly in touch, asynchronously or live, in real time, with native speakers of a given target language. Teachers today have an historical opportunity to teach language in the context and purpose for which it was invented: to communicate with others, to express one's ideas and feelings, and to understand and interact with the ideas and feelings of other native speakers of a target language. This presentation will touch on not only how technology makes this possible but why this is a desirable outcome. Highlights include: what the benefits are, how technology used in this way can motivate and inspire students to take greater interest in learning languages, and how teachers can use the medium themselves to further their expertise in facilitating environments which heighten enjoyment in teaching and learning languages.

I'm honored to be selected to give a keynote address at this illustrious venue, and I'm pleased that the theme of this conference is on integration of skills in EFL. Often we talk about four skills in language teaching, the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. All of these are of course communication skills, but it is possible in teaching any of these to lose sight of the key role that communication plays in the exercise of language skills. That's why I decided to

give my talk the name that I did, the Skill of Communication. Communication is a value, if not an outright skill, that needs to be integrated in activities we design for the other 4 skills. The urge to communication IS what motivates people to learn languages, both first and second ones. So it follows that if the other skills are taught in a context that promotes communication this should increase the motivation of students to learn the skills. A context that promotes communication must be rich in interactants. Suitable interactants can be hard to find locally in an EFL situation. The Internet can play an important role in helping students to find other speakers of a language to communicate with them. Perhaps more importantly, it can also play an important role in putting teachers in touch with one another to further their professional development. This gives teachers the knowledge and experience to use online tools effectively in helping students practice communication in safe and productive online environments. This the message that I hope you will take from this talk.

It's quite likely that, once they are exposed to easy access to the Internet, your students might gravitate to the chat, or Instant Messenger, programs. Often their teachers view these as a distraction, and indeed they can be. On the other hand, these programs clearly have potential and appeal to people who want to communicate, and therefore, given appropriate direction, chat can have a useful role in language learning. I hope in this talk to give some insights into what these appropriate directions might be, and indeed here and in my presentations over the next few days, to explain how a community of learners that I have been

working with for the past several years has formed on the Internet, and why they have stayed together, some for as long as five years now, since 1998.

The conference theme mentions creativity, and I would like to add another word, **inspiration**. Both these constructs will prompt communication. Creativity wants to be articulated, and inspiration not only leads to creativity, but can also set the stage for its articulation. That is, you can be inspired to create, and afterwards, if there are people around who might appreciate your creation, you can be inspired, or motivated to communicate with that group about your idea.

So inspiration can work on the principle of reciprocity. I think of teachers as musicians in the classroom. I know from experience that it's hard to play an instrument for audiences, but if the audience is appreciative, you play better and enjoy yourself. Accordingly, the more your students respond to your guidance, the more your students learn, and the more you are inspired to guide them.

I said 'guide' rather than 'teach' on purpose just now. I have a quibble with the concept of teaching. Basically, it's my contention that there's **no such thing as a language teacher, only a language learner**. Try envisaging yourself as, not a teacher, but as a learner who has become so adept at learning that you are now qualified to help others to learn.

This fits well with the idea of teacher as musician. A musician is not on stage to 'teach' people in the audience how to play the way he or she does. But a musician might inspire people in the audience to play. The musician can be a

guide for others. Just as many famous musicians acknowledge their debt to musicians of a previous generation, students also speak of their debt to teachers they have had, but the appreciation is not because the teacher got the student to memorize case endings or finally understand when to use 'be' as opposed to 'does'. Just to illustrate the point, here are pictures of Ernest Rutherford and his student, **Nils Bohr**. As Yeats once said, or is said to have said, "**Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire**." Students appreciate teachers not for what they have been taught, but for what they have been inspired to learn.

Incidentally I did a Google search on that quote to try to find its source, and I found it is so often quoted by others that it has so far been impossible for me to find the original using Internet search tools. I also found this expression "quoted" in various ways in hundreds of sources, "**Education is not filling a pail, but lighting a fire**," for example; and not one of hundreds of entries I viewed on the Internet cites the original material. I found that puzzling, and I'm beginning to wonder if Yeats actually wrote, or said that, and if so, where. If you know, please tell me afterwards.

However I did come upon some other interesting quotes about teaching. Socrates apparently said something to the effect that he couldn't teach anyone anything, he could only make them think. One humorous quote takes the counter approach, "**A professor is someone who talks in someone else's sleep**."

So this idea that teaching is something other than talking in other people's sleep is nothing new, but paradoxically, it's an idea that we as educators need to constantly remind ourselves of; that is, to monitor our own use of this term 'teach', in order to be sure that what we consider to be teaching is actually creating environments that allow others to learn, more easily said than done.

Let's hold those two thoughts here: **(1)** the idea of ours being a world inhabited by learners, some of whom are better at it than others, and the idea that **(2)** these super-learners, people who we might think of as 'teachers' are in fact learners who are inspired by other learners to impart what they have learned, and who have been inspired by super learners before them to do what is sometimes called 'teaching'.

This is what social constructivists call '**scaffolding**' – and it works when you put learners together in close proximity to one another, in what is called the **Zone of Proximal Development** or ZPD. So although I have the floor here, I really see myself as a learner in a room full of learners. You might say that we share the same Zone of Proximal Development by virtue of being together at a conference, and that we are in a sense scaffolding each other by virtue of attending each other's presentations. Of course, our Zone of Proximal development exists in a more abstract sense, in that it includes all the people and sets of interactions in our respective networks.

One way of looking at this is … let's say this conference is the tip of an iceberg. The small tip, where we are now, is this conference, and the huge iceberg, the

reason that the tip is now here, in our field of vision, is our **Community of Practice**, which is that set of all the people and interactions 'regarding a particular practice' in our respective networks. So this iceberg coincides with our Zone of Proximal Development, and our scaffolding occurs throughout it and probably with other icebergs as well, or other fields that touch the one we are most concerned with at present, that of Language Learning. *(10 min)*

I mentioned a community of practice just now, and that's a **concept** I've grown familiar with myself only in the last year or two. Perhaps the best known proponent of communities of practice, at least the one making the most money off the term, is **Etienne Wenger**, who has written several books and articles on the subject. Another researcher in the field is **Christopher Johnson**, a member of the Webheads in Action community of practice, who is carrying out research on that group as part of his PhD studies. Chris produced the chart displayed here, and others like it, to describe what communities of practice do and how they operate. Since we're members of the same online community, and he appears online occasionally on web cam, that's where this picture of him came from.

Here you can see that what I have represented *in the metaphor of an iceberg*, Chris presents *as a tree*, and the diagram intends to show how novices and experts meet together in the community to develop the expertise of all concerned through negotiating a mutual understanding of the knowledge domain, and its manifestation in practice. Incidentally an expert in one aspect of the knowledge

domain may be a novice in another, so scaffolding tends to be a give-and-take proposition. As shown on the chart, other social constructivist principles such as reflection, negotiated meaning, facilitation, and trust are all elements in the process.

Communities of practice may be recognized as communities of practice and have names, or they might form spontaneously and have adherents but no recognizable structure. An example of a formally structured community of practice might be a listserv such as TESLCA-L, or a professional organization such as EgypTESOL. Essentially these groups have in common that they are composed of people who band together to learn and work in unison to improve their expertise in their common interest, or practice.

A community of practice might be much more loosely formed, such as a community of language learners. These could be people anywhere in the world who band together as the opportunity arises to further their interest and expertise in the language that they are trying to *master and gain an appreciation for*. These social groupings have more loosely defined boundaries and no set memberships, but when their members encounter each other they might work together spontaneously to help each other to further their common practice.

So these are social groupings that we recognize as having certain boundaries, and because they serve to further the common purpose of their members, we can think of them as communities of practice.

Now, let's say you want to learn a foreign language. How do you go about that? Probably if you have just now decided to learn this language you might go out and buy a book. Or whatever your level of proficiency, you might enroll in a course designed to 'teach' you the language. But already you've run up against what I claim is an oxymoron. There is no such thing as a language teacher. There are only language learners. That's you. If you're lucky, your teacher will understand this and try to steer you in directions that will help you on your way to learning the language. But your teacher can only take you so far on this road, because this road gives only limited access to the surrounding countryside. As a *passenger in your teacher's bus, or car if it's a private class, you are left to try and learn the language essentially by reading billboards at the side of the road. Through the windows of your vehicle you see native speakers of the language passing. How can you engage them? How do you gain access to the countryside? The key to that I think is to make use of your implicit membership in a community of practice.

This is a road that many have been down in many different kinds of vehicles over the centuries. Richard Burton, the famous linguist and traveler (not the actor), learned some 200 languages by hiring speakers of those languages to accompany him whenever he wanted to learn their language. I wonder what he would have done if he'd had access to Internet and instant messengers with free web cam and voice enabled components. Since he lived in a previous century he had to use different means, but it seems he did very well with what he had, which was, I suspect, relatively unlimited time in the company of native speakers.

Nowadays, we don't have that luxury, but in any event, the goal of a successful language learner is the same today as it was in Richard Burton's day; and that is *communication with native speakers* through the other skills of being able speak and write to them, and to be able to understand what they say and write.

Fortunately, computer-based access to the Internet is starting to restore that balance. Let's compare modern-day language learning before, and after, access to native speakers has become possible through the Internet. As someone who has been involved in teaching and learning languages since the mid 1970's, when access to native speakers was only for those who could afford to travel, I can tell you how teaching was done back then

From: http://www.vancestevens.com/papers/tesolarabia2002/outcomes.htm

Era	Milestone	Language teaching	CALL
1970's	How languages were taught before computers	behaviorist: audio lingual, transformations as a way of understanding syntax	copying book exercises into computer, like shooting movies on theater sets
1980's	The move into humanism	cognitive, learner centeredness, communicative competence, community language learning, silent way, TPR ...	humanism in CALL, tools based approaches, culminating in networked computers and evidence of student (and teacher) scaffolding
1990's	Tutor / Tool distinction	communicative approaches	Internet; in my own work: move from text manipulation to projects based curricula
This millennium	Communities of Practice	constructivist approaches	Webheads and other communities online

Essentially this chart bullets how languages were taught before computers, when the methodology was weighted toward behaviorist. Audio lingual was the dominant approach, and teachers taught transformations as a way of understanding syntax. In our early computer work, we copied book exercises into the computer, and Seymour Papert wrote in his book Mindstorms, in the early 80s, that this is like shooting movies on theater sets the way the earliest film makers did, before they learned to exploit what was unique to the medium.

By then there was taking place a move into humanism, more cognitive approaches, and stress on learner centeredness. Communicative competence was the buzz at the time, and Del Hymes was cited in many scholarly papers to be published during this era. Teaching methods such as community language learning, silent way, and total physical response were being echoed in attention to humanism in CALL, tools based approaches, with students starting to work in networked environments, where we began to notice evidence of scaffolding, or teaching one another, and there was evidence of this in teacher staff rooms as well.

About this time, people were making the Tutor / Tool distinction with computers. In the classroom, teachers were using more communicative approaches. The Internet had arrived on the scene. In my own work, I saw a move away from text manipulation, which I often used as a means of getting teachers and students quickly into using computers in CALL contexts they could immediately relate to,

to projects based curricula once language learners and teachers began to understand more clearly what was unique to the medium.

By now wevwe growing increasingly uncomfortable with using the term CALL to describe what we do. That's mainly because of that old era of activities associated with CALL, not that what we do is not computer-assisted language learning. Nowadays, I see a lot of interaction within Communities of Practice, with constructivist approaches permeating learning environments, and in my work, this is manifested in the emergence of Webheads and proliferation of other communities of learners and educators working online.

Here is a quote from an **Interview with Seymour Papert** where he suggests that the concept of teaching, as we currently know it, may one day vanish.

In my first ESL teaching jobs, I was expected to use the audio-lingual method when teaching. The books were written that way. Emphasis was on memorization, and repetition of dialogs had teachers standing over the mimeograph machines seeing who could churn out the wittiest inventions of pseudo-natural language. Creation of inauthentic dialog was favored because dialogs could be constructed heavily weighted toward the linguistic forms being taught. This approach was commensurate with avoidance of authentic and natural speech acts in the materials creation processes. The needs of students to genuinely communicate would have been given short shrift in a classroom where an inexperienced teacher dogmatically applied these methods. The result was that language learning was not necessarily fun or particularly meaningful. I

don' t meanticouldn' t be fun - it was as fun as its practitioners could make it! But practitioners in foreign language contexts simply didn' t have the means at their disposal to bring the language to real life – there was only one live interactant, the teacher - and so in the hands of the most assiduous practitioners of these methods, students were having suppressed in them the instinct to express themselves, and teachers could all too easily 'burn out' and feel that they and their students had been turned into automatons. *(20 min)*

We now know – or suspect at any rate – that all this was unnecessary. **Steven Pinker's** book, The Language Instinct, is one modern, easily accessible book that credits learners with the capacity to figure out the structure of a language through an innate ability to make sense out of jibberish. This suggests, to me at any rate, that natural language should be a part of the learning process of learners from the earliest stages of their learning, not withheld from them and replaced with inauthentic materials created by teachers for the purpose of learning languages.

Authenticity is a key element here: **John Higgins** has defined authentic teaching material as anything not written by a teacher for the purpose of teaching the language. There's that word 'teaching again'. We didn' t want to confuse the learners with realia, on the assumption that learners wouldn't be able to process it. John Higgins was a proponent of having students get at the meaning of texts through **text manipulation** programs of his own design. He and **Tim Johns** were developing the concept of using concordance programs to engage students

in what Johns referred to as Data Driven Learning. This was at a time when the **Cobuild** project was re-writing the dictionary through a text analysis approach to listing the *actual* most commonly used meanings of words first, as opposed to the *previously* perceived but unsubstantiated so-called most common meanings first.

Despite its great impact on our understanding of collocation and isolated successes in pedagogy, it is pretty widely admitted that text analysis and concordancing have never really taken hold in language learning. Although a powerful tool for researchers and the most analytic of learners, the concept has not been widely understood or embraced by teachers, and hence less so by their students.

Getting at real authentic language through analysis and manipulation of texts was the best we could do at the time. We didn't have Internet but we did have increasing access to authentic texts in electronic form. With the emergence of Internet as a tool in language learning, the pile of available texts was exponentially increased, and indeed this is what many language teachers saw as the greatest potential of the Internet in language learning - a rich source of authentic text, and nowadays audio and video as well, and for many, this is still the case. And that's not a bad thing. But there's more to it than that.

But first, why am I dwelling on the past when we should be focused on the future? Consider this -- Although the computer has *changed how we teach and learn* in ways we could hardly have anticipated a few years or even a few months ago, it is important to consider use of technology in the perspective of the

mindset of language teachers from these past decades. Many of these teachers were ourselves, or if you are younger, then they were your teachers, and their methodologies have a good chance of being recycled unless we step back and take a close look at the direction we are headed with respect to the tools we now have available to us. It's important to appreciate and keep in mind what a radical paradigm shift many of us from that era have had to make in order to accommodate computers and use them appropriately and effectively.

At first, computers were seen as modern language labs - a way to increase efficiency by increasing the possibilities for drill and practice, or by emulating what might be called the teacher' s knowledge base and doling that out to the students. But this association has always been spurious. Language labs were designed for little purpose other than to mechanize the audio lingual method. A computer lab on the other hand is full of equipment that students can use and relate to in many aspects of their real lives, and they have now become accepted means of communication themselves. Therefore, the most potentially successful paradigms to employ them in language learning today, I believe, involve using them in such a way that they do an end run around *the teacher and this concept of teaching itself* and put students in touch with other target language speakers in authentically communicative situations.

In order to think that this might work we have to put some faith in the power of the individual to learn, or to essentially teach him or her self. Aside from the book by Pinker I just mentioned, there is much evidence that this is indeed the case.

Papert's work with **LOGO** demonstrated that kids left alone with an interesting and empowering tool can learn to use it to manipulate the world thus revealed. Papert created a toy turtle that kids could program by writing simple mathematical algorithms that, when applied recursively, caused the turtle to trail a marking pen that made diagrams on sheets of paper laid out on the floor. This particular paradigm shift has yielded insights not only for training of young mathematicians and programmers, but has contributed to many features we take for granted in object oriented applications we use on computers every day.

More recently, a similar outcome has been demonstrated in the computer kiosks installed in poor areas of **New Delhi**, where street children learned to use Internet connected computers simply by approaching them through 'holes in the wall' and figuring out what to do. I have a picture here from an article by Mark Warschauer published in Scientific American. Mark mentions many limitations to what the street kids could do with these computers without guidance, but the interesting thing is that they illustrated once again our universally human capacity to figure things out.

Mark Warschauer Scientific American August 2003, pp 42-47, Demystifying the Digital Divide http://www.gse.uci.edu/markw/ddd.pdf

I imagine that no one invented the wheel. Probably people in many separate locales happened independently on the discovery that round objects were better at overcoming inertia than flat ones, and it was probably not a huge leap for people to incorporate that realization in the accomplishment of daily mundane tasks. Cognitive science has formalized this phenomenon under the term

Parallel Distributive Processing. The concept is simple, that if you are given or shown a powerful tool, you will learn to use that tool to manipulate your surroundings.

Meanwhile, speaking of figuring things out to manipulate your surroundings, **Tim Berners-Lee** had by then invented the Internet.   The perennial problem of language learners has always been finding a mother lode of natural, authentic, target language material. In days before the Internet it was not easy to come by such material. Not everyone could travel to countries where foreign languages were spoken, and it was not easy to meet and enter into relationships with the few foreigners that came to one's country. There have always been books and foreign films and newspapers and other media in a target language, but these rarely meet the needs of beginners. What these learners need is something directed more at them, something that will interact with them. Ideally, this 'something' would be another person.

Granted, the Internet had been in existence for some time before people in position to guide language learners were able to make systematic use of it. The enabling software for that was the development of the **browser**, followed by refinement of search techniques that have today opened up a world of information to us in such a way that we can find almost anything online, except perhaps in what original work Yeats may or may not have said 'Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire' - or words to that effect.

The next big breakthrough in technology brought to bear on the skill of communication was the development of the **instant messenger**, especially the ability to see when others were online. The first of these tools was ICQ, which came into popular use in the mid 90's. ICQ also gave users a set of tools for chatting and sharing files and it was not long before a budding community of language learners discovered the potential of *this* new medium of communication.

There was about this time an educator by the name of **Dave Winet** who had himself caught on to the potential of synchronous communication tools from the standpoint of a teacher interested in learning environments fostering communication in a target language. Dave's unique contribution was to bring the two groups, teachers and learners, together via a free website where he recruited students interested in this medium of instruction and matched them, for free, with teachers who also volunteered to teach them, for free. I was one of those teachers.

Now, to make a long story short, I soon discovered the value of setting up my own website, which would serve as a portal for a community of language learners and teachers who didn't know one another, who had never met in person, yet who have remained in existence and interacting with one another since 1998. In fact there are two such communities, one of language learners, and one of language learning practitioners, such as Christopher Johnson, whom you met earlier when we he helped us introduce the concept of Communities of Practice.

The community of language learners is called **Writing for Webheads**, and it is the one that has been going since 1998. This group eventually attracted the interest and participation of so many language learning professionals that we were noticing a suppression of student input, so in 2002 **Webheads in Action** was formed as a sort of experiment to see if the community-building techniques that had worked so well with the student group could be replicated with a group of language learning professionals who would be taught the techniques as they experienced first-hand how the community could form and develop. The experiment worked so well that the group continued beyond the time-frame for the original course and into a second round of courses a year later, where it undertook a study of itself as an example of a distributed Community of Practice. This study culminated in a symposium at the TESOL Convention in Baltimore last year where, because of the world situation at the time, the outbreak of SARS coupled with the start of the Iraq war, only half our panelists were able to travel to be in attendance. So we arranged to have a phone line installed in the room where our panel would meet and we beamed in the missing presenters using voice chat software, and broadcast our session to the world at large while were at it. (40 min)

Although we had to pay convention prices for the phone line in Baltimore, we have often broadcast from conferences, usually for free. The software to do this is freely downloadable, and all you need really is a reliable Internet connection. Last month, we reversed the process and I presented to an audience in Cairo from my home in Abu Dhabi, using voice enabled chat software at the website of

Learning Times http://www.learningtimes.net. To use the software you have to register with the community, but it's a community of educators, and its use is free.

Another online community portal which our Webheads communities use regularly and which I also recommend to educators is **Tapped In**, http://www.tappedin.org. It would be well worth your while to point your browsers to these two web sites, if you are starting to become interested in this topic.

At the moment my focus with these two groups is on the teacher training aspects. I think that in order for these techniques to be used with students, it is necessary first that **you**, their teachers, become comfortable with the medium. Admittedly there is so much that can go wrong with connectivity, with the software, with firewalls, that it is understandable that teachers prefer to stick with what they know when meeting with students. We are working within our community to scaffold one another into a greater understanding of these tools. Our approach is working. Many of our members have engaged their students in gratifying projects which they say they could not have accomplished if not for their work with Webheads in Action.

I could produce dozens of stories of such accomplishments but I'll note just a couple. Here is a PowerPoint slide showing a portal developed by **Aiden Yeh**, who collaborated with Michael Coghlan, another Webheads community member who, to bring us back to one of the themes at the beginning of this talk, is a musician and teacher who writes his own music and puts it online at his web site

for use with his own students in Australia. Aiden had her students in Taiwan listen to one of the songs and then meet with Michael online to discuss it, and then Aiden documented her students' reactions and interactions with Michael on her own web site.

Another success story is that of **Buthaina Alothman** at Kuwait University. Buthaina joined Webheads in Action when it was formed in 2002. She used the community in the way that Chris Johnson describes in his diagram to increase her expertise in online communications tools to the point where she had developed a 'before and after' website where she showed us examples of her web design before and after exposure to Webheads and she said she was, in her words, "much obliged" to the help Webheads had given her in facilitating her professional development. She joined us as a contributor in our online workshop where we examined our own community as an example of a community of practice, in the part where members discussed how what they had learned with Webheads in Action informed their teaching practices.

Late last year Michael Coghlan paid a visit to Abu Dhabi at a time when Webheads were giving a Global Learn Day presentation via voice chat live and online from an auditorium at Petroleum Institute in Abu Dhabi. There were half a dozen people in the auditorium audience and ten times that many in the virtual voice chat audience from all over the world. So Buthaina hopped on a plane from Kuwait and joined Michael and I on stage and, as she said later, saw how things worked from behind the curtains. It's not rocket science, and I'll try to

show more about how it's done in a demonstration I'm giving on Friday, but sometimes it's good to see first-hand how simple it is. Buth's reaction was clearly, "Oh, I can do that myself" and so when it came time for her students in Kuwait to make their end of term presentations, she constructed the activity according to what she had learned. She lined up an **auditorium** with an Internet connection and networked with Webheads to ensure the presence of a virtual audience, and her students presented not intramurally within the confines of their classroom at Kuwait University, but to a world at large.

I ask you to ponder for a moment how motivating, real, and meaningful that experience must have been for her students. Buth has helpfully documented her work online so you can visit her web site and see feedback from her students and others who participated online.

How do students benefit from these activities? One of the first studies of chat in the sort of contexts I'm describing was done by **Jo Mynard**, a colleague in the UAE, as part of her doctoral dissertation. She lists several benefits as given on the slide I am showing. Another article on this topic has been produced by **Dafne Gonzales**, another member of the Webheads in Action community. Both articles list benefits to students compatible with constructivist principles: learner autonomy, negotiation of meaning, immediacy of feedback, and a further benefit of having a record of the chat for enhanced study later. This is possible for both voice and text chats by the way. Dafne also references the work of Joy Egbert,

who couches benefits from use of technology, including synchronous chat, in terms of TESOL and other written standards.

Again, to all too briefly encapsulate six years of development and evolution of this community, here are some things we have learned.

We have learned that it's possible to bring people together to work on a common purpose or practice via the Internet, but the recipe requires several essential ingredients:

- Primarily, inspiration and creativity: **A driving force**: someone who takes on the task of managing the community and maintaining the portal
- As I just mentioned, a **portal**, a means of collecting information on the people involved, introducing them to one another, and tracking their contributions to the community. **Pictures** are essential and voices helpful to community cohesion
- **Free access** to the community and **free tools**, certainly on a grass roots level
- **Ease of use**, can't be too complicated for a common denominator user
- A willingness to be **informal** and have FUN

I am often asked what we do in such an environment. I often answer that it's like Seinfeld. Do know Seinfeld, the American comedy TV show? It's a show about nothing. Because it's informal, we talk. We talk about nothing, and about everything: the weather, local concerns, our lives and surprisingly personal

details (considering we are mostly strangers), and of course, we talk about our practice, language learning.

In the case of Computer Mediated Communication, the practice IS the medium. That is, the goal is to learn about a language if you're a student, or about how to facilitate language learning through CMC tools if you're a teacher, or perhaps both for either group (because not all our teachers are native speakers of English, and a lot of our NNS students who aren't teachers are interested in CMC out of interest or as an aspect of their professions). So a part of our discourse is about using the tools, troubleshooting problems, and finding new tools. Topics are not restricted to tool talk, but as the community grows, the likelihood of gaining insights from the interaction grows too. As with any stimulating endeavor, it's hard to pinpoint what someone is getting from it at a given moment. But one indication that it's beneficial, at least in Webheads, is that people keep coming back to it, week after week, year after year. And it cuts to the core of that over riding reason to learn a language: to communicate. It's constructivist: people talk about what they want to talk about, each person is in control to the extent he or she wants to be, the affective factor is way down, meaning derives from within, scaffolding clearly takes place within the zone of proximal development that encompasses the community of practice.

End of speech as of January 20, 2004, what follows is notes.

This is a working version and nothing should be cited from this text until this notice is removed.

This document has been finalized during my stay in the Nile Hilton in Cairo.

Internet access there is 2 pounds, about 30 US cents, a minute, or $18 an hour.

When I can resume reasonably priced access to the Internet I will complete the

References section to this paper.