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Enhancing Oral Fluency Through Task-Fluency Discussions in Second Life

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Abstract

This qualitative exploratory action research was conducted with A2 university students at Universidad de la Sabana. They are immersed in blended learning practices where autonomy has become the key to succeed in learning processes. The needs analysis carried out in the target A2 population showed that there was a need to improve oral fluency and gain more motivation in virtual learning spaces. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to enhance oral fluency, which is understood as the ability to communicate by dealing with meaning rather than accuracy of language use. Thus, the approach that best responds to this aim is the implementation of Task-Fluency Discussions (Ur, 2012) which are effective tools to practice talking freely while learning from content and putting communicative strategies into action. Additionally, the present study proposes Second Life as a visual friendly virtual environment to foster communicative learning experiences. A process of participants´ self-reflection was followed by using a self-reflective-portfolio to review their progress in their oral performance, the further challenges and a potential action plan to achieve more fluent speaking. Those perceptions were also explored during in-depth group interviews. The teacher-researcher also compiled her own perceptions as individual, researcher and teacher in a reflective journal to supplement qualitative analysis. Findings indicate that Second Life is a tool that may empower oral participation and fluency, enhance autonomy and provide a more appealing virtual learning space. Oral fluency can be increased in several ways. Firstly, by accomplishing task-fluency discussions; secondly by making use of a self-access bank of words and expressions; by self-reflection upon achievements and future goals, all of which, in turn, may lead to new understanding of that being fluent means.

Key words: oral fluency, second life, task-fluency discussions, self-reflective portfolios, autonomy.

Resumen

Esta investigación acción exploratoria fue llevada a cabo con estudiantes universitarios (nivel A2) en la Universidad de La Sabana. Los estudiantes han estado inmersos en la modalidad de aprendizaje híbrido, en donde la `autonomía` se ha vuelto clave para tener éxito en los procesos de aprendizaje. De acuerdo al análisis de las necesidades de esta población, era necesario mejorar la fluidez oral y generar más motivación en los espacios virtuales de aprendizaje. Por lo anterior, el propósito de este estudio es mejorar la fluidez oral, la cual es entendida como la habilidad que tiene un individuo para comunicarse enfocándose en el significado más allá de la perfección en el uso del idioma. De este modo, la estrategia que mejor responde a éste objetivo es la implementación de Tareas de Discusiones de Fluidez (Ur,2012), que son herramientas efectivas para practicar un habla espontánea mientras se aprende del contenido y se ponen estrategias comunicativas en acción. Adicionalmente, el presente estudio propone Second Life como un ambiente virtual y visualmente atractivo para promover experiencias comunicativas de aprendizaje. En este proyecto, los participantes siguieron un proceso de auto-reflexión usando un portafolio para considerar su progreso en la producción oral, futuros retos y un plan de acción potencial para lograr mayor fluidez oral. Dichas percepciones también fueron exploradas durante entrevistas grupales semi-estructuradas. La profesora-investigadora también recapituló sus percepciones como individuo, investigadora y profesora en su diario de reflexión para complementar el análisis cualitativo. Los hallazgos indican que Second Life es una herramienta que puede empoderar participación oral fluida, facilitar el desarrollo de la autonomía, y brindar un espacio de aprendizaje virtual más atractivo. La fluidez oral se puede incrementar con Tareas de Discusiones de Fluidez y haciendo uso de un banco de

palabras y expresiones, auto-reflexión sobre logros y futuras metas y un nuevo entendimiento del concepto de ser un hablante fluido.

Palabras clave: fluidez oral, second life, tareas de discusiones de fluidez, portafolio de auto-reflexión y autonomía.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1   Introduction to the study

The educational system has been challenged, in recent decades, to adapt new technological tools to enhance motivation, promotion and improvement of communicative skills and social interaction. In the Digital Age, digital education is having a progressively stronger impact on the language learning process and practices. Digital learning resources are shaping a range of different issues that are implicit in the teaching-learning process. Web 2.0 and 3.0 offer a set of tools which may help address certain issues including: autonomy, collaboration, critical thinking and enhancement of the communicative skills. These issues enhance the purposes of galvanizing student-centered approach into action. There has been substantial growth in the use and preference of technology for communicative purposes; hence, the need for supplementing face to face learning sessions with online approaches. Technological resources comprise a wide range of tools that foster educative activities, including the virtual world Second Life. Sahin (2007) argued that the advantages of virtual worlds, are the flexibility and creativity to provide learning atmospheres that meet the students´ preferences. In this way, the students´ motivation and engagement may be enhanced by means of providing them with experiential learning opportunities that may be unavailable in traditional learning environments. Communicating behind an avatar may influence the quality of communication. In terms of dealing with anxiety, this experience may lead to less inhibited speakers when misusing the language and social pressure could be left aside. Hence, communicative skills mainly speaking can be nurtured.

Teachers need to constantly seek for new alternatives to intertwine the development of communication skills, the improvement of virtual practices, the empowerment of students´

beliefs and attitudes. The present qualitative action research attempts to examine a possible transition of the student´s perceptions of their oral performance, while attempting to accomplishing tasks within a virtual learning environment.

1.2 Rationale of the study

1.2.1 Needs analysis and problem statement

The experience of facing blended education can be meaningful and successful in terms of having different environments for academic practices. Due to the flexibility in time and space (synchronous or asynchronous modalities) and the inclusion of information and communication technologies, the learning and teaching experiences tend to reach transformational potential. Thus, Prensky (2001) argues that digital natives (or the new generations that are part of the Digital Age) expect immediacy of technology, collaborative learning opportunities, and active learning environments which force faculty and administrators to adopt more effective pedagogies. Therefore, teachers need to discover the strategies to make that autonomous practice more appealing for the students.

The present study aims to propose a different virtual tool to be part of the blended program the participants need to accomplish in an English Program with the purpose of exploring their perceptions regarding oral fluency, while engaged in task-fluency discussions. English Language Teaching (ELT) community has been at the cutting edge of e-learning or blended learning modalities; hence, multiple online courses or tutorials have appeared to

undertake the educative needs attached to the ELT programs. For example, Second Life appeared as an environment that allows the creation of communicative context scenarios where the participants may well be more fluent speakers. The communication tools provided may fulfill verbal and non-verbal communication in real time, which will add the sense of presence and community. These tools can empower interaction thanks to the possibility of participants having access to multiple personifications; text messaging and voice chat; paralinguistic language that can be performed with the avatars; and their recreated places and events. All these features and facilities are suitable to develop task-fluency discussions to enhance better participants` identities as learners. This is the first time in the Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures that an English Language Teaching attempt is carried out to intervene with the implementation of learning experiences in Second Life. This research attempt may be beneficial for La Sabana University since this virtual world provides innovative virtual learning practices, where the students may feel motivated to enhance their communicative practices to improve their oral skills when performing in the English language. Additionally, this experience can be seen as an extensive space to reinforce autonomy virtually; the participants are devoting extra-time in a virtual land to participate in tasks that are not graded.

1.2.2   Justification of problem's significance

According to the Common European Framework for languages (CEF), A2 level students are expected to make themselves understood in short contributions by constructing phrases on familiar topics with sufficient ease to handle short exchanges, despite very noticeable hesitation and false starts. The population for this study (see Page 36) was disadvantaged in their oral performance since they were rather quiet (due to lack of confidence) during the oral tasks

performed in face-to-face sessions, so that little practice made them obtain unsatisfactory results in their testing and oral examinations. The data collected in the in-depth interviews, at the pilot stage, demonstrated that participants were, generally speaking, in the need of enhancing fluency in their oral production in the English language. The participants attributed their passive oral participation during lessons to the fear of speaking in public caused by social pressure; they were afraid of making mistakes with their target language oral performance. In addition, these students thought that they lacked the necessary vocabulary and accurate grammar use in order to speak fluently.

Furthermore, as they followed a blended modality, with 4 hours a week to cover independent study virtually, they shared certain aims for improvement during the piloting. They agreed that they were discouraged from participating actively in the institutional virtual platform since they wanted to have improved visual and interactive features, as well as more interesting topics for tasks to be covered.

1.2.3   Strategy proposed to address problem

The researcher found it appropriate to provide these participants with an alternative virtual environment for them to possibly accomplish task-fluency discussions, and where they could experiment a new type of interaction by means of using new tools to communicate. According to Lewis (2011), technology has an enormous impact on learning which cannot be ignored. He claims that teachers are responsible for encouraging exploratory, autonomous and discovery learning in respond to the student´s need to be self-expressive. This assertion also led the researcher to find alternatives for motivating future changes in the students' performances

and perceptions towards learning. This might be achieved by enhancing fluent oral practices and constant reflection upon learning processes by means of technology use.

Hence, the research question and objectives are focused on exploring the participants` perceptions throughout the accomplishment of task-fluency discussions. It is hoped that reflections towards learning, their experience in the virtual environment, and their oral performance will be the aims of this action research.

1.3   Research question and objective

1.3.1   Research Question

How might fluency-task discussions in Second Life influence A2 university students´ perceptions of their oral fluency as expressed in self-reflective portfolios?

1.3.2   Research Objectives

- To explore the effects of task-fluency discussions on the students´ oral fluency.
- To explore students´ perceptions regarding their oral fluency through the accomplishment of task-fluency discussions.
- To explore students´ perceptions regarding the use of Second Life in their learning process.

- To explore students` self-directive learning strategies they may put into action during the accomplishment of task-fluency discussions.

In the following chapters, the reader will find other related aspects regarding the study: Chapter Two presents the theoretical framework of the project, which includes relevant theories about Fluency, Task Fluency Discussions, Second Life (virtual world) and Self-directed Learning. Chapter three contains a description of the Research Design. Chapter Four displays the Pedagogical Intervention, detailing how the activities were developed and how the data was collected. Chapter Five shows the analysis of the data collected and the study findings. Chapter Six presents the Conclusions, Pedagogical Implications and Further Research. Bibliography and Appendixes are included at the end of the document.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

2.1   Introduction

For the present study, the constructs to be considered are related to the target population`s needs and the strategies the researcher attempted to put into action to be able to answer the research question: *How might fluency-task discussions in Second Life influence A2 university students´ perceptions of their oral fluency as expressed in self-reflective portfolios?*. Therefore, the main constructs are the following: Fluency, Second Life and Self-directed learning. In the same way, Task-fluency discussions are also approached here but this will become significant subsequently for the understanding of the pedagogical intervention.

2.2   Definitions

2.2.1   Fluency

The present study aims to explore oral fluency as a component of communication that results from a constant exposure to discussions given in a virtual world. Given that the purpose of this study is to generate strategies to improve this component, it is necessary to define it from different perspectives.

Fluency is the ability to communicate by making use of language for communication, which deals with meaning rather than accuracy of language use. The concept of fluency, in this study, is flexible in terms of the validity of making mistakes while performing orally, since meaningful attention is given to communicative improvements within a learning process.

According to Hedge (1993, p. 275), fluency may be defined from two perspectives: the competence of the learner and the goals of ELT. Regarding the first perspective, fluency is defined as the ability to produce rapid, flowing, natural speech, but not necessarily grammatically correct speech (ESL Glossary). Thus, teachers cannot wait for students to master all grammar issues to determine they are fluent. In this connection, (Faerch, Haastrup, & Philipson, 1984), as mentioned in Hedge (1993) distinguish three types of fluency, from which the `*articulatory fluency*` applies most appropriately for this study. This refers to the ability to link together speech segments, that is to say that a speaker can communicate insights by making use of vocabulary, elaborated chunks, fillers and even paralinguistic resources to communicate assertively. Furthermore, the participants may be able to communicate fluently by covering a variety of elements further beyond speaking rapidly with a perfect grammar.

Teachers therefore play an important role in equipping students with vocabulary that is helpful for them to become fluent. Simensen (2010, p.2) puts forward two major implications for the teaching of fluency: students should be taught to use short words and acquire an automatic use of sub-skills to store words and sequences of language in long-term memory. These strategies can be complemented by taking into account Widhiatama's (2011, p. 3) suggestion. This author suggests that speaking to different audiences by repeating the same message within controlled time to deliver oral discourse may encourage learners to develop fluency in speaking.

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment* determines that spoken fluency belongs to functional competence which qualifies the use of spoken discourse and conversational competence. It defines fluency as a generic

qualitative factor which is seen as the ability to articulate, to keep going, and to cope when speakers reach a dead end. For A2, the level of the participants of this study, the descriptors are:

A2	*Can make him/herself understood in short contributions, even though pauses, false starts and reformulation are very evident.*
	Can construct phrases on familiar topics with sufficient ease to handle short exchanges, despite very noticeable hesitation and false starts.

The second perspective is connected to the goals of ELT regarding fluency. Brumfit (1984, p. 32) defines fluency as a natural language use. He argues that activities promoted in the classroom to foster fluency are attempts to help learners become competent performers in L2. Additionally, he lists certain criteria to bear in mind when promoting fluency tasks, including: the focus should be on the meaning and not on the form; the content should be determined by the learners; there must be negotiation of meaning between the speakers; improvisation is valid in the process; and teacher intervention should be minimal. In the same line of thought, Harmer (2007, p. 142) claims that when giving feedback during fluency work teacher should respond to the content, and not only to the language form. Constant correction may increase students` anxiety and reluctance to speak; the role of the teacher may turn to be as facilitator instead of controller.

Responding to the last assertions, Urrutia & Vega (2010, p.16), concluded that thanks to the variety of games they implemented to push student to communicate orally, they could gain the necessary confidence to overcome the fear they had to make mistakes, given that they could

experience speaking as a natural process. Additionally, in order to help students become more competent performing orally, the researchers attributed the influence of games as a facilitator to motivate and provide a comfortable and spontaneous attitude from the speakers; which had a positive impact on their use of vocabulary and chunks to share their ideas and feelings.

Similarly, Kessler (2010, p.10) deduced from data that fluency can be enhanced by leading the learners to perform out-of-class self-access activities in an environment of their choice. Implicitly, anxiety may be reduced meaningfully, together with all those barriers that may appear to inhibit learners´ potential to speak fluently. Kessler would argue that giving the chance to his students to record themselves in their MP3 made them have a visible incremental improvement in their speaking abilities; in contrast, having them record their oral productions in the audio laboratory of the institution would reduce confidence while speaking. The results of this study appear to be a complementary alternative to encourage the pedagogical attempt proposed by Brumfit (1984). However, in the case of the present action research, the improvements in oral fluency are expected to be given throughout the promotion of autonomous learning experiences.

All in all, fluency is a skill that needs to be uncovered and fed through meaningful practice which may result in substantial improvements in learners` oral performance and samples of self-confidence as speakers of L2. A fruitful strategy to foster such an attempt is the implementation of task-fluency discussions.

In connection to the present research purposes, it may be meaningful to consider fluency as Hedge (1993) suggests, when a speaker can communicate by dealing with meaning and

natural performance regardless an accurate grammar use. In order to put learning strategies into action, Siemensen (2010) displays a helpful strategy to be adapted in this study, which is to provide learners with a bank of chunks that enable them to speak more confident. Additionally, Brumfit (1984) proposes a valid strategy for the present research attempt, which inspires the researcher to reduce control during the oral practices that may allow students to negotiate topics and improvise during the discussions. Regarding Kessler´s study (2010) providing learners with an out-of-class environment to perform orally may result in a powerful tool that could facilitate fluency.

2.2.2   Task Fluency Discussions

The present research purpose of enhancing oral practice and foster fluency in speaking, might be achieved through discussions, which are suitable tasks that may generate learners` spontaneous speech through which they can uncover beliefs, feelings, preferences, experiences, opinions, among others. Ur (2012, p.3) defines discussions as the most natural and effective way for learners to practice talking freely. The author presents three main aims for discussions: efficient fluency practice, achieving an objective and learning from content. Discussions are a good opportunity to develop certain aspects of fluency since they are spaces for constant improvement. During the delivery of communicative oral tasks, the speakers have the opportunity to put into effect strategies, choices and tools for communicative language to take place.

Learners´ contributions become stronger as topics of interest encourage participation to negotiate ideas or meanings, to set positions, argument ideas or contradict viewpoints. In this case, the accomplishment of objectives may take place by means of the nature of the discussion.

The established objectives for the discussions used for this study encompass the following: encouraging response to emotions, setting personal viewpoints, contradicting, supporting positions, reacting to pragmatic intentions (e.g., humor, irony) and shaping critical insights. To conclude the discussions: there are spaces planned to think over the learning experience and it is in here where learning from content becomes a reality. During the group interviews the learners may expand on their discussion by self-reflecting on their communicative improvements; this, in turn, may be meaningful due to the opportunity to share impressions with the other learners.

Tello (2012, p.95) also found in her study that self-reflection during oral activities promotes a progressive discovery of learning awareness, which allows learners to identify deficiencies in their oral performance as well as to search for mechanisms to overcome difficulties. These learners aimed to create a healthy environment to be able to communicate assertively. Additionally, in Tello´s study, it was concluded that an active participation in the production of a radio show, an oral activity, led learners to develop awareness of others´ thoughts and feelings while becoming better listeners. Thus, learners felt encouraged to communicate with more confidence and autonomously utilized repetition of chunks and recordings of their productions to improve their speech.

Another view regarding discussion is given by Hedge (2011, p. 275), who argues that teachers should be involved in decision making in the design and evaluation of fluency-based activities. Jiménez (2013, p.26) used a set of helpful strategies and resources to enhance fluent speaking in his students. In order to promote collaboration within a self-directed practice of reflection and adjustments in the learning strategies, this teacher implemented: creation of commercials, video-based controversial discussions, recordings of TV news, simulation of phone conversation and eventful memories. The results were satisfactory since learners became

conscious of the importance of their role in the tasks for their individual and collective learning process and grew inspired to speak more every time with less hesitations and initiative.

The previous studies may provide the present research purposes with valuable contributions. Tello´s (2012) findings underline that self-reflection may be an appropriate self-directed learning strategy to help learners uncover their capabilities and challenges, in terms of their oral performance. In addition, this researcher now believes the idea of training learners to repeat chunks to improve their speech; a bank of prefabricated-chunks may be helpful for the learners to enhance fluency. Jiménez (2013) found that the key to consolidate a communicative and friendly atmosphere for students to take meaningful part in oral tasks, consisted of attractive resources and collaboration.

Hence, for the purposes of fulfilling the objectives in the present study, an appropriate setting must be disposed for the accomplishment of the fluency-tasks. Second Life, as a virtual environment with communicative tools, proves to be a convenient tool.

2.2.3   Second Life

Rennie and Morrison (2008, p.7) have defined Second Life (henceforth SL) as a 3-Dimensional multiuser virtual environment, where people can explore, communicate and do business. The users can also generate content that will favor educational projects thanks to the features that can be constructive and very attractive for academic communities; specifically those which support autonomy and motivation in virtual practices.

The educational challenges of SL are connected to the quality of interaction which may not replace face-to-face contact, but which can, nevertheless, be considered more appealing than text-based communication. There is, in addition, a potential enrichment of curricula since SL is a flexible environment to be immersed in real-time activities and the simulation is also capable of nurturing experiential learning that prepares students for real life situations. It offers its users secure intranet spaces with restricted membership for faculties and the access is free; also, it is a collaborative workspace that functions as a tool not as a game, since there is no goal; the goals are, in fact, set according to the user´s needs. According to (Warschauer, M., & Liaw, M., 2011, p.5), the stimuli-rich Second Life environment offers a variety of opportunities for second-language learners to produce language; these experiences then can be shared in a language classroom via presentations and essays.

This is consistent with the findings of Jarmon et al. (2009, p.175), who concluded from their data analysis that Second Life is a facilitator of experiential learning based on experimentation with the positive constituents. These include, Virtual social interaction and collaboration, doing something without the risks and costs of real life, the stimulation of imagination, exploration and creativity and the increased sense of personal presence and tangible experience in this virtual world. This last attribution was supported by their feeling that the sense of embodiments during the accomplishment of project-based experiential learning within a three-dimensional environment, ensure that their social presence became more realistic.

In the same vein, in a case study to test the application of a task design grid (Jauregi, Canto, de Graaff, Koenraad & Moonen, (2011, p.80), underline that the most substantial advantage that a virtual world offers to teach languages has to do with the fact of being able to practice simulations in an environment created for that purpose, rather than picturing situations

in the imagination. The pre-service teachers that participated in the study concluded that everything in SL is more realistic to communicate and to become aware of cultural contrasts and similarities, and these cannot be appreciated or shared by writing down in paper.

Previous findings might be considered for the present research study. Jarmon (2009) suggests that SL may facilitate learners to collaborate and interact meaningfully throughout the reinforcement of their virtual presence while experimenting with the tool. Thus, certain characteristics that facilitate communication in Second Life to bear in mind are: shared experiences, feeling of presence, 3D visual component, immersion, simulation of real world classroom, document sharing and editing and toolkit.

2.2.4   Interaction in ESL Virtual Environment

Palloff & Pratt (2007, p.28) note that when individuals are immersed in virtual environments, they interact with the hardware, the software, the process and each other; bringing in a loop that helps in the construction of an alternate identity that create a sense of privacy which allows them to ignore the rest of the world. This is a good thing since the attention will be focused on the virtual interaction which, however, is evaluated from different perspectives.

According to Moore (1992, p.126), if the interaction between learner and instructor increases, it will lead to a smaller transactional distance and more effective learning. He also claims that the types of interaction are learner–instructor, leading to encourage learners; learner-learner, which is a valuable learning resource; and learner- content interaction, that results in an intellectual exchange that fosters a new perspective of cognitive structures in the learner´s mind. Thus, it is clearer how the elements that constitute learning through oral interaction are intertwined in order to give raise to meaningful second language virtual communication.

The participants of the present study will be led to construct their own virtual identity while interacting in this environment. Therefore, the researcher needs to balance contents, with types of interaction and a promotion of a communicative and collaborative atmosphere among learners, which may result in positive stimuli for their expressive and cognitive spheres.

2.2.5   Communication in Second Life

Communicative tools

According to Pereira (2008, p.4), given that Second Life is Computer Mediated Communication, it offers different tools to address communication among the users. Users can interact through a variety of tools: instant messages directed to one or more people in a group; note cards that can be sent to participants; the possibility to have a private voice chat with another person which no-one else can hear; and the real-time chat for a full group. Regarding the three dimensional nature of Second Life, a teacher can split a larger group into smaller discussion groups and send them to different physical locations on the same island. The voice chat supports the 3D design so that the sound of close avatars is perceived loudly while sounds further away are fainter or not audible at all.

One meaningful aspect to consider is communicating behind an Avatar. Robbins (2007, p.27) affirms that in most virtual worlds the avatars can produce non-verbal cues such as gestures and facial features that give insight into the users´ state of mind approximating the virtual experience of face-to-face interaction. An important strength of SL is the co-presence of the users through the use of avatars. The properties an avatar has are possibilities to show emotions with gestures, displacement by running or walking, real- time chatting and the creation of

identity. Thus, regarding communication, a potential reduction of anxiety to interact or specifically to talk may occur. Fluency and confidence to establish relationships are issues expected from the smooth of interaction. The learners can create their own opportunities for language use since this type of experience gives rise to potential language emergence.

In their research, (Gregory & Masters, 2012, p. 425) promoted role-playing within Second Life to explore the participants´ perceptions regarding the contrast between real life and virtual life. They conclude that as the activity progressed learners grew more accustomed to what, to them, was a new and novel way of interacting and communicating. The authors aver that due to the practice, the participants became slightly more comfortable and more adept at controlling their avatars to perform the tasks at hand. Therefore, they began to see the educational potential of technology.

In addition, as Peterson (2011) argues, the reduction of social context cues including age or status frequently creates a low-stress atmosphere in which learners may take risks and engage in language play. In addition, the supportive atmosphere frequently engendered by interaction in virtual worlds might support the development of collaborative interpersonal relationships based on the exchange of personal information; it contributes to the social cohesion and sense of community. Palloff & Pratt (2007, p. 30) concur with Peterson (2011) by coining the presence in virtual environments as Social Presence. As the authors indicate, this refers to the transition the person suffers when existing and interacting in a virtual space. This condition may reveal certain attitudes from the participants´ personalities to shape interaction in a collaborative way and support communication.

Certain research studies have attempted to explore the effects of social presence within learning environments. They have been held in Europe and Colombia. The AVALON project -

Access to Virtual and Action Learning live Online, as a two year project in 2008 that was part of the Education and Culture DG Lifelong Learning Programme. This project evaluated and selected the most adequate virtual worlds for educative purposes.

Based on the creation of a learning scenario, the AVALON project worked with four groups of students all attending different programmes at different universities: Campus Students from Manchester university attending a course on on-line teaching, Internet students from Mid Sweden University attending a course on Language Proficiency and Academic Presentation.

The greatest challenge in this cross-cultural meeting was to match different interests and goals to find points in common. To do so, the researchers took into account the students´ motivations by way of the preparation and presentation of a group debate during which tasks fed into their individual program. The success of this practice had to do with the previous examination of the students´ motivation bearing in mind the different institutional and cultural orientations. This study exemplifies the importance of the tutor´s role and intervention from the previous stage to put research into effect.

In addition, there was another research study carried out at the University of La Sabana (Chia, Colombia) in the Computing Engineering (INF) and Agro-industrial Production Engineering (IPA) programs. In this latter study, Beltrán, Gutierrez & Garzón, (2011) implemented a methodology that consisted of involving the use of a virtual environment as part of certain subjects. SL was linked as part of the employed methodology in electronic related subjects. Although students considered that conducting a percentage of their classes in a virtual platform facilitated their learning process, the final average grades (which aim to measure the effect of such process) failed to reflect a significant change. However, in terms of motivation and participation, the teacher detected favorable changes that permitted them to have more dynamic

classes, a higher degree of participation and investigation from the students, especially from those who were shy and hardly ever participated in on-site lessons.

Certain teacher´s views about the fact of facing new technology show advantages and disadvantages from the experience held. The advantages are to have more attractive sessions, more interest in participation and research, increasing motivation when working in the comfort of home. On the contrary, the disadvantages are distractions of two types: family and access to all social networking tools, difficulty to work on equations and technical problems with slow connections.

In relation to the present research, the previous affirmations, such as Robins´(2007) lead the researcher to be prepared to appreciate the difference of the learners´ participation and quality of their verbal production when interacting in SL. This population share a feeling of shyness when speaking in the target language and the fact of having several non-verbal cues to interact may reduce their anxiety meaningfully. Implicitly, the potential improvements in the oral communication may contribute in the consolidation of a virtual community, which possibly may shape a more confident learners´ personality; as asserted by Palloff &Pratt (2007).

Regarding findings mentioned from other research studies, from the AVALON project, it is important to note that when participants share motivations and interest it may result easier-to-achieve goals. Basically, the researchers involved in this project let us see the importance of conducting a piloting stage systematically, previous to the implementation. this enables researchers to know in more depth, the participants, resources, limitations and preventive alternatives to succeed with a research attempt. On the other hand, Beltrán, Gutierrez & Garzón (2011), as precursors in research with SL in La Universidad de la Sabana, opened the door for

further studies which attempt to use this virtual world as a dynamic, motivating and communicative tool for teaching-learning experiences.

All in all, the above-mentioned resources are thought to be beneficial for the learning process of the participants, in order to enhance oral fluency and autonomous strategies the participants can put into action with the view to impacting their awareness of their identity as learners. Thus, self-directed learning processes are the approach that leads the participants towards a transition in perceptions to influence their communicative practices.

2.2.6   Self-directed Learning

Zimmerman (2002, p.83) defines self-directed learning as an activity that students do for themselves in a proactive way, rather than as a covert event that happens to them in reaction to teaching. Such a proactive attitude is inspired by the identification of the learning strategies of their preference and their own capabilities to perform. In the same way Gibbons (2011,p.11) argues that self-direction enables students to customize their approach to learning tasks, combines the development of skill with the development of character, and prepares them for learning thorough their lives. In the present study there was constant self-reflection that led participants to discover the advantages of adopting certain strategies and the inclusion of new resources to enhance fluent oral performance. Additionally, they could uncover little by little their capabilities which empowered them to establish further goals to optimize their oral performance.

Bandura (1993, p.121) describes three important sub-processes that take place in the development of self-regulatory learning processes: self-observation, where participants

monitor and follow-up behaviors and outcomes; self-judgment that leads participants to evaluate the effectiveness of their actions and assess whether progress toward their goals has been made; and finally, self-response where students respond and react to the assessment previously made. These three steps were crucial in the development of the present study. The two first sub-processes were inspired by the learning experiences and leading questions to self-reflect. The last sub-process was enriched by students` action plan to nurture language use. In this way, Schunk (2001, p.2) claims that goals have positive effects on motivation, learning, self-efficacy and self-evaluation of progress. Goal setting and self-efficacy believes go hand in hand because they lead learners to execute actions for change. A further discussion of this approach will be made in the pedagogical implementation chapter, following.

Robertson (2010, p.4) referred to the self-directed learning strategies his students put into action in his research study and explained that through self-reflection in learning logs the students set their gown goals based on their evaluation of the learning environment and the gaps in their learning. This was complemented with action plans by predicting outcomes and scheduling strategies. Therefore, a transition towards metacognitive reflection was enhanced with an affective support and guidance from the teacher, staff and peers. The researcher emphasizes the importance of the teacher´s role in the monitoring of students´ affect with respect to their learning, particularly with students who have low self-efficacy in order to guide them in dealing with frustration and failure.

Furthermore, the acts, attitudes, thoughts, feelings will be positively influenced by efficacy beliefs. The sense of efficacy is developed and feeds into a process where the learner acquires cognitive, behavioral and self-regulatory tools to execute appropriate actions. According

to Zimmerman (2000), once the learners have dealt with a phase of reflection, they may begin accomplishing a performance stage of those goals previously considered. Hence, learners, as seen in this study, may include resources and strategies to maximize productions and interactions. This action represents a self-experimentation when assuming new roles, increasing the frequency of participation and daring to try new alternatives to facilitate performance.

Zimmerman (2000) also asserts that as learners self-monitor learning through self-reflection, this gradually shapes a new self-concept. Due to better task-performance outcomes, learners may gain satisfaction out of the achievements and this has a meaningful incidence for their self-esteem. Such transition in beliefs regarding the learner identity brings about implicit benefits. For instance, during oral practices, anxiety may be reduced meaningfully since an optimal self-concept may influence behaviors that progressively change from a threatening to a safe environment. In the middle of a communicative atmosphere, social interaction may be favored by a progressive reduction of low sense of social efficacy, bringing improvement in the social relationships.

In that connection, Bandura (1997) makes reference to the vicarious experiences, which are based on provided social models of similar people who may also succeed by perseverant efforts. Therefore, by taking the interaction between the avatars into account, the quality of participation in the task-fluency discussions may be enhanced by seeing the others performing and having a potential improvement in their communicative skills. This will generate social persuasion which could strengthen the learners` conviction that they have what it takes to succeed. Thus, self-doubts may reduce significantly at the moment to perform tasks that may provoke personal deficiencies. Zheng, Young, Brewer, & Wagner, (2009, p. 218) in their study,

found that the participants increased their willingness to communicate in English and became more comfortable in expressing opinions in English. Additionally, they set realistic goals in order to improve their communication in the target language because they had discovered the importance of learning this language. The opportunity to be in a virtual environment helped learners to both make more friends and to develop their knowledge about the world.

Studies have revealed that teachers may help students regulate their learning. Thus, Bandura (1993) has claimed that self-efficacious teachers believe strongly in their instructional efficacy, support development of students´ intrinsic interests and academic self-directedness. These last contributions may occur when giving students the opportunity to direct their learning in a supportive environment. Robertson (2010) carried out a qualitative study through which he suggested that teachers model the process learners must undergo, as well as to strive for setting up a positive affective learning environment in which students feel supported. In addition, he underlines the importance of monitoring students` affective needs with respect to their learning. This involves monitoring the students' affective side by encouraging students with particularly low self-efficacy, to manage their expectations and helping them to deal with failure and frustration.

Teachers may well attempt more in terms of regulating the promotion of learning (Lai, Shum, & Tian, 2014, p.3) in their study present an alternative procedure which teacher may adopt in order to promote self-directed use of technology for language learning outside the language classroom. They followed Hubbard´s three-part training framework (Hubbard & Romeo, 2012, p.34) to cover pedagogical, strategic and technical issues to enhance a

metacognitive awareness in the participants in order to take active part in language learning within an online training platform. Participants could gain knowledge about operational skills, functioning of applications, concepts and rationales behind various Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) activities. This training was a meaningful strategy to empower students 'understanding about the available resources they had to optimize their language learning practice so that they could be selective when deciding for specific resources by fulfilling their preferences and learning styles. In this study, the importance of Zimmerman´s (2000) three-phase self-regulated learning model was taken into consideration. This training enhanced the forethought, performance and self-reflection phases in which the learner may plan, execute and reflect upon a set of actions to optimize learning.

Those three actions have also been evaluated by Montalvo and Torres (2004, p. 6), who found that a group of strategic learners learnt to plan, control and evaluate the cognitive, motivational or affective, behavioral and contextual processes in learning. These researchers assert that self-regulation is a fusion of skill and will, which actually lead the learners to consider limitations and adjustments to the task objectives and to the context; meanwhile, skills may be improved through the practice. Once again, the teacher´s intervention appears to result in a key element with which to scaffold self-regulatory practices. They also argue that environments should be natural, the tasks should be genuine and contextualized in accordance to the learners´ interests; in their opinion this result may well guide learners to project further applications of the learning experience in their personal, academic and social life.

Similarly, Zea (2013, p.14) was able to motivate his students to put self-directed learning into action. He found that video-making tasks were fruitful experiences where the learners could: collaborate in learning with their peers, self-assess their products and define goals whereas, as teacher, he was a facilitator. Web 2.0 tools were successful to motivate children, enhance participation, facilitate the flow of information and collaborate in the accomplishments of the activities. The researcher´s view contemplates that teachers must take advantage of the early age of learners to shape autonomy to foster life-long learning meaningfully. Hereafter, cognitive and metacognitive skills may appear and be developed, which is a huge advance in favor for the academic future of learners and may be extended to all spheres of life.

2.3   Conclusion

In order to channel the research purpose for the present study, it is important to state that Robertson (2010) found how significant self-reflection was with the participants´ learning logs, as a strategy to foster action plans towards improvement; the Self-Reflective Portfolios may reproduce this successful approach. In the same way, when the learners set goals to enhance their action plan, as asserted by Zheng, Young, Brewer, & Wagner (2009), they can feel moved to speak more often and improve their communication, since they engage with realistic goals that may make them become more aware of the importance of learning the target language as well as the improvement in their cognitive processes. A detailed discussion of the previous theory on Self-directed learning in connection to the present study can be found throughout the discussion in Chapter 5.

Chapter 3: Research Design

3.1   Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed view of the different procedures that occurred during the present study. The topics that this chapter covers are: Information about the context, participants and the researcher´s roles in this study. The definition and details regarding the data collection instruments and procedures, which are: Student´s Self-reflective Portfolio, In-depth Interviews and the Teacher-Researcher´s Reflective Journal. Finally, certain considerations have also been included regarding : Validity, Reliability and Ethics fundamental for this study.

3.2   Type of study

This is a qualitative study that followed a dynamic inquiry whose purpose was to convey the *why* of human behaviors. It thus, aims to show the causality throughout a clear description of the reality and interpretation of *what* was observed to finally achieve the explanation of the facts. According to Burns (1999, p.22), qualitative studies provide researchers with descriptions, interpretations and clarifications of social contexts. This result is appropriate to gain an understanding of what influences language learning, which occurs within a social context. Additionally, qualitative research helps shape perceptions and insights of a particular population with its own issues. Thus, Corbin & Strauss (2008, p.16) affirm that this research approach allows the inner experience of participants to determine how meanings are formed. Researchers of qualitative studies may build concepts, hypothesis, by means of being part of the field and observing to gain intuitive understanding. Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p.6) thus argue that the word *qualitative* implies an emphasis on the qualities and on processes and meanings that are not

experimentally examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency; which is part of quantitative analysis.

Embedded in the qualitative paradigm, Action Research is seen as a strategy which aims to lead to change and progressive transition of realities. In terms of teaching and learning, this research strategy has the potential of empowering the researcher to be more than a thinker: a doer. Kemmis (1995, p.560) found that it is reflection which addresses a purposeful change of reality in order to investigate it; reflection and action lead to modify practices meaningfully. This dynamic uncovers an impetus for transitions that will be consolidated in a small–scale intervention to generate new thoughts that will feed further investigations to make a fruitful impact on problematic issues. Thus, action research may be used to turn problems into positive rather than negative experiences (Wallace, 1998, p. 17).

Shaping perspectives and methodologies contributes to amend students´ difficulties. In this line of thought, Carr and Kemmis (2003, p.220) refer to Action research as a self-reflective enquiry put in to action by participants immersed in social situations with the view to improving the rationality and justice of their own practices and the context in which they are carried out; this attempt functions in accordance to (Burns, 1999) who proposes interpretation of realities as the means to generate purposeful modifications of facts. Everything developed sequentially in a systematic process, which is composed by a set of steps presented by Burns (2010), that may end when the researcher feel the goal has been achieved. The first step is the *planning stage* where the problem is identified and the action plan for a potential change. Secondly, is the *action stage* where the interventions are constantly criticized by the researcher so that new strategies in the teaching can be implemented. Third, the *observation stage* aims to document perceptions that

will be fed in the *reflection* stage where researchers can make sense out of the things they have been exploring. These three stages were fruitfully developed in the present study.

3.3   Context

The context for this project is a virtual academic campus called `parquebot`, located in the virtual world `Second Life`. This is a virtual environment where the users, students from The Universidad de la Sabana, interact under the appearance of avatars. This campus has classrooms and natural spaces where the discussions can take place to add variety to the sessions (Appendix A). There is the option to display multimedia resources that complement written and aural real-time communication. This world offers the option for the avatars to teleport to other animated settings, some are fictitious and others are animations of real cities or towns in the world.

3.3.1   Participants

The learners of this group are classified in A2 level, according to the Common European Framework, and are studying in Level four in the English proficiency program. The proficiency program consists of levels one to seven, Level One being the lowest and Level Seven being the highest. These learners are in the undergraduate programs in the university. They are 3 male and 5 female students aged between 17 and 19 years old. Level 4 syllabus contemplates the practice and improvement of all the communicative skills and addresses the process through the accomplishment of weekly tasks carried out virtually in the virtual platform of the university.

In terms of linguistic needs the students are in the process of developing confidence when using different grammar tenses in the simple, progressive and perfect forms. They are learning to use a new range of vocabulary for communicating in different social situations. The

communicative goals for this level are based on processes of reviewing, comparing and contrasting, giving opinions, analyzing situations and supporting viewpoints. Additionally, they need to develop critical thinking skills in regards to contents as to be able to contradict, support or compliment insights by setting their own position.

In terms of their affective needs these students require to communicate by interacting and sharing goals. They are in the need to be heard and share their insights freely. Similarly they require encouragement to take risks in language learning situations to be able to gain more confidence in their spoken English. As they are immersed in blended learning methodology, they are used to carrying out team work practices. In order to foster fluency in conversations, it is necessary to handle interesting topics of conversation. One salient characteristic from the participants is their need to improve their oral practices since they hardly ever participate in face-to-face sessions and are willing to devote extra-time in an alternative space to be able to interact with more confidence.

3.3.2   Researcher's role

For this project, the researcher´s role consisted of being a creator and promoter of communicative strategies to foster oral practices towards a more fluent performance. In addition, she was a promoter of reflections for the participants to shape perceptions regarding their identity as learners. In terms of raising awareness of the importance of the project, the researcher carried out reflective talks after each session and examined the possible improvements resulting from the oral practices as well as the student´s and teacher´s perceptions of having a different space for virtual language learning experiences.

Corbin & Strauss (2008, p.33) mention certain characteristics that a qualitative researcher should have. The trust in self and the ability to see value in the work that is produced allows the researchers to become a research instrument themselves. The exploration process is fed with creativity, curiosity, imagination and willingness to take risks. Therefore, the researcher is in the process of looking for and applying the necessary skills for reflective observation and interviews.

3.3.3   Ethical considerations

The researcher put into effect the principles mentioned by Burns (1999, p.10) regarding the ethical conduct of action research: responsibility, confidentiality and negotiation. During the collection and analysis of data they were carries out as follows:

Responsibility and Negotiation: The researcher told the participants about the new things they would face in terms of virtual learning experiences, the focus and that those practices would not be graded as part of the course. Those who accepted had a training process through a short video with the main ideas of the project. Subsequently, the participants agreed to allow an hour daily to meet in Second Life and consented to freely participate on it (Appendix D). In addition, they were informed about the constant conversations they were going to have as a conclusion of the sessions to ponder over what they were living in terms of learning. Moreover, they received their self-reflective portfolio presented as a tool to register perceptions and empower their speaking. Furthermore, the director of the Department of Languages and Cultures of the university was notified about this research attempt (Appendix E). In terms of *confidentiality,* the participants` names were protected by using letters and numbers assigned to them at the moment to display data taken from the portfolio and the interviews. Their anonymity was ensured.

3.3.4 Validity and Reliability

During the piloting period the researcher collected suitable data for the problematic situation she identified. The issue to be explored was based on the need the participants had to have an extra-space to gain fluency in their oral production. Thinking about an attractive context, the researcher considered it appropriate to take advantage of the blended modality participants had and turned to explore their preferences in terms of virtual learning environments. Through a survey, the researcher became aware of specific elements which the learners felt were essential for their academic practices. They tended to prefer quality visual features, interesting topics to work on tasks and a high standard of interaction with their classmates. Due to the limitations the institutional platform presented in terms of visual and the interactive features improvements, the proposal of a new virtual environment was designed. In the same way, as the pedagogical implications and aim of improvements were based on the oral performance of the participants, all of the data collection instruments designed aimed at the gathering of data needed. As first data collection instruments, focus groups and the in-depth interviews offered the researcher to plan and implement speaking practices within an appealing virtual environment. Similarly, introspective reflection was being registered in the Teacher`s reflective journal.

Data collected with the instruments led the researcher to consolidate the setting, the topics and the type of oral tasks in order to meet the linguistic needs of this population. According to Nunan and Bailey (2009) the process of triangulation is a quality control strategy that allows the researcher to gain solid insights by taking into account more than one source of data. Thus, triangulation of three instruments, namely, ensured the validity and reliability of the research.

3.4   Data collection instruments

In terms of collecting data for this research project, the selected instruments are: a) Students' Self-reflective Portfolio, b) In- depth interviews and c) Teacher´s Reflective Journal.

3.4.1   Description

3.4.2   Students' Self-reflective Portfolio

Burns (2010, p.92) classified portfolios as instruments belonging to the group of classroom documents. She argues that these instruments are where students evaluate their own progress and diagnose areas for further development. Portfolios are tangible containers of formative learning and can be exploited for a huge benefit; students can foster life-long learning by using them. They may thus have the opportunity to enhance the growth of affective, cognitive, social, metacognitive and expressive skills by means of guided self-reflection.

The portfolio used for the present study registered a formative process of reshaping perceptions in terms of what being a fluent English speaker meant. There was a needs analysis regarding learning strategies and language use before its practice. The organization proposed for these instruments was to include initial short and punctual reflections upon the term `fluency`, several tips to speak fluently, an exercise to uncover myths regarding oral fluency, some insights to empower a new self-judgment as fluent speaker, a format of self-reflection per session covered and a bank of vocabulary with useful expressions for different speech acts (Appendix B). Additionally, there were questions referring to their feelings during the task, identification of drawbacks and a space to set action plans to overcome these difficulties; these questions invited the student to reflect over their improvement in each learning experience. Therefore, the

portfolio was a vehicle to empower and redirect positively the learner`s performance, informed by a transformed self-judgment which was fed by opening spaces of reflection upon achievements and challenges to face.

3.4.3 In- Depth Interviews

This is an introspective method of data collection that allows the researcher gain insights related to the research question: *How might fluency-task discussions in Second Life influence A2 university students´ perceptions of their oral fluency as expressed in self-reflective portfolios?,* which will feed understanding for further analysis stage. Marshall & Rossman (1999) define this type of research as a conversation that helps uncover the participant´s views by handling with respect the way how the participant frames and structure the answers. Hence, the researcher should avoid biasing the outcomes regarding the research purposes but instead appreciate objectively the relevance those insights bring to the study. Personal interaction is crucial in terms of establishing cooperation to generate a good feeling towards this constant practice throughout the research experience.

For the present study, the researcher carried out informal conversation (in-depth interview), right after the discussions, to enquire about the participants` perceptions and feelings regarding their experience in the discussions. In this light, Nunan and Bailey (2009, p.285) explain that the data collected with the purpose of observing and reporting on one´s thoughts, feelings, motives, reasoning processes, and mental states, often determines the ways in which these processes and states shape behavior. Thus, this appeared to be an appropriate procedure for an introspective analysis.

The conversations were recorded with a digital recording of computer screen output that is also known as a video screen capture. This tool stored the recordings with links that could be seen at any time in internet. This complemented the note-taking register the researcher put into effect while interviewing. The process of obtaining suitable data for the focus of this research study is also informed through a self-reflection process conducted in a Teacher- Researcher´s Reflective Journal.

3.4.4   Teacher- Researcher´s Reflective Journal

This introspective instrument belongs to the *immediate retrospection category* – proposed by Nunan and Bailey (2009). This means that the process of observing and analyzing participants´ thoughts takes place right after the event. Burns (2010) defines journals as a tool in Action Research that allows the researcher to record the events and happenings in the locations, the reflections, beliefs and teaching philosophies as well as the ideas and insights about the practice by also including personal histories as teacher-researcher. In this research study the researcher designed the format of the reflective passages in four different sessions: Evidence of fluency, regarding Second Life, regarding discussions and afterthoughts (Appendix C). This division suggested an open space for reflection by covering each area of attention. The reflection was fed by having thought about previously and processed what had occurred and further examined data and drew possible meanings and personal interpretations.

Chapter 4: Pedagogical Intervention and Implementation

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to enhance oral fluency, which is understood as the ability to communicate by making use of language for communication, which deals with meaning. Thus, it was decided the approach which responds most suitable to this aim is the implementation of Task-Fluency Discussions (TFD). TFD are effective tools to practice talking freely while learning from content and putting communicative strategies into action (Ur, 2012, p. 5) For the completion of the discussions, the principles of Goal Setting Approach were taken into consideration to define the level of difficulty of the tasks, the type of goals and the proximity to accomplish them (Schunk, 2001, p. 2). In the same way, task-fluency discussions covered three moments: before, during and after; which were thought to provide autonomy within learning in the participants. Additionally, the present study proposes Second Life as a virtual, visual friendly space to foster learning experiences. This enabled participants to explore communication by interacting through avatars in verbal and non-verbal ways during the discussions.

Therefore, with the intention of implementing this proposal, it was necessary to contemplate certain elements, including: the vision of the language, learning and curriculum; which are part of the routing towards the instructional design.

4.2 Visions of language, learning, and curriculum

4.2.1 Vision of language

To define how language can be perceived in this study, it is valuable to consult a definition. According to the Oxford dictionary.com (2010) the definition of language is

> *¨The method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way… * system of communication used by a particular country or community.. * the phraseology and vocabulary of a particular profession, domain, or group.¨*

Therefore, if language is conceived as a method to communicate which can be familiar to a community and whose structure is a characteristic of a particular domain, it may be seen as a **vehicle for connectivity** in the interaction within Second Life environment. The definition of connectivity in www.businessdictionary.com (2012) appears to be of relevance here:

> *¨ The measure of the extent to which the components of a network are connected to one another, and the ease with which they can converse.¨*

Moreover, according to this definition of connectivity, the connection implies ease of communication.   The language is seen as the bridge to create a community by means of communicating, in this case within a virtual environment. The use of the tools to communicate in SL, as a learning environment during the oral tasks will reflect the importance given to the language as the vehicle to connect the mental and emotional contents of the participants, together with the ways they choose to express themselves through the avatar.

Through language, the participants will also empower their own self-reflection in terms of exploring and expressing insights that uncover improvements, feelings and personal challenges, towards their own learning process, in becoming more fluent. Those insights are shared orally during the accomplishment of the in-depth interviews as well as written in their self-reflective portfolio. Therefore, as Palloff and Pratt (2007, p. 28) claim, the learning community is the vehicle through which learning occurs online.

4.2.2   Vision of learning

According to De India (2008, p.3), Learning is defined as the modification of behavior through practice, training, or experience. The author also mentions certain components that supplement learning; the necessary change for good or bad that should be permanent and that will be reflected in a different behavior resulting from experience or practice. Based on this inspiring definition, the vision of learning in this study is that learning is a *living experience.* This study attempts to give the participants the chance to discover strengths and potential improvements they have in the oral practice with the target language. By implementing task-fluency discussions within an interactive virtual environment, it is expected that learners undertake a change of perception of virtual learning practices as well as the quality of their performance in oral tasks.

4.2.3   Vision of curriculum

According to Nunan (1996, p.134), the context and environment of the learning process might be attached to the pedagogical actions. The information about the learner, language and learning process is necessary when thinking of the implementation of a new teaching strategy. The curriculum provides information regarding what might be achieved in the teaching and learning situation.

What has already been established in the institutional curriculum where this study takes place is, plays a vital role, as there are certain assumed premises in terms of virtual learning, autonomy and assessment. The sessions in SL are planned to foster fruitful virtual learning

experiences, as well as autonomy, when taking part of the project and improvements in self-regulatory strategies through constant feedback and reflection.

The Department of Language and Cultures at The Universidad de la Sabana has determined that the students have weekly online sessions where they have to work individually and collaboratively in the development of target tasks stated in each semester term. In addition, they are expected to participate actively in discussion forums as spaces for continuous reflection, contributions, and learning within a respectful and supportive learning environment. On the other hand, there is a space, in the LMS, for independent work, where the students are expected to use sources to practice their communicative skills. This aim is supported in the accomplishment of this study, since the sessions in Second Life demand students to devote some time to have extra-practice which is not officially assessed; which may mean that autonomy can be fostered. In terms of assessment, it is viewed as a process of encouraging students to become aware of their own language process and needs. As far as the institutional curriculum is concerned, this study attempts to improve the virtual learning practices by fostering students` immersion into a more attractive virtual environment where they could carry out communicative tasks in order to improve their oral skills. Since no grading is involved in the sessions, this implies that the participants can take more responsibility of the learning and for the strategies aimed at overcoming their present difficulties to become fluent speakers. In order to foster significant outcomes in the self-perception of the participants, a constant process of self-reflection in individual and group mode, may allow an understanding of their efforts and strategies to achieve goals, both in the development of the tasks, and in the exercise of the communicative skills. This latter element has been provided through the feedback given during the constant in-depth interviews. According to Guardado & Shi (2007), meaningful feedback should be valid, fit the

students´ background, be understandable, communicate high expectations and reduce emotional barriers. As teacher –researcher, in order to communicate high expectations, it is fundamental to give sincere praise regarding a specific area of development, in this case oral skills. The feedback needs to be frequent and understandable, based on the students´ strengths more than on weaknesses and in order to foster progress in learning, challenging tasks should be provided.

4.3   Instructional design

4.3.1   Lesson planning

The planned goal of accomplishing fluent communication, may be best thought of as Task-Fluency Discussions. According to Ur (2012), these tasks provide an effective way for learners to practice oral skills freely. In the same way, Skehan (1996, p.57), advocates three moments that are given for a task to be executed: pre, during and post. According to this author, previously the task, there is an introduction of the language needed for the task. During the task, the learners are engaged in fulfilling the task and subsequently, the learners take care in refining what has been learnt. These stages were mirrored in the development of each discussion. The three main following objectives were expected for the participants to achieve: the generation of efficient fluency practice, the achievement of an objective and learning from content.

For the first objective, two essential requirements were taken into consideration: the selection of attractive topics to be discussed and different strategies to carry out the discussions. Before the task the participants had to explore a bank of expressions (Figure 1), for speech acts, as well as a bank of vocabulary, that was going to be covered in the session. These resources were part of their reflective portfolio and sometimes they were sent e-mails with the vocabulary

that was expected to be used in the discussions. The intention was to provide the participants with tools to empower their oral performance by taking into account that during the needs analysis they agreed on the fact that due to lack of expressions and vocabulary they felt reluctant to speak.

*Figure 1.* Bank of expressions- pre-task stage.
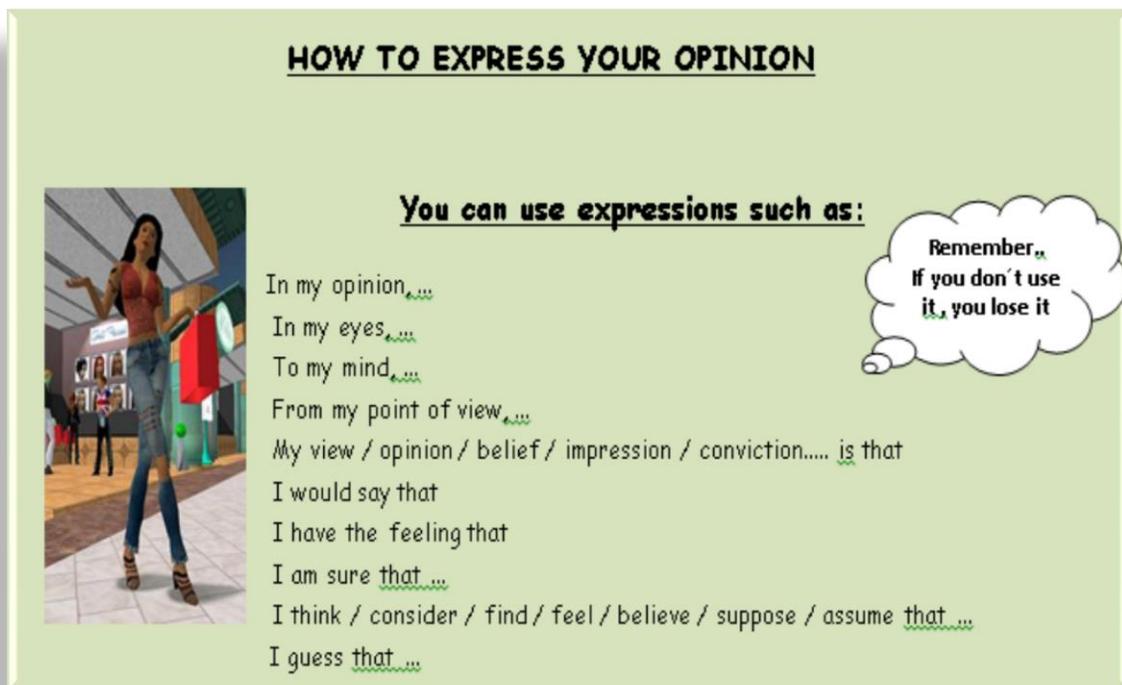
Although the researcher had considered several interesting topics initially, furthermore, with the participants` desire to become moderators, topics were selected and prepared by the participants themselves. Additionally, during the development of the discussion, the participants supported each other by typing words or expressions the speaker in turn did not know. They used the chatting box to cooperate in the execution of the discussions (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Use of chatting box during the discussions.
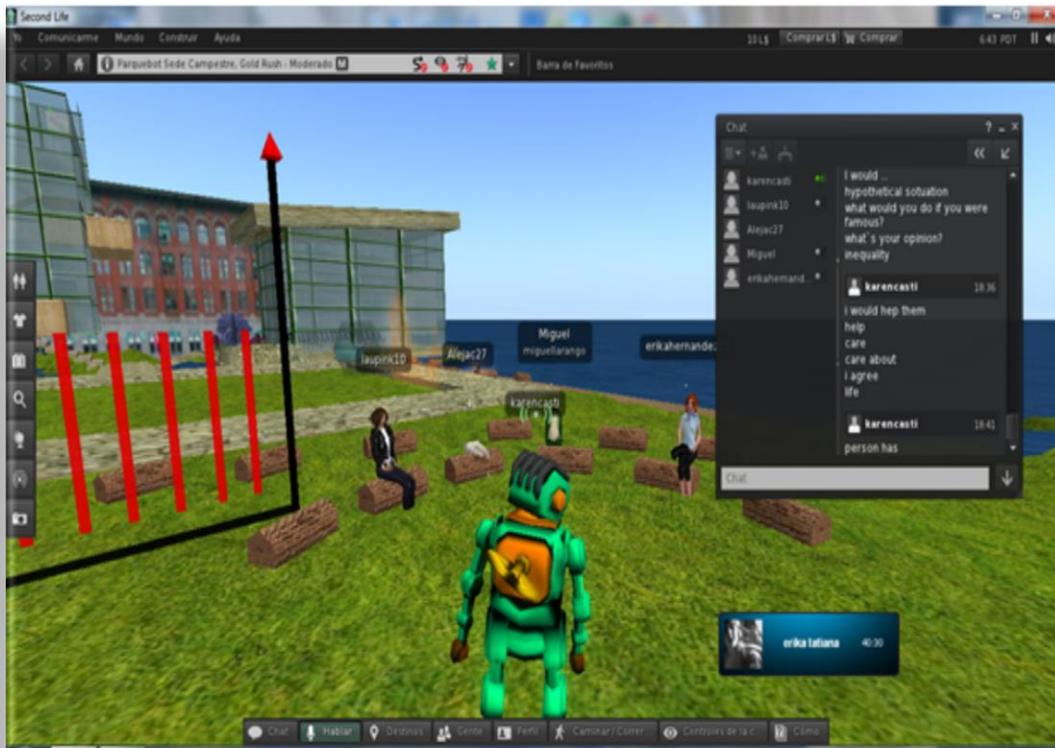
The second objective went hand in hand with the Goal Setting Approach (Schunk, 2001), which guides participants towards the establishment of achievable goals. During the accomplishment of the task, the participants carried out the discussion by covering the particular goals for the discussions as seen in the lesson plan template (Appendix F). Finally, the third objective opened the space for the participants to acquire new knowledge about the target language, communicative skills and themselves as learners and speakers of a second language.

Lesson-planning for the TFD

As seen in (Appendix F), the lesson plan was divided in two sections. The first , displays a communicative title to name the task and the main principles of Goal Setting Approach (Schunk, 2001). The specific goals specified the necessary strategies to achieve the main goal. Thus, cognitive, conversational and expressive skills were taken into consideration to lead students to have a fluent discussion. The proximity to accomplish the goals was measured with an estimated time; the difficulty presented the steps to follow in order to succeed in the task. The second section displays the description of the task with a chart of suggested language to be used during the discussion.

Before the task, in the majority of cases, the students were sent an e-mail to be informed about the task and the language they were expected to use. This was a strategy to help them empower their speech with the chance of preparing their opinion and the section of the portfolio they could use during the discussion. Bearing in mind that starting a conversation was the hardest part for them, it was helpful for the students to have ideas and chunks before the interaction. The most successful issue was that spontaneous exchange of ideas and questions was given as they were getting involved in the discussion. The first section of the lesson plan was analyzed during the in-depth interviews, right after the discussions.

After each discussion the participants filled out a self-reflective format out, which was also part of their self-reflective portfolio (Appendix G). There, they had to reflect upon the achievements in terms of fluency and oral performance in general. The issues the students reflected over were the goals that had been set for the discussion. Additionally, they had to

identify things that deserved further improvements in improved delivery of discussions. Similarly, they listed new expressions or words they had learnt during the session. Regarding the communication in Second Life, they needed to reflect upon their feeling by communicating behind an avatar, to finally provide a general insight of their personal feeling in the given discussion.

4.3.2 Implementation

Twenty sessions, one hour each, were conducted for the present study. They took place in the headquarters of the academic campus `Parquebot` in Second Life. In this campus there are visually attractive spaces conditioned for communicative activities which offered the possibility to display videos or audios in order to feed discussions with extra-information. Alternatively, the participants could teleported to a zoo and a disco to set the context according to the topics discussed: musical preferences and animals` characteristics and rights. The discussions were planned to be carried out in one hour and additional 10 minutes for the in-depth interviews, which were led mainly in English language. However, many sessions took more than the expected time due to the participants` interest to continue speaking and expanding on their ideas. A number of the discussions were changed since the students proposed other topics ; particularly on Fridays, they agreed to assign ¨homework¨ among them as preparation (watching news, a film, reading book reviews or listening to a song).

The Task-Fluency Discussions covered different topics and goals as shown in the following table:

Table 1.
Task-Fluency Discussions

SESSION	TASK	GOAL
1	Getting to know each other	To share information about likes, dislikes, personality and learning goals
2	Turning the other cheek	To discuss controversial situations where forgiveness can be contemplated
3	Sharing ideas, feelings or believes	To share or contradict perceptions about some famous quotes
4	Telling Lies	To discuss about motivations to tell lies in certain situations
5	Instant Comments	To discuss instant comments given spontaneously about given topics
6	In favor and against	To discuss positions in favor or against about socio-cultural issues
7	Sharing Opinions	To discuss controversial statements regarding life issues
8	From my avatar's perspective…	To discuss given statements by assuming a perspective according to the characterization of the avatar
9	Tea Time	To discuss beliefs about fashion and celebrities
10	Thinking and Contradicting	To discuss about some social believes that influence people's lives
11	Silly Laws	To discuss about silly regulations around the world
12	Discussion Panel	To defend a given position to be in favor or against some controversial premises
13	The secret of my success	To discuss and rank strategies to be successful
14	Thought provoking statements	To complete introductory statements about thought provoking topics and discuss the proposals
15	Let's go to the Disco!	To visit an American disco and discuss about music preferences and feelings about party time.
16	Future Shock	To discuss about future changes due to medical science advances
17	How tolerant are you?	To discuss about feelings towards certain type of people and actions
18	I think that…	To discuss about controversial topics by taking a position of agreement or disagreement
19	Something about me…	To discuss about a movie, a literature piece, a song and news proposed by the participants
20	Let's go to the zoo!	To visit an American zoo and discuss about animals' features and rights as well as the purposes of the zoos and circus around the world

Chapter 5: Results and Data Analysis

5.1   Introduction

In this chapter an account of the data management and the procedures of data analysis is presented. The principle that inspires the data analysis stage is what Corbin and Strauss (2008, p.32) define as sensitivity, which refers to the researcher`s capability to present the view of the participants through immersion in data. This principle allows the researcher to develop insights concerning the participants` position and perspectives. At the same time, it enables researchers to respond intellectually in order to arrive at concepts that are grounded in data. In connection to this idea, a researcher who aims to understand a phenomenon under investigation, needs to inductively analyze salient themes or categories emerging from data as such, in order to avoid imposing theories coming from literature or previous experiences. This last notion is discussed by Corbin and Strauss (1990) and coined under the name Grounded Theory. The understanding of the salient concepts and theory is consolidated as the analysis of data progresses.

5.1.1   Sources of Data

Three introspective instruments were used in the collection of data for this research study: Students` self-reflective portfolio, Teacher`s reflective journal and In-depth interviews. The unit of analysis was the participants` perceptions, which means that the findings were directly connected to what they communicated; content related to their perception of oral fluency.

5.2   Data management procedures

After the accomplishment of the discussions, the semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out in order to explore participants` opinions about their role in the discussions, their perceptions about their oral fluency and their insights about the use of Second Life as a tool for communication. Tentative questions were prepared beforehand and others were added along the conversation. Note-taking was a useful procedure to collect the answers provided by the participants. In the same way, the use of a screen-cast helped to capture the participants` speeches with more detail.

Subsequently, in my identity as a teacher-researcher I reflected upon the observed during the discussions as well as the afterthoughts shared in the in-depth interview. I used the reflective journal by contemplating evidences of fluency, the effect of communicating through Second Life, the role of the participants during the discussions and additional insights related to the particular session to be linked with the general research attempt.

Moreover, the participants were required to self-reflect by filling a format out which was filled in their portfolios. Their reflections were focused on their feelings during the delivery of the discussion, their perception about the tool (SL), the achievements in learning and oral performance they identified and a possible action plan they set as a personal goal to continue improving.

5.2.1   Validation

The validation of data was determined by triangulation as a strategy that, according to Ritchie and Lewis (2003, p. 270), involves the use of sources to check the integrity of inferences

drawn from the data and the investigation of the convergence of both the data and the conclusions derived from them. Thus, the construction of the salient theory in this project is supported by the findings coming from the three data collection instruments mentioned previously.

From those three sources with preliminary outcomes, an initial analysis stage was carried out. To work with qualitative data, a researcher must be in a constant interactive process of reading, thinking, rereading, posing questions, searching through the records, and trying to find patterns (Nunan & Baley, 2009, p. 339). These same authors propose two alternatives to find patterns in data: looking for repeated themes or key words and looking for parallel or connected comments. As a result of the wide amount of data obtained, the researcher transcribed all the participants` responses into a Microsoft Word Office (MSWord[TM]) document (Appendix H) in order to have easy access to the information. The participants were named with a letter to respect anonymity and each piece of data was reference systematically by adding the number of the session, the line in the interview or the page of the journal and portfolios.

Basically, those strategies were taken into consideration for a provisional identification of categories. This was complemented by considering the techniques that Corbin and Strauss (2008) display as part of the Coding Process, which is understood as the process to dig into data in order to explore the participant's perceptions.

5.2.1   Data analysis methodology

5.2.2   Data Reduction

Once the Data Management process was carried out, it was necessary to implement coding as a more systematic process rather than just noting concepts or having field notes. In order to tackle the subject of study, it was necessary to follow the principles of Grounded Theory, which according to Corbin and Strauss (2008), leads the researcher to engage in a continuous process of data collection, analysis and emergency of questions. This process will go on until he is satisfied that sufficient data has been acquired in order to identify properties and dimensions that finally take him to generate a coherent explanatory story. Such a story is the result of placing small units together that can be identified by putting three kinds of coding processes into action: open, axial and selective coding.

5.2.3   Open Coding

With the purpose of exploring the participants` perceptions in terms of oral fluency, the data was collected from the three instruments and displayed within a chart, and was then classified in areas and the researcher used paper stickers that were used in the printed transcription of the instruments. (Appendixes I, J and K). In this analysis phase, the researcher selected the most frequent excerpts of data that aimed to respond the research question:

How might task-fluency discussions in SL influence university students` perceptions of their oral fluency through self-reflective portfolios?

According to Borgatti (n.d.), open coding is the part of the analysis concerned with identifying, naming, categorizing and describing phenomena found in the text. Therefore, data guided the research to determine two crucial stages for this project: preliminary stage and transition stage.

The following figure shows the conceptual names that emerged from those two stages:

Figure 3. Two stages emerged after the Open Coding.
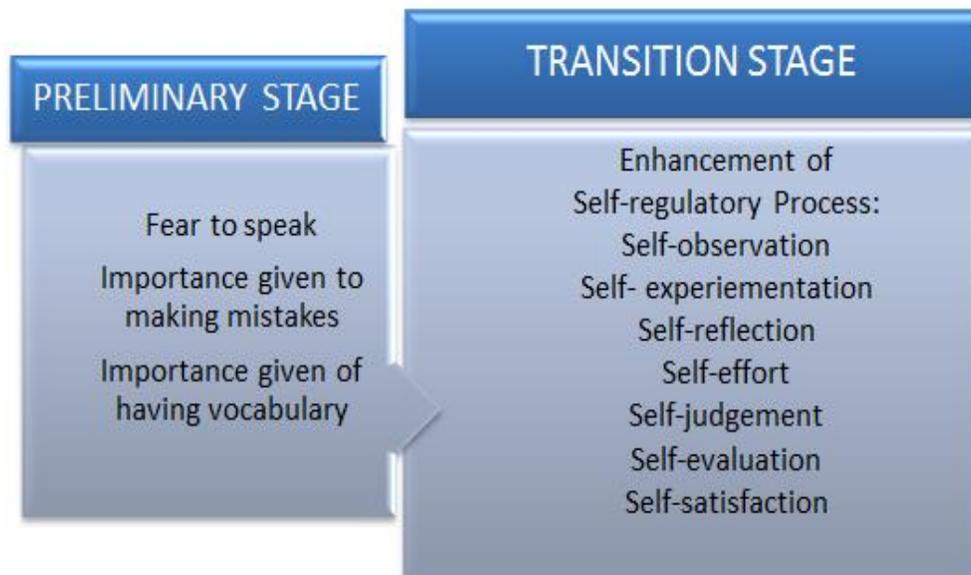
The researcher determined that the preliminary stage nurtured the needs analysis this population presented at the beginning of the project as well as the necessary actions to be taken during the pedagogical intervention. Furthermore, she decided to focus on the transition stage to analyze a change the participants suffered regarding their perceptions and performance in the

oral communication. The following table displays the main categories and subcategories that emerged from this open coding stage:

Table 2

Categories and Subcategories emerging in the Open Coding Stage

Research Question	Categories	Subcategories
How might task-fluency discussions in SL influence university students` perceptions of their oral fluency through self-reflective portfolios?	**AWARENESS RAISING OF LEARNING STRATEGIES**	• Importance of the portfolio • Initiative to become moderators in discussions • Initiative to use non-verbal language • Initiative to start discussions • Initiative to propose topics of interest • Second Life as a tool to disinhibit when speaking • Second Life as a tool to risk to speak • Second Life as a world to foster communication
	INFORMED SELF-EFFORT TO SPEAK FLUENTLY	• New Self-judgment as learners • Self- evaluation of progress • Value of inclusion of chunks • New strategies to speak more • Importance of speaking naturally • Given value to discussions • Initiative to persuade others • Proactive learning to speak better
	ENHANCED SELF-PERCEPTION OF BEING A FLUENT ENGLISH LANGUAGE SPEAKER	• Making mistakes as a human component • Fluent speakers commit mistakes • Fluency as a matter of personality • Fluency as a matter of attitude • Fluency as a process • Fluency does not mean perfection • Fluency as a matter of spontaneity • Self-reflection upon achievements

5.2.4 Axial Coding

The next phase in coding process is defined by Borgatti (n.d.) as the process of relating categories and properties to each other, and fitting things into a basic frame of generic

relationships. The objective now is to consolidate information by linking properties of the categories and subcategories emerged in the open coding in order to reduce data. Therefore, a process of comparisons, classifications and finding connections was followed to finally come up with well-defined categories and subcategories. Corbin and Strauss (2008) explain state that axial coding consist of putting together a series of inter-linking blocks to build a pyramid that represents the general structure. The information is disposed in a new matrix, as Ritchie and Lewis (2003, p. 220) argue, it is useful to display main themes into columns to denote a separate subtopic so data can be synthesized within the appropriate thematic framework. Therefore, the new categories and subcategories that aim to depict the participants` perceptions regarding their oral fluency while taking part of discussions in Second Life are as shown in the following table:

Table 3

Categories and Subcategories emerging in the Axial Coding Stage

| Research Question	Categories	Subcategories
How might task-fluency discussions in SL influence university students` perceptions of their oral fluency through self-reflective portfolios?	AWARENESS RAISING OF LEARNING STRATEGIES	• Self-experimentation with Learning Strategies • Second Life as a tool to empower Oral fluency
	INFORMED SELF-EFFORT TO SPEAK FLUENTLY	• Improvement of Oral Fluency • New Self-judgment
	ENHANCED SELF-PERCEPTION OF BEING A FLUENT ENGLISH LANGUAGE SPEAKER	• New perceptions regarding Fluency • Flexibility regarding making mistakes • Self-satisfaction

Once the comparison of properties of the subcategories was carried out, in order to avoid overlapping, the researcher grouped the information into a more explicit conceptual mode. As a result, three main categories were obtained:

1. Awareness rising of learning strategies.

2. Informed self-effort to speak fluently.

3. Enhanced self-perception of being a fluent English language speaker.

5.2.5   Selective Coding

This final coding phase permitted the researcher to consolidate an umbrella concept or core category that, according to Corbin and Strauss (2008), represents the main theme or phenomenon of the research that displays the emphasis the researchers set as a result of their own constant analysis. In the same line of thoughts, Borgatti (n.d.) defines selective coding as the process of choosing one category to be the core category, and relating all other categories to that category. This means that the resulting theory is a process of construction within a constant dynamic of analyzing equivalent connections among the properties of categories, to finally embody everything into a storyline. The following is an illustration of the core category obtained in this stage:

Figure 4. Core category emerged from Selective Coding.
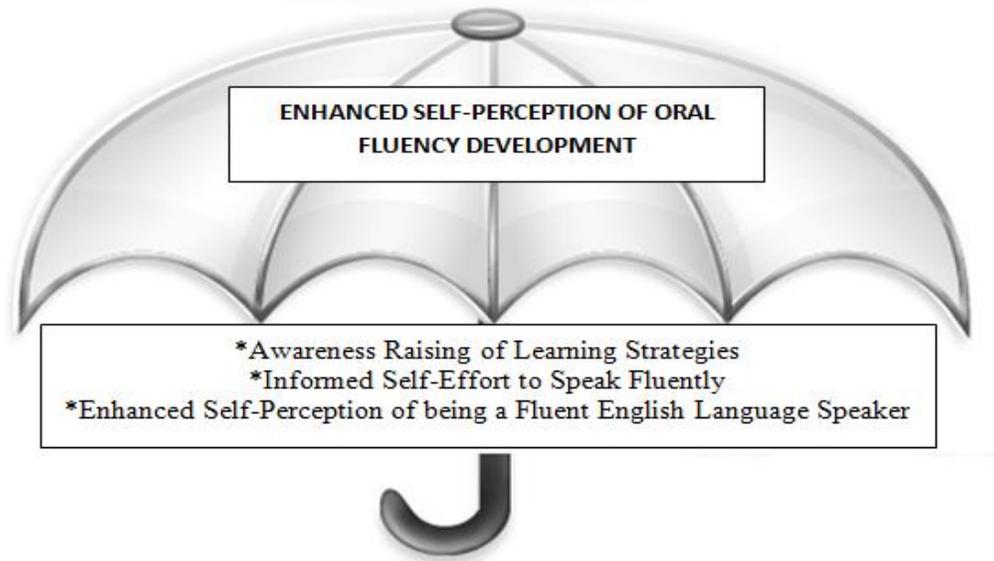
5.3   Core Category

This category represents a process of transition of the participants` perceptions regarding oral fluency. The enhancement of self-perception of oral fluency was progressively occurring due to a constant exposure to actions that were transforming judgments and learning experiences in terms of a more fluent spoken performance. Firstly, the participants reflected upon the usefulness of new learning strategies incorporated during the discussions that empowered their oral fluency. Self-reflection and self-experimentation fed the process of learning to learn. Secondly, during the process of shaping new perceptions of learning to become more fluent, the participants were shaping new perceptions to take new actions to favor their oral fluency. Hence, their self-efforts resulted in visible improvements in their oral fluency in terms of the resources they used to communicate; this mainly responds to the understanding of fluency, which the

present study advocates. Thirdly, to determine the influence of discussions in Second Life that were carried out over the participants` perceptions about oral fluency, it was pertinent to group all the accounts from data that showed an enhancement of self-perception regarding being a fluent speaker of the English language. Based on the data, and the visible transitions in the oral fluency, the participants had, even in face to face sessions, there were new perceptions of fluency in the oral performance that lead the participants to be more tolerant towards mistakes when speaking, and uncover their progress by adding self-satisfaction in connection to oral fluency development. All in all, this core category is resulting from a process of self-directed learning outcomes.

5.4   Categories

5.4.1.1   Category mapping

The emerging categories that enlighten the responses to the research question, which is central to the present study, will be fully explained in the forthcoming section of this chapter. The researcher believes that they emerged as a sequence in this way:

Figure 5. Sequential emergence of categories

5.4.2   Analysis of categories

5.4.2.1.1   Category 1: Awareness Raising of Learning Strategies

For the participants to raise awareness of those strategies that suited their learning preferences and allowed them to become more fluent, they had the initiative to incorporate new actions in their learning. Zimmerman (2002) defines self-regulated learning as an activity that students do for themselves in a proactive way rather than as a covert event that happens to them in reaction to teaching. This was apparent when the students had the initiative to use resources the avatar offers to improve communication. In this connection, the researcher noticed as she wrote in her journal:

> They turned to use fillers, with their avatars, gestures and non-verbal sounds to support communication. Without being told they started to laugh, to wave, to levitate, to dance. They seem not to care about lack of vocabulary, whenever they ignored a word; they asked me and continued speaking. (T.J. Pg. 5. Line 3)

Such a proactive attitude to react in front of learning opportunities must be nurtured by self-reflecting upon strategies to learn more, as stated by this participant in his portfolio:

> The best action plan to improve the difficulties is to try every day to get better on something or learn any different so either little or very small but the important thing is to have the intention of doing. (Ss. P. N. 1. Pg.7.)

This sample shows how this student perceived that there was a process of improvement, where the most important was a constant will to learn.

5.4.2.1.2   Subcategory 1: Self-experimentation with Learning Strategies

Therefore, self-experimentation arises as a strategy to integrate alternatives and tools to maximize learning. Zimmerman (2002) includes this issue into the performance phase which follows the self-reflection process. Students claimed that it was a useful strategy to use more resources to improve their participation in the discussions. The dictionary and extra- devices helped them to access new vocabulary. In their oral performance, they found it helpful to interrupt others to become more involved in the discussions; overcoming the fear to make mistakes and looking for different the ways to communicate their insights were also new alternatives they found fruitful. These participants shared their own strategies to succeed in the discussions:

> `I feel pretty good, I try to be on time, I have my pc, tablet and desk computer. I have trust, I have the feeling...` (Participant M- Interview - Session 6)
>
> Don`t be ashamed to speak is a very good idea because that is a barrier to learning. Learn from my mistakes, believe in yourself, continue to insist that people understand me to follow my process, insist to continue learning (Ss. P. N. 3. Pg.2.)

As the discussions were tasks, which were the pedagogical approach for the intervention, Zimmerman (2002) also listed `task strategies` as methods during the performance phase processes. The delivery of the discussions allowed the students to expand their vocabulary while using the portfolio to access pre-fabricated chunks to support their speech acts; they said to have acquired different expressions from those which they used. Additionally, as they could speak freely, they said they felt more comfortable to establish communication among each other. Moreover, several strategies to become more fluent speakers were proposed by the participants, a selection of these is described below:

> The portfolio was like a bible, what I said was taken from the portfolio. It helped me a lot, even for the written part. To talk about a social issue I used the expressions from the portfolio to give opinions.`. `. (Participant M- Interview - Session 14).
>
> `I think it was interesting, we asked questions to each other and you did not intervene so we could get to know the others better. Also, we spoke about topics we liked and shared like pieces of our world.`.(Participant L- Interview - Session 10).

These participants self-reflected upon useful strategies to communicate better in the discussions and to disagree, included new expressions, supported opinions by using the portfolio, and shared preferences with others. They could see that they were empowered to speak more fluently, based on the positive results they gained from having included those specific tactics. Furthermore, they would be eager to continue applying these useful strategies based on their satisfaction after the practice. This may be the preparation for further discussions and corresponds to what Harvey and Chickie-Wolfe (2007, p. 171) mention about the preparation phase, where the learners consider and adjust the resources, patterns of interaction or assumed roles in order to cope with more successful learning experiences. As an example, the researcher added in her journal a proposal from the participants to work with idiomatic expressions to sound more natural in their discussions:

> I could realize of the importance the participants gave to the project. One of them proposed to include idiomatic expression in the discussions, the others agreed since they had interest in getting to know more real expression to feed their vocabulary. (T.J. PG 8. Line 15)

Additionally, the students required to be given the role of moderators of the discussions to start having a more active role and initiate, interrupt or simply have the command of the discussion by presenting a topic of their preference. This attempt is described by Harvey and

Chickie-Wolfe (2007, p.10) as a characteristic of self-regulated learners, who modify contextual factors in subsequent learning experiences. In this case, they had the intention to assume a different role to favor their learning experience. The same authors affirm that a self-regulated learner strives to meet goals by implementing the strategies to complete the tasks. The participants agreed to play the role of moderators with the purpose of being more fluent in the discussion task. They proposed to set some discussions by covering topics of their preference and as they felt totally interested, they spoke fluently. The researcher noted in her Journal her perception during one of those sessions:

> *In this session, as requested by them, they played the role of moderators and they did it in a fluent way , since they commanded the topic they selected. They could share their preferences and perceptions regarding music and God. This session turned to be very reflective and in a fluent way; it was a spontaneous talk. (T.J. Pg. 10. Line 10)*

To the same extent, goal setting flourished from the data. Undoubtedly, this strategy contributed in the awareness-raising of the learning strategies that would serve to increase oral fluency. It is necessary to recall that Schunk (2001) asserts that goals have positive effects on motivation, learning, self-efficacy and self-evaluation of progress. This was reinforced due to the spaces for reflection the students had where they not only could see their limitations but also could set goals to keep on improvement. The following participants recognized their present limitations to speak fluently and set specific goals to ensure progress:

> *Thing to improve: my participation because it has to be more active. I talk in Spanish. (Ss. P. N. 2. Pg.4.)*
>
> *I think I need to improve speak more in the discussion, be more outgoing and stop being shy to the conversation to flow. (Ss. P. N. 6. Pg.12.)*
>
> *I listen to the other but I need to participate more and to be more concentrated`.(Participant A2- Interview - Session 10).*

5.4.2.1.3   *Subcategory 2: Second Life as a Tool to Empower Oral fluency*

The participants recognized Second Life as a fruitful tool to boost fluency in their spoken communication. Based on the needs analysis and the first set of data displayed in the first stage of the present study, there was a shared `fear to speak` within the participants due to factors such as: importance given to personal image, passive participation, timid personality, teacher-dependent behavior, fear to make mistakes and social pressure. The data that was collected all along the process of implementation demonstrated that thanks to particular features this virtual world offers (such as the fact of interacting behind an avatar), the fear to speak was decreasing progressively.

> `I recognize many people for their voice, I don`t feel ashamed. Nobody sees you and you can make mistakes and nobody criticizes you. (Participant L- Interview - Session 4)
>
> `Is good have avatar to talk and I don`t see the other person timid`.(Participant P- Interview - Session 2)
>
> ``In class, for example, one makes a question and the others make fun of you. I realize of that, but here I don't have fear to speak , here is funnier. `(Participant A- Interview - Session 11).

The researcher asserted in her journal, by having the testimonials and the quality of oral performance during the discussions, that Second Life was a tool that encourages inhibition among speakers. The students could compare their feeling in oral participations given during face-to-face sessions and the type of interaction they could have in this virtual world. They expressed their confidence of being in a pressure-free context to dare to speak in the target language.

> I can say that all of them agreed on considering SL as an ideal tool to speak without feeling social pressure. They used the word ¨security¨ or ¨safe¨ to describe their feeling interacting in this virtual world. I see SL as a means to uninhibit participants (T.J. Pg. 1. Line 11)

Equally important is to appreciate that although the participants were interacting by using avatars, they could communicate their insights and feelings by building up interaction that was nurtured every day, throughout the discussions. Palloff and Pratt (2007, p.17) coined the presence in virtual environments as Social Presence. This refers to the transition the person suffers when existing and interacting in a virtual space. As seen in the discussions, this virtual condition stimulated certain attitudes from the participants` personality to shape interaction within a collaborative and communicative atmosphere. Particularly, this group of students was rather quiet during the face-to-face sessions but during the discussions in SL they turned to be talkative and had the enthusiasm to introduce the topics, to refer to others` insights by contradicting or agreeing, to ask questions, to share personal experiences, etc. Things that they recognized were new in the quality of participation they commonly had.

> *They have said that this reduces stress, fears to speak and increase opportunities to communicate in English by making friends they can´t see in the University, but they like to share with in Second Life. (T.J. Pg.13. Line 22.)*

Similarly, as Peterson (2011, p.70) suggests, the reduction of social context cues such as age or status frequently creates a low-stress atmosphere in which learners can take risks and engage in language play. They are university students who are in their adolescence and are in the same level in the English proficiency courses. Those common things could be shared easier due to the absence of gestures, attitudes or proximity, which according to the students` reflections intimidated them in the oral delivery in classes.

> *I wasn`t embarrassed because no one saw me, I risked speaking. (Ss. P. N. 3. Pg.13.)*

To reinforce the social presence and the flow in communication, a number of participants underlined the helpfulness of the tools Second Life offers to interact. Robbins and Bell (2007) argue that in most virtual worlds the avatars can produce non-verbal cues such as gestures and facial features that give insight into the users´ state of mind approximating the virtual experience of face-to –face interaction. This non-verbal language started to be a resource for the participants to express feelings when faced with the topics that were being discussed. This tool was important to let the participants see they could complement their speech with paralinguistic language that could be much more natural in real life to transcend the context of this study and become more fluent in any context.

> In the discussion the avatar have differents gestures and I can be in differents places to better communication. (Ss. P. N. 6. Pg.11.)
>
> The comfort is important and with gestures you can feel better speaking. (Participant M- Interview - Session 6)
>
> `You are not shy because you can be someone else`(Participant L- Interview - Session 2)

Category 2: Informed self-effort to speak fluently

As a complementary element to explore participants` perceptions regarding their oral fluency, new perceptions regarding their learning and their performance when speaking in English were being shaped resulting from the students` efforts to speak more fluently. Bandura (1997, p.2), claims that self-efficacy is connected to the beliefs one has on his own capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations. Hence, the

participants could accomplish and share their personal efforts to be exposed to a more fluent speaking performance.

> *I learn to use expressions in every conversation to speak clearly. Practice every day and use all the vocabulary I learned. In each conversation the teacher corrects us. (Ss. P. N. 3. Pg.2.)*
>
> *In the second discussion my achievements were intervene more in discussion and lose fear to speak in English with others persons. (Ss. P. N. 6. Pg.9.)*

Furthermore, there was a positive influence in the participants` acts, attitudes, thoughts, and feelings. The samples below show that the learners` participation was informed by the awareness that was developing through the tools and learning strategies that had been used to foster oral fluency:

> *They have more confidence to take the initiative to discuss. (T.J. Pg/5. Line 19)*
>
> *Students could support their view from the perspective and knowledge of their field of studies and they were more confident and moved to speak and participate. They were trying to persuade others but it turn to be a for or against position towards the others' opinions. (T.J. Pg. 12. Line 8)*
>
> *`The adjectives you sent us were a great help. I could expand the vocabulary. `.(Participant E-Interview - Session 13).*
>
> *It was an activity very important because I can use the expressions of the guide. This activity helped me in my oral evaluation for expressing better. (Ss. P. N. 6. Pg.7.)*

Subcategory 1: Improvement in Oral Fluency

After a set of self-efforts, the participants could appreciate their tangible improvements and achievements during the discussions**.** Progressively, the students were performing orally more fluently. They fed their appreciations by adding personal experiences, beliefs, critic, and feelings. They started to be interested in the others` ideas rather on their individual worries about speaking correctly; they started to be listeners and could intervene by responding to what they heard. In addition, they understood that speaking slowly or asking about unknown words was helpful to reach their goal: communicate better in English. The fact of setting a position and defending it empowered them in their speech. This was substantial not only for the transition from having semi-controlled discussions to have the researcher as one participant more, but also for the daily reflection completed afterwards. The students were discovering their progress based on the amount of interventions and their satisfaction for partial improvements. Time was another indicator, since a discussion planned to last one hour could easily take two hours.

> ` Interesting because the topic made us speak more, it is easier to join the phrases. `
> `.(Participant A- Interview - Session 12).
>
> I talk to all my colleagues and respond to conversations. I speak only in English and ask the words you do not understand English. Also, I speak slowly to make me understand, is a good strategy to talk naturally. Talk more, it makes me practice more. (Ss. P. N. 3. Pg.3.)
>
> `It was very funny to support what the others said.` (Participant A2- Interview - Session 12).

Subcategory 2: New Self-judgment

Naturally, a new self-judgment was shaped progressively according to the recognition of the value of new learning strategies to speak more fluent and the positive outcomes in the delivery of the discussions. Zimmerman (2000, p.68) coined the term self-judgment under self-concept and explains that it emphasizes self-esteem reactions by focusing exclusively on task-specific performance expectations. Similarly, Thanasoulas (2000, p.6) claims that self-esteem is a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes individual holds towards himself. In the study, this was evidenced in the students` appreciations given in the in-depth interviews and the personal reflections students filed in their portfolios. They could recognize that there was a hidden potential they had to speak better in the target language. As they hardly ever participated in the face-to-face sessions, they only had two opportunities to speak in English in the semester: during their oral exam and their oral defense. With this study, they could discuss actively for about 20 hours. Having a student affirming he felt like an expert using English was a sample of a meaningful transition of self-concept as English language speaker. They said they felt more confident and capable of performing orally.

> *I feel ok due to it was easier say my opinion than before. (Ss. P. N. 2. Pg.21.)*
>
> *My achievement was I feel more security at the moment to talk. I feel a bit better, because I talk a bit much (Ss. P. N. 2. Pg.2.)*
>
> *I feel good giving opinions like a expert used English because that gives to me more fluency. (Ss. P. N. 6. Pg.18.)*

Category 3: Enhanced self-perception of being a fluent English language speaker

After the exercise of reflection upon learning strategies and the progressive achievements in the oral performance, the final set of data collected exhibits the results of a shaped perception of what being a fluent speaker means. The subcategories will illustrate that there was a transition in the learners` perceptions regarding the term fluency, the fact of speaking fluently and the self-satisfaction resulting from the progress.

Subcategory 1: New Perception of Fluency

Zimmerman (2002) claims that self-regulation also refers to self-generated thoughts, feelings and behaviors that are oriented to attained goals. In this connection, the participants started to understand fluency in a more flexible perspective. That is to say, they stopped assuming that a fluency meant perfection in grammar use, richness in vocabulary and high speed in the delivery of messages; ideals that had made them believe that a person was either fluent or not, as expressed in the first stage of the present study.

Fluency in this research study is understood as the ability to communicate by making use of language for communication, which deals with meaning rather than accuracy of language use. In this line of thought, Brumfit (1984), defines fluency as a natural language use. Correspondingly, participants attributed the presence of fluency in their speaking as an outcome of their personality and their emotions at the moment to interact; they assumed fluency as a natural expression of language.

> `Confidence gives fluency, you can try to communicate with your attitude and abilities`(Participant E- Interview - Session 4)
>
> `For example, I was stressed, in my case now no,you say is a true fluency is a process` (Participant A3- Interview - Session 5)
>
> `The fluency is determinate what I feel at the moment to talk.` (Participant E- Interview - Session 9)
>
> Fluency represent your personality. For example, if I don´t know a word my personality takes me to speak more.` (Participant F- Interview - Session 9)

Another complementary perspective of fluency is explained by (Faerch, Haastrup, & Philipson, 1984) who define as articulatory fluency the ability to link together speech segments and even paralinguistic resources to communicate assertively. During the discussions the participants made the effort to include new pre-fabricated chunks (contained in their portfolios) to express their opinion, to contradict, to support and to express their feelings.

> `I'm more basic, I listen, take vocabulary and complement my idea. I use what comes to my mind. I don´t even look that much to talk, yet I speak even with mistakes.` (Participant L- Interview - Session 10).

Subcategory 2: Flexibility regarding making mistakes

The concept of fluency, in this study, is flexible in terms of the validity of making mistakes while performing orally, since meaningful attention is given to communicative improvements within a learning process. Data analysis revealed that it is noticeable how the fact

of making mistakes turned to be less important for participants. Learners affirm that it is more important to make their message understandable, losing the fear of using the language wrongly and accepting that being fluent is a journey not a final destination.

> *Fluent speakers could have mistakes but they try to the other people understand. (Ss. P. N. 6. Pg.15.)*
>
> *I can to talk a bit more and I have to more confidence, for this reason I don`t have fear to make mistakes. (Ss. P. N. 2. Pg.5.)*
>
> *Everybody are human and everybody make mistakes (Ss. P. N. 4. Pg.2.)*
>
> *`I guess the important is to try to make it well and not perfect, the important is try`.(Participant A3- Interview - Session 9)*

Subcategory 3: Self-satisfaction

Zimmerman (2002, p.66) avers that the self-reflection on the effectiveness of the strategies the learner incorporated in learning enhances self-satisfaction and motivation to continue to improve. In the next set of samples, it is appreciated that the participants` self-satisfaction deals with a remarkable improvement in their oral performance, the quality of participation in the discussions and the extensive outcomes within their academic practices. Participants noticed they had increased the quantity and quality of oral participations, not only in the fluency-discussions but also in the face-to face English lessons. The improvements were also noticeable in their testing and the delivery of their ideas.

> *In this term I improve a lot my English, I speak more and I try to express my thinkings in English!! This is really new for me, and I am pleasant for this opportunity. Really thank you very much teacher!! (Ss. P. N. 4. Pg.14.)*
>
> *`You learn new words, when you discover discussion is so productive in this moment we are practice for the speaking exam. You construct the expression and you are more preparate because in my case I speak better than in the first cut.`*
>
> *(Participant P- Interview - Session 7)*
>
> *You get the fluency step by step. With the experience. I'm noticing more changes, now it is easier for me to speak because as I said before, the discussion helps me for the ideas to come.` (Participant M- Interview - Session 11).*

Gibbons (2011, p. 94) argues that self- regulation enables students to customize their approach to learning tasks, combines the development of skill with the development of character, and prepares them for learning thorough their lives. With the present study, the participants could identify more about their learning preferences to adopt new tools to optimize the oral practices. Alternatively, they could uncover more capabilities as English speakers and the way to address their speech acts. This helped them be more expressive and confident by using language as a vehicle to interact and shape new self-perceptions as expressed in their reflections. The opportunity they have to experiment a transition in perceptions and the flexibility to assume learning as a process that implies different strategies and resources contributed in the participants` growth as individuals and learners.

> *The important thing is to be persistent, be positive in knowing that I can learn. Errors are synonyms with learning. The important thing in this project is to learn not only speak English, but to trust yourself. (Ss. P. N. 3. Pg.5.)*

To foster life-long learning, they needed to reshape their self-perception to continue feeding their self-satisfaction towards being fluent. They could be satisfied due to the things they achieved in this study and the personal transition they could gain from this experience. It may have moved them to have a positive affect towards learning, speaking in English, as well as being autonomous to set goals to improve. Their self-satisfaction appeared when they discovered that their goals were achieved and felt motivated to continue making efforts to modify or include strategies to succeed.

(Elliot & Dweck, 2013) emphasize that self-satisfaction is a form to self-react in front of the quality of performance. They affirm that the self-directed learners may pursue courses of action that result in satisfaction and positive affect towards learning by persisting in their efforts. Once there is a feeling of satisfaction, the learners can enhance self-motivational beliefs, which lead them to consolidate their goal orientations and increase their intrinsic interest in a task. Thus, the affective dimension informs the cognitive and expressive dimensions in leaning.

In this chapter data analysis methods and procedures have been fully described so as to justify findings displayed into categories and subcategories. The following chapter will bring into focus the most salient conclusions that have emerged from this exploratory research study, the pedagogical implications and limitations adhered to the implementation stage and considerations for further research studies.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

6.1   Introduction

This chapter aims to present the resultant conclusions from the data analysis process, the pedagogical implications and the limitations in the attempt to answer the research question: *How might fluency-task discussions in Second Life influence A2 university students´perceptions of their oral fluency as expressed in self-reflective portfolios?* Moreover, this chapter will be concluded by considering further research studies that can be carried out based on the teaching and learning experiences encountered in this research study.

This study revealed that thanks to the exercising of learning strategies to foster fluency in the target oral practices, participants could enhance self-directed learning sub-processes that modified their performance and self-perception, and led them to improve their oral communication. Autonomously, students volunteered to take different roles in the delivery of the discussions by bringing up different topics, moderating, searching for information before the sessions and daring to interrupt or initiate the conversations. Additionally, they were giving less importance to the fact of lacking vocabulary or expressions that supported their spoken production. They could self-experiment by integrating new alternatives to maximize fluent speaking. Participants used their portfolio as one of they called `the Bible`, given that they could easily have access to banks of words or pre-fabricated chunks to set different positions in every discussion. It also became a constant practice to collaborate in the communication by using the chatting box to type a word their partners needed during their interventions.

Interacting behind an avatar was an innovative practice for this population; they asserted that they could speak uninhibitedly, since they rarely gave importance to their personal image, the social cues (that generate pressure in a context), the critic or the fact of making mistakes.

Therefore, they could shape a more proactive social presence in this virtual world by also using non-verbal communication (the specific option which the avatars offer) and interacting more naturally while having the chance to share in different animated contexts. Spontaneous reactions and expressions were produced thanks to the stimulus of teleporting to different contexts.

These learning strategies were samples of participants` self-effort to speak more fluently. They could observe partial achievements in their target oral production and set new goals to modify practices. It was evidenced in both, their quality of oral performance and their reflections that they could progressively transcend from passive participation and teacher-dependent behavior towards individuals with a new understanding of what being a fluent speaker meant. They discovered that communicating effectively is not a matter of speed or perfection but a resourceful use of the language to shape interaction. Participants accepted that learning is a process or overcoming failures and incorporating helpful strategies to succeed. It was informative for them to start speaking more fluent and trust more in their capabilities.

Additionally, it was appealing for them to get into the habit of self-reflection. They could recognize their advances and set new goals to deal with difficulties. Among the goals they shared, they aimed to stop speaking in Spanish, having fear of the misuse of the target language, listening more to the others so as to respond accordingly, changing previously timid attitudes, which had limited them in classroom-based sessions and include new words more frequently.

The significance of this study in The Universidad de la Sabana associated with the perpetuation of innovative academic practices that foster the inclusion of technology and the promotion of autonomy. Chiappe and Segovia (2011, pg. 8) claim that given that the process of planning ¨teaching-learning dynamics¨ is of vital importance, two main issues are taken into consideration: the development of students´ autonomy and the use of resources that both teachers

and students make to foster communicative competences. The teaching of English in this study has conceived such dynamics, such that the exploration of a new virtual world has been a suitable strategy to achieve the expected goals.

Regarding the national MEN policies, Garzòn et al. (2004, pg.2) explain that one of the fundamental insights exposed by the Government to benefit *Bogotà Bilingue Project* is connected to the necessity to promote autonomy in learning and the urgency to change the traditional practices and roles both teachers and students have dealt with in teaching and learning languages. Therefore, in setting a new virtual context for the accomplishment of communicative practices in an extra-curricular setting results a productive attempt to generate autonomy and innovation in the academic practices. Students and teachers have the opportunity to explore new settings in real time within an animated visual appearance that may result in interesting and new experiences for the students. The technological support facilities to generate new learning experiences is a method to boost independence in the students to ensure that academic practices may progress beyond the time in the classroom.

Finally, this study can be considered as an extensive promotion of life-long learning through the implementation of learning strategies into Second Life. The AVALON project (Access to Virtual and Action Learning live Online), was part of the Education and Culture DG Lifelong Learning Programme in Europe. It attempted to promote experiences that left trace in the learners` cognitive and affective spheres. This study also had integrative purposes since the participants were studying different programs; similarly, the present study joined students from different majors and groups. In the same way, in the AVALON project, the participants could share their preferences and insights during discussions by aiming to give them spaces to improve their English proficiency. In the present study, fluency-task discussions was a fruitful approach

for the participants to speak freely by covering topics which were for them both thought provoking and interesting especially because they selected the topics in some of the sessions. Moreover, this study matches what Gregory and Masters (2012) concluded. They explained that as long as the participants became more confident at controlling the avatars they can perform the task more effectively. In the present study, the use of avatars facilitated verbal and non-verbal communication, taking the participant into a fruitful transition in their communicative practices.

Another outcome to consider in this exploratory research study is that participants could increase their level of metacognitive reflection and autonomy. The spaces provided to reflect upon experiences, tools, feelings and in general perceptions about learning result a meaningful and supporting strategy to foster metacognitive insights. The reflective portfolio and the spontaneous in-depth interviews every session allowed students to discover their capabilities as learners, their potential to be more effective when communicating in English, to plan actions to overcome drawbacks, a new type of social interaction; among other elements which demonstrated to them that positive transitions could be achieved when following a process or learning and making efforts to do so.

As teacher-researcher, I could progressively discover the hidden power of key elements for successful communication, and, in general, learning. Firstly, thanks to the in-depth interviews, I was able to know more about my students´ internal world, that is, , their desires and fears in their learning. Thus, I could help them appreciate every new achievement in their oral performance so that trust flourished to enable them continue with the project. Secondly, it was exciting for me to see new identities, autonomous students taking action of their own progress; I was pleased to take distance in several occasions in both planning and the development of the discussions. I heard many positive comments from the participants during the interviews, I felt

this project had left a trace in their learning experiences; I could verify this when my students attended to the symposium on socialization, telling the academic community this project was worth continuing within the university. This was the best recognition of having believed in their potential stimulated by the technological supporting facilities.

6.2   Limitations

During the implementation of this study certain limitations appeared, which need to be considered for further applications. Firstly, the sound quality in Second Life was not expected to cover one hour discussion due to some technical failures in connectivity. Therefore, it was necessary to use the software `Skype$^{TM}$` as an alternate means to listen to each other. This solution was ideal in the sense that the virtual sound environment was not heard and participants could hear more clearly. Sometimes in the settings where participants were having discussions there were more avatars speaking, so this interference was avoided. However, having more than five people chatting in the platform was unsuccessful, requiring that one of the participants had to chat through the chatting box in Second Life.

Secondly, difficulties in the visualization of new settings when teleporting were displayed and some participants could see many features displayed in the places and that affected their perceptions to speak about it. It could be tackled by asking the users to enter previously the sessions in order for the recent locations visited to be saved in the list of settings, so the next access would be faster. Another alternative could be to consider the possibilities to get a High Definition Video Card and/or a powerful processor corresponding to the latest generation; this last option is according to the facilities and financing which the user has in order to acquire this advanced technology. Additionally, if the users attempt to change the appearance of the avatar or

watch a video in the screens disposed to enter internet, it would be easier to visualize. Thirdly, for the first sessions it was hard to start on time since some of the participants took longer to appear in the virtual campus. Thus, we agreed to enter the virtual world twenty minutes before starting the session, as an attempt to have sufficient loading and preparation time.

Other Limitations

Task-fluency discussions are a pedagogical approach that implies time to be successfully accomplished. Participants needed to have a previous exploration of key expressions and useful vocabulary to avoid being checking the portfolio during the discussion; this is a distractive factor that sometimes affected the flow of communication. In addition, in order to have more productive reflections in the portfolios it would have been ideal for the participants to have more time after the sessions. This project was held simultaneously with their career studies and as they agreed in one of the interviews, this project could have been fantastic to be conducted during vacation time.

Finally, regarding the roles the teacher-researcher had to carry out within a single hour, it would be ideal to conduct this type of projects in collaboration with another researcher. On several occasions, the researcher had to handle with the delivery of the discussions, the in-depth interviews, technical issues, register of the students` perceptions and the non-verbal language communicated during the sessions. While in a virtual environment it would be proper to have support in both technology and in the pedagogical implementation. This study aimed to explore participants` perceptions and transitions into a more fluid use of the language and their experience with the tool; thus, it is necessary to have extra-help to register all those issues faithfully.

6.3   Pedagogical Implications

The application of Task-Fluency Discussions as the approach to lead the pedagogical intervention in the present study, led to the conclusion that to help students speak more naturally it is ideal to include topics of interest that may be proposed by the students themselves. One of the most fruitful outcomes in this approach is the opportunity the students have to learn from content. Hence, having them selecting the topics and autonomously playing the role of moderators (which helped them be better listeners) resulted in a meaningful learning experience that required from the teacher-researcher to provide them with the necessary tools to enhance fluency. Therefore, the oral practices were empowered by counting on the students` interest and motivation, and the bank of vocabulary and prefabricated expressions to support their speech. It was significant the use of a reflective portfolio to set spaces of introspection regarding their oral performance as well as to file helpful expression to lead their interventions.

Similarly, the exercising of goal-setting became a practical strategy to simplify objectives and become more realistic in the expected outcomes when planning. The researcher could distribute dense contents into singular sessions with more achievable products leading to a fluent oral performance.

Another benefit of this pedagogical implementation has to do with the possibility a tutor has to take their students to different settings, from which animated real life settings are very useful to put English language use into action. For this study, the participants could share into a safe academic campus and the teleporting to certain settings was really a fruitful experience for them to react naturally and make use of the target language inspired on what they could see. Indeed, this option turns out to be a rewarding experience when doing things differently.

Moreover, when a teacher provides students with easy access tools to communicate, this empowers them to keep on improving in their oral practices. At the same time, it leads them to shape a new self-perception that alters a group of shy speakers to one which becomes eager to take advantage of every opportunity to speak fluently.

On the other hand, considering online distant education attempts, teachers themselves may benefit from meeting their students in this virtual world, since it allows having real-time communication wherever they access this platform. This is a way to establish the tutor`s presence in a more attractive way other than sharing in a common chatting-room. Second Life can be used as a field-work experience in online English courses to use studied language contents, previous investigation of a real-life animated setting existent in this world for the students to communicate in the target language.

Other Implications

As a researcher, it was meaningful to witness a gradual transformation of the participants in many senses. This was an alternative space to know more about my students` personality and identity as learners. I could see how certain levels of sensibility they have in perceiving what others transmit, while communicating, made them develop fears that inhibited interaction and learning as such. That is to say, they needed to perceive respect and tolerance and especially they wanted to be heard with attention. Hence, the time shared in this study, according to their own evaluations, was that space they needed to uncover their capabilities as learners of a second language and the quality of interaction they built up permitted them to consolidate a new social identity, where they were willing to listen to each other, share insights and reshape perceptions within a friendly and collaborative atmosphere. However, behind an avatar, they could

experience a human atmosphere that helped them raise trust in themselves and leave those fears that had impeded actual learning to take place.

6.4   Further Research

According to the findings of this study, communicating behind an avatar facilitates interaction since it inhibits speakers to share their thoughts, leaving aside social pressure. Therefore, researchers interested in covering sensitive topics connected to social realities or the speakers` internal world can include Second Life as an alternative space to explore perceptions, fears, queries, and issues which are rather hard to communicate in face-to-face sessions. This idea comes from a session in which the participants proposed topics connected to their personal and spiritual life and it was remarkable to see how they shared insights and experiences spontaneously. Bearing in mind that this study population was rather passive in classroom participation and that they had not met each other personally, it can be concluded that this could be a potential strategy to address a wide array of intimate matters successfully.

In addition, taking into account certain testimonials from some participants, Second Life was a space to consolidate friendship and a second family. One of the participants, for example, was living alone in this city, far from his family and he affirmed that this virtual world offered a refuge and companionship. Since there were twenty sessions in a row, he could share daily with classmates from the same university, with many things in common; he could even celebrate his birthday in a visit to a club in an American colony. Thus, researchers interested in analyzing the attributes given to the *sense of community* and the implications it may bring to the users`

personal and social life, might find this virtual environment as a rich field to explore personal and social experiences and perceptions.

Finally, thanks to the visual features this virtual world offers, and the possibility to teleport to different real-animated and fictitious places, tutors can design modules on specific thematic (architecture, history, etc.) to set field works by including task–based or project- based approaches. Probably more research studies, based on quantitative or qualitative analysis, might be carried out with the view to exploring new teaching and learning experiences with different populations and fields of knowledge. This corresponds to what Suter (2012, p.363) denominates as *transferability,* which refers to the possibility for one study to fit when applicable to different populations and contexts to which it is also possible to evidence a theoretical transference. All in all, the effectiveness of Second Life as a tool to enhance oral fluency by means of fluency-tasks discussions may well be a fitting strategy for different populations within virtual or blended modalities for teaching English.

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Appendixes

Appendix A- Campus in Second Life

Appendix B- Student`s Self-reflective Portfolio

Appendix C- Teacher´s Reflective Journal

Appendix D- Consent Form for Students

Appendix E- Consent form for the Director of the Languages Department

Appendix F- Lesson plan template by following Goal setting approach

Appendix G- Format participants completed after the discussions.

Appendix H- Data Management in a Microsoft Word Office Document

Appendix I- Preliminary Categories in the Students` Self- Reflective Portfolio

Appendix J- Preliminary Categories in the Teacher`s Reflective Journal

Appendix K- Preliminary Categories from the In- Depth Interviews

Appendix A- Campus in Second Life

Appendix B- Student`s Self-reflective Portfolio

Appendix C- Teacher´s Reflective Journal

DATE: October 17th ,03	SESSION: 10

EVIDENCE OF FLUENCY:

There was a spontaneous delivery of ideas. They could share personal insights, perceptions and experiences in a more confident way so they used given expressions to state their ideas, explore the vocabulary related to the topic and could take initiative to interrupt, ask questions and expand on information without being asked to.

REGARDING SECOND LIFE:

For this session we used the screen we have in the campus to display videos of the participants´ favorite artists. We were conducting the discussion in skype but anyhow we could hear the songs and have them as background music while discussing about this particular band or artist or type of music. At the beginning we had problems with audio quality since the videos were displayed slowly.

REGARDING DISCUSSION:

In this session they played the role of moderators and they did it in a fluent way , since they commanded the topic they selected. They could share their preferences and perceptions regarding music and God. This session turned to be very reflective and in a way fluent; it was an spontaneous talk.

AFTERTHOUGHTS: This session was really enriching because more than a normal discussion, it was an exploration of the participants´ internal world. They could uncover feelings, fears, needs, very personal issues and communicated them without fears. It was surprising to see them touched by a song that connected them with God and that a participant proposed and played. They were like absent for a moment while feeding their insights regarding how their lives were connected with God. From this experience they concluded that it is appealing to be moderators and explore the topics they select by their own. I could realize how sensitive the participants were and in many moments I was apart from their flourishing of communication; at the end a participant asked me to be part of the discussion, to become a participant as well since he considered interesting to know what I think.

Appendix D- Consent Form for Students

Research Project Informed Consent to Students-Universidad de la Sabana

Title of the Project: ENHANCING ORAL FLUENCY THROUGH TASK-FLUENCY DISCUSSIONS IN SECOND LIFE

Dear Students:

Currently I aim to conduct a research study in order to answer the following question: *How might fluency-task discussions in Second Life influence A2 university students' perceptions on their oral fluency as expressed in self-reflective portfolios?* As it is indicated, my intention is to explore the possible transitions you may have in your perceptions about your oral fluency while participating in discussions in the virtual world: Second Life. This study is my research work as a requirement for the degree of Master in English Language Teaching –Autonomous Learning Environments. Thus, I kindly request your consent to participate in this research study, which will last 20 hours. Fluency-task discussions that last 1 hour each will be carried out to attempt to enhance your oral fluency. During the accomplishment of the discussions you will share your perceptions in a 10 minute interview to finish each session. At the same time, you will have your personal self-reflective portfolio to keep track of your progress by piling your insights. You need to know that you will not be given a grade for taking part of this project. Your reward will be to have the opportunity to have extra-practice by speaking in English.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. You no not have to give a reason for withdrawing and there will be no negative consequences if you decide to withdraw. Though, it would be really meaningful to count on your participation in this research study.

When I report on the research, I will ensure that you are not identified. No reference to personal names will be used. I am the only person who will have access to data collected for the project. Any data I use in reports or publications will be for illustration only. If you wish to have a copy of the final report, I will arrange for this to be done.

I agree to participate in this research.

Signed: _____Date:_____

If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the main researcher at karencasti@unisabana.edu.co.

Name of the Researcher: _____Date:_____

Appendix E- Consent form for the Director of the Languages Department

Chia, February, 2013
Dear
Jermaine S. McDougald
Master Programs Director
Department of Languages and Cultures
Universidad de la Sabana

As you know, I am currently pursuing a Master's Degree on English Language Teaching and Autonomous Learning Environments at La Sabana University. I am conducting an exploratory action research study on the enhancement of oral fluency through task -fluency discussions in Second Life. This research project is under the supervision of Dr. Dario Banegas and Dr. Liliana Cuesta.

As English teacher in the proficiency courses at the university, for A2 (level 4) students, I have noticed the necessity to enhance fluent oral practices in order to fully comply with what the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages has stipulated for the quality of oral performance expected for this level. Thus, I have found that Task-fluency discussions are fruitful strategies to offer the students a spontaneous context for them to share thoughts regarding different topics. Likewise, taking advantage of the immersion our students have had into virtual practices, I aim to propose Second Life as an appealing virtual environment to motivate communication among the participants.

I will be focusing my project on a targeted group of level 4 (students from two groups) whom I will meet 20 hours, one daily to accomplish the task and have some time to apply a semi-structured interview to explore their perceptions. Additionally, I attempt to reinforce a self-reflective routine that will take students to have a metacognitive appreciation of every learning experience. For this reason, they will work on a self-reflective portfolio, which is also a bank of useful language that will empower their oral participation. Students will remain anonymous in my written report and any work samples used will not include their names. Students will be referred to as a letter or a number in the report.

There will be no risk involved in this study except for the investment of valuable time on the enhancement of fluency in their speaking and the opportunity they will have to shape a new identity as learners based on the discovery of their capabilities through a formative process. The virtual setting where we will be meeting is a safe academic campus that was disposed for learning purposes, which is also a context for students of engineering of our institution.

Students will be free to choose to participate in this study, in fact this is a great attempt to continue fostering autonomy since they are aware of the extra-time they need to devote in this experience. They said to be willing to improve their English performance and their grades hereafter.

All students will receive standard treatment and will be free to withdraw from the study at any time without any adverse effects.

Should you have any questions about the research or any related matters, please contact the researcher at karencasti@unisabana.edu.co.

Yours Faithfully
Karen Castiblanco
Candidate to obtain a Master's Degree on English Language Teaching (ELT) and Autonomous Learning Environments

Appendix F- Lesson plan template by following Goal setting approach

LESSON N°:8   N° HOURS:1

TASK: From my avatar´s perspective...

MAIN GOAL: Students share thoughts from the perspective of a new avatar characterization.

SPECIFIC GOALS: Students select another characterization for their avatar
Students set a position regarding given topics by taking into account their new personification
Students expand on their opinions
Students contradict others´ positions

PROXIMITY: Students discuss for 50 minutes

DIFFICULTY: Students take some thinking time, set a position in accordance to their new avatar, share thoughts, contradict others´ opinions and defend their ideas.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DISCUSSION TASK

Characterization of a desired avatar to share thoughts.
You have the chance to change your appearance. According to your new character, assume a position regarding the following ideas:
Animals are more human than people
Pets are a pest
Look at nature and you will not need art
For me life is...
Everything has its price
To possess nothing is to be rich
Fashion is fun
You are what you wear
Friendship doesn´t exist
Love is the hardest thing in life

Suggested Language:

In my opinion,....

In my eyes,....

To my mind,....

From my point of view,....

My view / opinion / belief / impression / conviction...... is that

I don't share his/her/your view.

Appendix G- Format participants completed after the discussions.

Which expressions did you use?

How did you feel disagreeing with people by using those expressions?

Which expressions would you like to use in the next discussion?

What do you think of using the long expressions?

Appendix H- Data Management in a Microsoft Word Office Document.

In SL, they need to become autonomous and have initiative to intervene or interrupt others. (T.J. Pg. 3. Line 11)	They turned to use fillers, gestures and non-verbal sounds to support communication. They seem not to care about lack of vocabulary, whenever they ignored a word, they asked me and continued speaking. (T.J. Pg. 5. Line 3)	It is to make clear at the same time to express the ideas. (Ss, P. N.1 Pg. 1.)	on considering SL as an ideal tool to speak without feeling social pressure. They used the word "security" or "safe" to describe their feeling interacting in this virtual world (T.J. Pg. 1. Line 11)
Without being told they started to laugh, to wave, to levitate, to dance. All along the discussion they used their gestures to communicate. (T.J. Pg 5. Line 8.)		All the persons make mistakes (Ss. P. N.1. Pg.1.)	
In this session the participants started to include gestures and movements to feed their communication. (T.J. Pg 5. Line 13)	They have more confidence to take the initiative to discuss. (T.J. Pg 5. Line 19)	One thing is grammar and other very different is speak well (Ss. P. N.1. Pg.2.)	In this virtual world they manifested to feel more comfortable to speak. (T.J. Pg. 2 Line 14).
		For me, the only way is practicing, because with the practice, you remember expressions, vocabulary and it is the easiest way to be fluent. (Ss. P. N. 4. Pg.1.)	I see SL as a means to disinhibit participants. (T.J. Pg. 2 Line 16).
If they were quiet, they were using gestures to react to the others´ views. (T.J. Pg 6. Line 4.)	They were asked to assume a different thought so they were like improvising but they tried to be fluent. (T.J. Pg 7. Line 2)	Everybody are human and everybody make mistakes (Ss. P. N.4. Pg.2.)	. They have said that this reduces stress, fears to speak and increase opportunities to communicate in English by making friends they can´t see in the University but like to share with SL. (T.J. Pg.13. Line 22.)
I felt satisfied to see that they did explore the tools and brought the gestures for the session. It helped in a way to support interaction that at times was passive or	For this particular discussion, the students used chunks related to the topics and discourse markers to fix their ideas. (T.J. Pg 7. Line 6)		
	They received in their e-mails the vocabulary that was planned to be included in the discussion.	I talk to all my colleagues and respond to conversations. I speak only in English and ask the words you do not understand English.	Second Life is a virtual world where nobody know who are you, and you can share your experiences in this work likewise

Appendix I- Preliminary Categories in the Students` Self- Reflective Portfolio

Appendix J- Preliminary Categories in the Teacher`s Reflective Journal

Appendix K- Preliminary Categories from the In- Depth Interviews

environment favors academic processes? How?

E: we have a space to improve our vocabulary.

A: Yes, because all to improve the fluency need time in to improve vocabulary.

Ana: In my opinion, I think the discussion contribute I learning new words and I can knew sentences.

Do you find any differences between holding discussion in face- to- face sessions and in SL?

L: SL is better, more interesting

E: I feel pressure from people in class

P: I don't like the other person thinking about me, I fear to speak in English. On this moment I speak a lot and more fluent than in face to face sessions because I try to apply the expressions you give. I pause because I think the possible answer.

A: You try can be more fluent, don't have fear to speak. In face to face is more difficult because we can have fear for make mistakes.

• What do you think is it the appropriate attitude to be fluent?

E: Confidence gives fluency, you can try to communicate with your attitude, with the abilities.

L: The most important is the vocabulary for new expressions in your speech.

A: to be more natural, to feel that I say. To learn more vocabulary, use the expressions.

M: Nervous and more vocabulary.

P: I try to remember the expressions and words.

• What do you think of this? "Fluency is not just an abstract long-term plan, but a daily opportunity that you can cultivate"

Ale: everytime a little bit more but is very difficult.

M: I believe that the fluency forces us to speak in the daily interaction.

A: I think the fluency is we practice every day.

Ale: For example, I was stressed before this activity and now no, in my case.

E: you say is true, fluency is a process.

other people.

P: practice the speaking and improve our fluency and try to speak more natural.

M: I believe that objective of this discussion is learn to speak in daily situations.

E: to speak of differents topics.

• What would you change from this discussion:

L: In SL no feeling embarrassed.

P: I change some mistakes I made grammar mistakes.

M: Nothing, I think all was good.

A: I improve my grammar improving the fluency to be more natural.

• Do you have a different perspective from the topic discussed, concerning the initial perspective you had?