

Northeast and Islands  
Regional Educational  
Laboratory

222 Richmond Street  
Suite 300  
Providence, RI 02903

**e-mail:**  
info@alliance.brown.edu

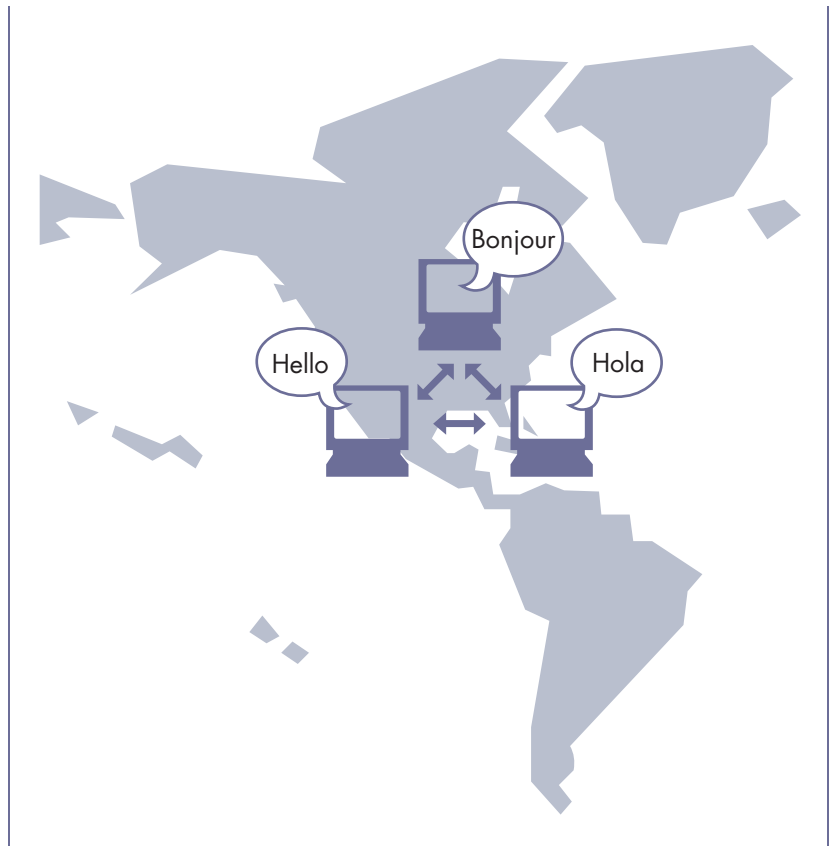
**web:**  
www.alliance.brown.edu

---

## TOPICS OF PEER-TO-PEER LISTSERV POSTINGS:

---

How Can They Serve as a Resource for Enhancing  
a Web Site for Early Foreign Language Educators?



Susan M. Hoyle and Ingrid Pufahl

---

## The Education Alliance at Brown University

Since 1975, The Education Alliance, a department at Brown University, has helped the education community improve schooling for our children. We conduct applied research and evaluation, and provide technical assistance and informational resources to connect research and practice, build knowledge and skills, and meet critical needs in the field.

With offices in Rhode Island, New York, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, and a dedicated team of over 100 skilled professionals, we provide services and resources to K-16 institutions across the country and beyond. As we work with educators, we customize our programs to the specific needs of our clients.

## Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (LAB)

The Education Alliance at Brown University is home to the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (LAB), one of ten educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. Our goals are to improve teaching and learning, advance school improvement, build capacity for reform, and develop strategic alliances with key members of the region's education and policymaking community.

The LAB develops educational products and services for school administrators, policymakers, teachers, and parents in New England, New York, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Central to our efforts is a commitment to equity and excellence. Information about all Alliance programs and services is available by contacting:

The Education Alliance at Brown University	Phone: 800.521.9550
222 Richmond Street, Suite 300	Fax: 401.421.7650
Providence, RI 02903-4226	E-mail: <a href="mailto:info@alliance.brown.edu">info@alliance.brown.edu</a>
	Web: <a href="http://www.alliance.brown.edu">www.alliance.brown.edu</a>

**Authors:** Susan M. Hoyle and Ingrid Pufahl

**Editor:** Cynthia Way

**Designer:** Patricia McGee

Copyright © 2005 Brown University. All rights reserved.

---

This publication is based on work supported by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), U.S. Department of Education, under Contract Number ED-01-CO-0010. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IES, the U.S. Department of Education, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

---



## **Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)**

The mission of the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) is to improve communication through better understanding of language and culture. CAL's staff of educators and researchers are dedicated to promoting and improving the teaching and learning of languages, identifying and solving problems related to language and culture, and serving as a resource for information about language and culture. CAL's activities include research, teacher education, analysis and dissemination of information, development of instructional materials and language assessments, technical assistance, program evaluation, and policy analysis. CAL is a private, non-profit organization.

Center for Applied Linguistics  
4646 40th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20016-1859  
Phone: 202.362.0700  
Fax: 202.362.3740  
Web: [www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org)

Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), based in Washington, D.C., is a LAB partner.

## About the Authors

**Susan M. Hoyle** is a consultant to the Center for Applied Linguistics. Her research interests include the discourse of adult learning and the discourse competence of school-aged children. She is co-author of “Locating Learning in In-Service Education for Preschool Teachers” (*American Educational Research Journal*, 2004) and co-editor of *Kids Talk: Strategic Language Use in Later Childhood* (1998).

**Ingrid Pufahl** is a consultant at the Center for Applied Linguistics. Her research interests are discourse analysis, language teaching, teacher education, and distance learning. Related publications include a monograph, *Language by Video: An Overview of Foreign Language Instructional Videos for Children* (2005) with Nancy Rhodes, and “Topics in German and U.S. Television News Reports” (*Linguistics*, 1992).

## Acknowledgements

Support for Professional Learning, a program of The Education Alliance at Brown University, seeks to develop effective tools and strategies for technology-based professional learning for K–12 educators. The overall goal of the Technology and Foreign Language project is to enhance foreign language instruction in the Northeast region, especially with underserved populations, through technology-based professional learning. Building on the LAB’s professional development for language teachers over the past eight years, the project continues improving its three main products: a Web site on early language learning (Ñandutí); an interactive listserv for language teachers, teacher trainers, and administrators (Ñandu); and annual professional development workshops.

We acknowledge the support and guidance of Marcia Rosenbusch of Iowa State University and Helena Curtain of University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, throughout this project. We also thank Tom Crochunis, Cynthia Jorgensen, Cynthia Way, Stephanie Feger, Martin Huntley, Nancy Rhodes, Carolyn Temple Adger, and Carine Feyten for their invaluable advice and suggestions during the preparation of this paper.

We thank the Ñandu listserv members for sharing their experience, expertise, and opinions and thus creating Ñandu.

---

This paper is also available from The Education Alliance’s online publications catalog at: [http://www.alliance.brown.edu/db/ea\\_catalog.php](http://www.alliance.brown.edu/db/ea_catalog.php)

## TOPICS OF PEER-TO-PEER LISTSERV POSTINGS:

---

How Can They Serve as a Resource for Enhancing a Web Site for Early Foreign Language Educators?

### ■ Abstract

---

*Foreign language teachers in grades K through 8 are frequently quite isolated in their schools and have few opportunities for daily personal contact with their peers. Online technologies offer teachers a timely and convenient forum to access professional information and to engage in meaningful and sustained dialogue with colleagues who share their interests and challenges. To support the needs of K–8 foreign language teachers for peer-to-peer contact and up-to-date resources, the Ñandutí Web site and Ñandu listserv are designed to provide a forum for information exchange and discussion. In this paper, we describe a small-scale study that analyzed topics in Ñandu listserv postings and their implications for content enhancement of the Ñandutí Web site. Within the framework of discourse analysis, we examined two types of co-occurring topics in listserv threads: (1) text topics, that is, the ideas or content; and (2) interactive topics, that is, the jointly negotiated focus of the interaction. Analysis showed that several text topics were of enough general interest to contribute to a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) section on the Web site. Analysis also revealed four types of interactive topics, and we considered how each could enhance the Web site. However, in many ways, what makes the listserv so successful also makes its content too detailed for FAQs on a Web site.*



---

## ■ INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the growing public awareness of the benefits of early foreign language education, combined with the 1996 release of the national standards (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999), have led to an increased demand in foreign language teaching and, concurrently, in staff development at the K–8 school level. Because K–8 foreign language specialists are frequently quite isolated in their schools and have few opportunities for daily personal contact with their peers, online technologies have become an important means for them to access information, reflect on their practice, and interact with colleagues. The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), as part of the Technology and Foreign Language project of the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB), has developed two online resources that provide easy access to up-to-date resources in early foreign language learning: (1) Ñandutí, a Web site, available at [www.cal.org/earlylang](http://www.cal.org/earlylang), and (2) Ñandu, a listserv, which provides a forum for information exchange and discussion about K–8 language education.

The Ñandu listserv offers teachers a timely and convenient forum to engage in a meaningful, sustained discourse with peers who share their interests and challenges and who offer suggestions and support for their classroom practices. In fact, a preliminary analysis of exchanges on Ñandu—as well as participants’ feedback outside the listserv—suggest that Ñandu is indeed a “virtual community,” characterized by a core group of participants, a shared history, mutual support, means of conflict resolution, group identity, and evidence of roles and hierarchy (Herring, 2004; The Education Alliance at Brown University, 2001). While arguing for the evidence of community is not the focus of this paper, some of the excerpts from listserv interaction included here will indicate that participants support one another’s teaching practice, address concerns through the exchange of ideas, and even resolve conflict amicably and (as they claim in their postings) learn from it.

In this paper, we report on the findings of a small-scale study that examined what Ñandu listserv participants talk about in order to consider the feasibility of using listserv postings as a resource for enhancing the Web site. In the course of our study, we have learned what problems teachers face in their daily practice and how they use the listserv to resolve problems by discussing them with their peers.

## ■ Research Study

In view of the increased use of a variety of online tools for professional development (The Education Alliance at Brown University, 2004) and the special challenges faced by K–8 foreign language educators (Ezarik, 2001), our small-scale analysis of Ñandu peer-to-peer listserv interaction focused on high-interest topics in listserv postings. Because the majority of our listserv members are preK–8 foreign language

educators, we assumed that understanding how they use the listserv would help us enhance our Web site.

Our specific questions were:

- 1 What are the topics that generate the most interest among Ñandu members? What are the most frequently discussed issues on Ñandu?
- 2 How can we use this information to enhance our Web site? Specifically, can we formulate a section of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) that are of interest to Ñandu members as well as to others who are interested in early foreign language education? And, if we cannot easily formulate a FAQs section, are there other ways in which we can use our findings to improve our Web site?

There are various options for enhancing our Web site. For instance, a type of “ask the expert” question is posed via the interactive component of the Web site; we may use these questions as the basis for some FAQs. And we may use listserv postings to determine what issues the Web site should address (without assuming that listserv participants could provide information about those issues). But in this paper, we focus on whether members ask each other questions—and provide answers—that can be incorporated into the Web site. We wonder, that is, whether any FAQs can be based on questions that have attracted attention from listserv members.

Many Web sites have a section of FAQs as a quick reference to common questions or areas of interest. FAQs are also often posted or archived on Internet newsgroups and listservs where new members ask the same questions that regular participants have already answered several times before (Club Plus Internet, n.d.). Thus, in order to reduce the continual reposting of the same questions and answers, “FAQs are compilations of information which are [usually] the result of certain questions constantly being asked in a newsgroup” (Hersch, 1997). More recently, however, some Web sites have FAQs sections that are broader in scope, reviewing and explaining a topic from several points of view or even going beyond the simple question-and-answer format and linking to a collection of documents (Wikipedia, 2005). In some cases, FAQs are the result of extensive research on a certain topic and may not be based on actually asked questions at all. Currently, there are literally thousands of FAQ documents on the Internet for all kinds of topics (for a searchable collections of USENET FAQs, see Internet FAQ Consortium, 2005).

In this paper, we investigate the possibility of using listserv discussion as a basis for constructing FAQs. The findings of this preliminary study are of interest to practitioners who want to learn more about the day-to-day concerns of practicing K–8 foreign language teachers, for example, teacher educators and designers of online tools for professional development, as well as researchers interested in computer-mediated discourse analysis.

## ■ Project Background

Ñandutí, the Web site on early foreign language learning, was originally developed in 1997 and is updated on a regular basis. Those interested in K–8 foreign language learning—educators, administrators, researchers, and parents—can consult Ñandutí for information on issues that range from standards implementation, different language program models, and alternative assessment to strategies for foreign language advocacy. The Web site’s focus is on practical materials, resources, and techniques that are easy to implement. Additional resources are links to national and regional organizations, state standards, training opportunities, and conferences with an emphasis on the Northeast region. Ñandutí receives well over 800,000 hits per year (2004), fluctuating from a high of approximately 85,000 in September to a low of 59,000 in August. The page views, that is, how often content pages are accessed, are well over 135,000 per year, fluctuating from approximately 10,000 to about 11,500 per month. In addition, Ñandutí has an interactive component, offering users the opportunity to e-mail CAL staff and request additional information. On average, 10 to 12 such questions are received per month. The Web site also links to Ñandu, the listserv, and the searchable listserv archives.

Ñandu, the listserv, was established in 1999 and has steadily grown to more than 680 members (as of January 2005) with approximately 220 new members joining over the past year and about 35 unsubscribing from the listserv. However, we do not know if all subscribers are still active participants because the number of members who routinely post messages is considerably smaller. For example, during the six months from July 2004 to February 2005, about half of the listserv members posted at least one message, with about 60 listserv members posting more than 10 messages each. There may well be “lurkers” who read postings but do not contribute, but of course we have no way of counting them. Yet, even “lurkers” may be deeply engaged in the online discussion (Gulati, 2004).

Although the listserv has a moderator, subscribers can post messages in real time without waiting for message approval. The welcome message (see Appendix), which every subscriber receives, encourages listserv members to share their “work, ideas, and questions with others interested in early-start, long-sequence language programs.” It also asks that those who post messages:

- ❑ give their postings an appropriate subject heading,
- ❑ keep postings related to the overall topic of foreign language education,
- ❑ avoid messages that are addressed to individual members, and
- ❑ avoid messages that are simple agreements or “me-too’s” and “thank you’s.”

By and large, listserv members are aware of and do follow these guidelines. Some members apologize when they break the rules or remind others about these guidelines.

The moderator keeps a relatively low profile and posts messages that provide information about new resources, refer to technical questions or problems with the listserv and archives, and, in rare cases, remind users of posting guidelines when these are violated repeatedly.

All Ñandu postings since July 15, 2004 are archived online and can be accessed at <http://caltalk.cal.org/read/?forum=nandu> even without a subscription. Messages are archived by date, subject line, number of replies, and original author, and can be searched by any/all words in message bodies and the header. Earlier messages (before July 15, 2004) are archived in an online database and can be searched by keyword at <http://www.cal.org/resources/nandu/>.

Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of Ñandu with respect to its technology, membership, and interaction (adapted from Herring, 2004).

TABLE 1. TECHNOLOGY, MEMBERSHIP, AND INTERACTION ON ÑANDU		
TECHNOLOGY	MEMBERSHIP	INTERACTION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Messages are text only.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> E-mail messages come to subscribers in chronological order or as a daily digest.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Messages can be posted by subscribers both via e-mail or online.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Public, searchable archives are organized by date and subject line.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Separate archive is for messages before July 14, 2004.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Public membership is by subscription.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Members are “committed to improving early language programs by sharing information and expertise” (Ñandu welcome message).</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Most members are K–8 teachers with a majority teaching Spanish.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Most members know each other only online.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Membership is not constant, i.e., new members can join or leave at any time.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> All members are of equal status (with moderator enforcing some rules).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Topics are selected by participants within the general area of “early foreign language learning.”</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Interaction is asynchronous but can be almost instantaneous.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Messages are organized chronologically by subject heading.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Moderator does not pre-approve postings.</li> </ul>

Ñandu shares technological and therefore interactive characteristics with listservs in general, such as its asynchronicity and chronological organization of messages. However, compared to other listservs that are geared toward educators, Ñandu's audience has some specific characteristics that may affect what and how issues are discussed:

- 1 Membership is open, by-and-large self-selected, and indefinite; anyone interested in K–8 foreign language learning can join. This is in contrast to discussion lists that are restricted to a closed group (e.g., members of an online class); lists with a much narrower interest (e.g., the Klingon language from *Star Trek*); and lists with a broader interest (e.g., foreign language education from elementary school through college, or gifted and learning-disabled education).
- 2 There are no a priori experts or higher status members in this group, even though some listserv members may have established themselves as authorities on certain topics (e.g., teaching preschoolers or teaching Italian) based on their previous postings. The moderator provides resources and assists with technical problems. This is in contrast to moderated lists, which require approval of postings. (It may be that members consider the postings of the moderator and the postings of some regular contributors, who have become well known in their field, to be those of experts, but all participants tend to present their contributions as suggestions rather than as authoritative pronouncements.)
- 3 Topics are selected by the listserv members within the overall subject area of K–8 foreign language learning and may or may not be picked up for discussion by others. That is, unlike discussion in an online class where topics, conversational goals, and amount of participation are prescribed, listserv members themselves decide if and how they want to respond to a posting.

## ■ Theoretical Perspectives

With the rapid expansion of the Internet and people interacting online in unprecedented numbers, researchers in a variety of disciplines have turned to studying this type of communication. One promising approach is computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2001, 2004), which applies frameworks and analytical methods developed in textually based discourse analysis (Schiffrin, 1994; Tannen, Schiffrin, & Hamilton, 2001) to online interaction. Traditionally in the discourse analysis of spoken, written, or computer-mediated text, researchers ground interpretation firmly in the data itself, presenting relevant data for scrutiny by others in the form of numerous examples and exercising caution when generalizing or abstracting. Discourse analysts assume that language in use is a means of performing actions and creating a social world (Wood & Kroger, 2002). Whether their data

consist of talk (or transcription of talk) or, as in the present case, written materials, the focus is on how speakers and writers create meaning in context (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 1997; Johnstone, 2002; Schiffrin, 1994; Tannen, Schiffrin, & Hamilton, 2001; Tannen, 1989).

Much discourse analysis of computer-mediated interaction has focused on how participants adapt to the medium and how they achieve various interpersonal goals. Researchers have found that even synchronous electronic communication (as in chat rooms) requires a different sort of turn-taking system from oral conversation, because adjacency pairs (i.e., utterances that belong together) such as questions and answers are often interrupted and because overlap is so common (i.e., several people typing or “talking” at the same time). Such disruptions may give rise to misunderstanding (Cherny, 1999; Garcia & Jacobs, 1999). However, users rise to the challenge of achieving coherence in their discourse (Werry, 1996), and in fact may “exploit the potential of loosened coherence for the purposes of [language] play” (Herring, 1999, Summary). Asynchronous electronic discussion (as on listservs) also requires adaptation; for instance, contributors to discussion groups may modify their accustomed means of agreeing and disagreeing (Baym, 1996).

In face-to-face conversation, people’s primary goals are often sociability or construction of identity, and these goals can outweigh the content of their talk (Coupland, 2000). The same is true in some computer-mediated discourse forums. Research has investigated how people use linguistic means to construct or display gender (Herring, 1996); create particular social identities—through the use, for instance, of personal narratives (Hamilton, 1998) or humor (Baym, 1995); and build a community (Herring, 2004). Such research focuses primarily on how participants attune to and build on one another’s contributions. It focuses less on the exchange of information—the content of contributions and topical development.

In this study, however, we are primarily interested in topics and content: identifying topics of high interest to listserv participants and finding out what they say about them that would be of potential interest to others who consult the listserv or the Web site. In professional talk (like that on the listserv), content is central to contributors’ purposes. Their goal is not sociability but the exchange of useful information. Of course, interpersonal concerns such as sociability and attentiveness to interlocutors are always integral to interaction of any kind, including the most businesslike. Central to our analysis is one of the main tenets of discourse analysis—that conversationalists make their contributions relevant and appropriate to each other. But our focus—rather unusually for a discourse analysis—is on content.

Although studies of asynchronous discussions have addressed the problem of how to keep online learners on topic (see Beaudin, 1999 for an overview), most have focused on how participants in chat rooms and discussion lists make their discourse coherent on a turn-by-turn level (Harrison, 1998; Hawkes & Romiszowski, 2001; Stromer-Galley & Martinson, 2004). Our analysis, on the other hand, involves extended stretches of discourse.

---

## METHOD

As discourse analysts, our approach is primarily qualitative. We scrutinized the linguistic features of the texts under consideration to characterize their structure and function in context, assuming that the analysis must account for the interpretation and understanding of the listserv participants themselves. In a discourse analytic framework, neither categories of analysis nor tools are imposed upon the data; instead, the data invite the use of particular analytical tools, and categories emerge through iterative inspection (Herring, 2004). In addition, the research question motivates both the kind and size of the data that are selected for further analysis.

### Data Sources

---

Our analysis drew upon more than 2,400 listserv messages posted during the period of July 15, 2004 through March 15, 2005. From these, we selected listserv postings that were of apparent high interest, as indicated by the number of replies they generated. We defined the unit of analysis as the thread, an initial posting with a subject line—usually chosen by the original poster—and all subsequent replies under the same subject line. We identified for closer analysis threads that received more than 10 replies, as a way of operationalizing “high interest.” (Although it is possible that participants were interested in messages that got little or no response, we could identify no practical way of demonstrating this. Furthermore, a large proportion of the responses that appeared in long threads were quite lengthy and probably took some time and effort to compose, another indicator of interest.) In addition, we examined postings that occurred within the same time period to find threads that were related based on the subject line and content. Furthermore, we used the search function in our archive to identify other threads that were related topically.

For example, a thread labeled “Numbers to 100” received 18 responses and thus was among those selected for further analysis. It was started on October 22, 2004 by a teacher asking for suggestions on how to teach the numbers up to 100 in Spanish. Eighteen responses appeared within this thread over a four-day period. During the same time period (October 23 to November 8), five messages about the same topic were posted under another thread labeled “Another numbers game...Wordswatter.” (Messages in this thread were clearly intended as part of the same discussion as those in the first: Not only did it run simultaneously but it was about a similar game.) Both before and after this discussion, however, people held other discussions about teaching numbers. A search of the archive revealed four more threads on the subject from different time periods. In most cases, the label of the thread was informative: “Numbers,” “Teaching numbers to 1000,” and “Cute online games, colors, numbers, ABC, etc.” However, the content of the posts had to be inspected, for not all messages that contained the word “numbers” had to do with teaching techniques. And the title of one relevant thread (“‘Anacleta’ offers something new”) did not reveal that the poster was offering on her Web site tips for teaching numbers.

Altogether, the six threads about teaching numbers in a foreign language contained 44 posts (indicating that this topic was indeed of high interest). This example shows that locating all the messages that were pertinent to a discussion took several steps.

Number of replies was a useful starting point for gauging participants' interest in a topic or a posting, but we also considered other expressions of high interest. Sometimes members provided feedback to the list moderator via private e-mail messages outside the listserv. Often, when listserv members offered to send teaching materials to anyone who was interested, they were inundated with requests. (Although such requests were supposed to be communicated privately and not posted, they often appeared on the listserv, in this case to the advantage of the analyst.) Posters also provided explicit online expressions of interest and appreciation to fellow members. In the following example, the original poster, who had offered to send a list of Spanish songs that she had compiled to interested listserv members, thanks other members for their enthusiasm and mentions that she received about 100 requests for her list.

**Note:** In this and all other examples, spelling and punctuation in the listserv messages have been preserved. Ellipses indicate that some material in the original message has been omitted.

---

#### EXAMPLE 1

---

*Subject: Re: Spanish Song list*

*Whew! Wow! I'm thrilled that so many people are interested in the song list!  
[...]*

*However, after sending it to about one hundred individuals,  
I think I'll take a break and see if I can get it put on my website [...]*

## Data Analysis

After selecting the threads that generated the most interest among Ñandu listserv participants, we performed a detailed analysis drawing on analytic tools from a range of fields important to the study of language. From cognitively oriented studies on discourse comprehension, we took the analytical tools for identifying the topic or content of a thread and the individual listserv messages. From speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), we took the insight that discourse participants are at all times doing something; in our data they are often requesting or offering information, and sometimes agreeing, disagreeing, making arrangements, etc. Conversation analysis gave us the notions of sequencing and adjacency pairs (Sacks, 1995; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). An adjacency pair is a pair of utterances, such as question and answer, that occur together and are understood together: Listserv members interpret whatever follows a question as an answer. Finally, the insights of interactional sociolinguistics (Schiffrin, 1994, Ch. 4) allowed us to examine how listserv members attune to each other's conversational needs by providing abundant details.

All these approaches allowed us to develop a comprehensive framework toward the analysis of topics in Ñandu listserv postings. Although intuitively it seems straightforward to say that topics are what a discourse is about, a closer look at the research on “topic” shows that the concept is notoriously difficult to formalize. Topics have been used to refer to different parts of the communicative process—such as message, speaker, or interaction—as well as to different linguistic units at which it is encoded, for example, small parts of sentences or large chunks of discourse (see Brown & Yule, 1983, for an overview.) We decided to focus on two aspects of topics, which always co-occur in listserv interaction:

- 1 Text topic, that is, the propositional content of a thread or “what a thread is about,” and
- 2 Interactive topic, defined as the “shared focus which results from hearer/ speaker interaction” (Schiffrin, 1988, p. 15); in other words, “what the point is of what we are talking about.”

Because our goal was ultimately to enhance Web site content, and because most listserv exchanges are content-focused, our initial emphasis was on text topics, which are primarily centered on the actual content of messages. We drew on the cognitively oriented discourse analysis approach of van Dijk & Kintsch (1983), which assumes that topics can be expressed in terms of hierarchically organized propositions that are (a) based on underlying semantic structures and (b) derived using textual and contextual strategies. In this framework, the topmost proposition for a listserv thread is the “summarizing title” of ideas expressed in the thread. Identifying such an overall “title” also allowed us to assign various threads to even higher level categories. For example, a thread with the heading “Spanish song list” and another thread on “French family songs” could be subsumed under the category “Songs in foreign languages.”

Text topics, however, do not tell the whole story about what is going on when listserv members talk about issues and concerns. To make our Web site most useful, it is not sufficient only to know what people discuss on the listserv; it is also imperative to discover their purposes, motivations, and interactive goals. The notion of interactive topic is helpful here. Interactive topics are pragmatics-based—that is, listserv members do something—and are negotiated and jointly created through discourse. The focus is on “what we are talking about.” In our context, threads are mostly asking for information or advice, and replying by providing that information or advice. As we discuss below, interactive topics may dovetail more or less closely with text topics. Cases where an interactive topic is less closely tied to a text topic, or where it departs entirely from an initially proposed topic, reveal a great deal about listserv members’ concerns, assumptions, and willingness to modify their views.

In order to identify topics, we relied primarily on textual indicators of topic in the text. We can assume that listserv participants also used contextual strategies to make themselves understood, although we do not focus on these here. (Contextual

strategies include shared assumptions about writers' identities, the communicative situation, and the discourse genre; both participants and discourse analysts know what kind of content and interactive exchanges are appropriate and expected on a listserv devoted to early language learning, and they interpret contributions accordingly.) Textual indicators of topic in listserv exchanges include the following:

- ❑ Subject lines of postings (in both the initial posting and replies)
- ❑ Lexical items (nouns or verbs denoting actors, actions, locations)
- ❑ Syntactic form (e.g., question, imperative)
- ❑ Identification of speech act (explicitly or implicitly) and/or purpose of a post
- ❑ Reference to previous postings
  - within the body of the message, or
  - by appending a previous message to the current one
- ❑ Adjacency pairs (e.g., question/answer, or offer of information/acknowledgment)

Example 2 illustrates topical indicators in a question and subsequent replies.

#### **EXAMPLE 2**

##### **INITIAL POST**

**Subject: seeking instrumental music from Guatemala**

*Does anyone know of a tape or CD of music from Guatemala?*

*Or even better, one that has music from all over Mexico, Central, and South America? Need some resources ASAP—my class starts June 28, and I've been looking on the internet for weeks!*

##### **REPLIES**

**1) Re: seeking instrumental music from Guatemala**

*I bought the las CD of Ricardo Arjona... he is from Guatemala and Grammy award winner. He's good.*

*And also you can get "Guatemala: Celebrated Marimbas"*

**2) Re: seeking instrumental music from Guatemala**

*Check the bookstore "Barnes & Noble" in the music section, they have CD's for Spanish countries, great selection and good prices.*

In this example, we found the following topical indicators:

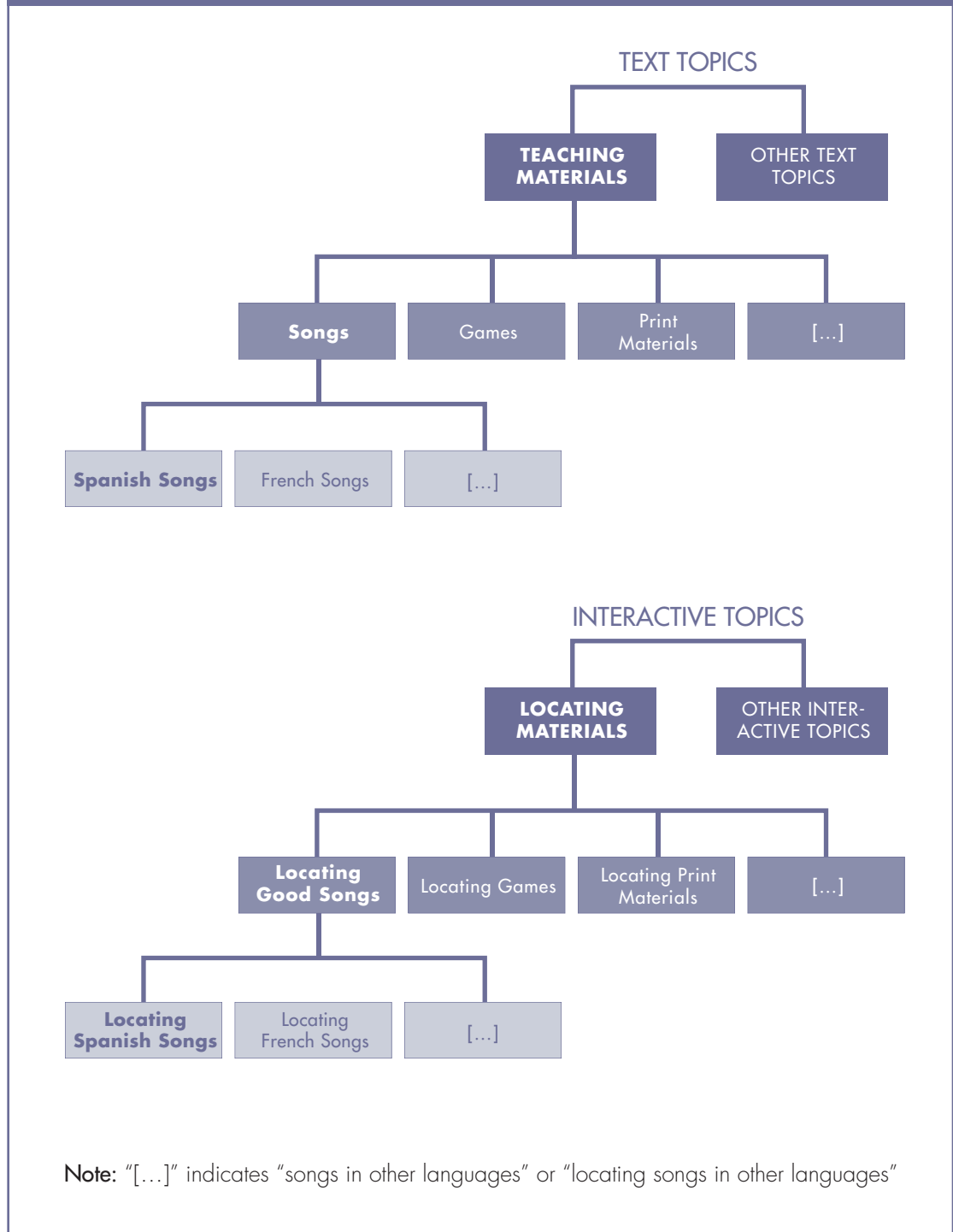
- ❑ subject heading
- ❑ lexical items: Guatemala; name of artist; names of objects (CD, Guatemalan songs); locations (Barnes & Noble, Mexico, Central and South America)
- ❑ syntax (questions, assertions, imperatives)
- ❑ speech acts and underlying presuppositions (requesting help/offering help)
- ❑ adjacency pairs (query/replies)

We used these indicators to identify the following topics:

- ❑ The text topic, or the summarizing title of the thread, is “Guatemalan songs that are available on tape or CD.”
- ❑ The interactive topic, that is, the shared focus of the participants, is “Help with finding good Guatemalan and Central American songs on tape or CD.”

Assuming that topics can be hierarchically organized, we then coded the text topics and interactive topics of this thread on increasingly higher levels of abstraction within the context of a listserv for early foreign language educators. Such topics are assigned or derived from the discourse by language users in the process of understanding and producing utterances (van Dijk, 2004). Figure 1 represents an example of hierarchy of topics on the Ñandu listserv.

**FIGURE 1. EXAMPLE OF TOPICS AT INCREASINGLY HIGHER LEVELS OF ABSTRACTION**



---

## ■ RESULTS

### ■ What Listserv Participants Talk About

---

#### ***General Information About Threads With 10 or More Responses***

Table 2 lists threads that garnered 10 or more responses. They contain a total of 403 posts from 139 different people, with a mean of 15.5 posts per thread (median = 14). Each thread had at least seven participants, and at most 27, with a mean of 11.6 participants (median = 17). (Many people, of course, participated in more than one thread or posted more than once in a single thread.) The response numbers, then, indicate that the questions posed and the issues discussed were of interest to listserv members. In fact, the actual number of messages and participants was sometimes higher than this because discussion on a single topic was not always contained within a single thread. The threads labeled “Spanish song list,” “Partner chants,” “Numbers to 100,” “The letter v,” “Teaching arrangements,” and “Summer in Spain” were part of larger discussions, which grew out of but were not confined to the named topics. This is indicated in Table 2: For these discussions, the numbers in the rows labeled “# posts total on topic” and “# posters total on topic” are higher than in the rows labeled “# posts in original thread” and “# posters in original thread.” (The labels “# posts total on topic” and “# posters total on topic” refer to the number of posts or posters in both an original thread and related ones, which may have a different subject heading.)

**TABLE 2. ÑANDU THREADS WITH 10 OR MORE RESPONSES**

<b>DISCUSSION</b>	<b># posts in original thread</b>	<b># posts total on topic</b>	<b># posters in original thread</b>	<b># posters total on topic</b>
Spanish song list	42	74	27	40
Partner chants	34	45	21	23
Numbers to 100	19	44	12	26
The letter v	18	24	16	18
Songs for months	17	17	13	13
First days of school, Spanish	17	17	15	15
French family song	15	15	7	7
Vocab review drills	15	15	14	14
Word ring	15	15	11	11
Spanish family	14	14	12	12
Unit on Spain	14	14	8	8
Question for native speakers (actually two threads: "slang word <i>porras</i> " and "use of tilde")	14	14	11	11
Teaching arrangements (other thread on "carts")	14	20	11	12
<i>Día de los muertos</i> age appropriate?	14	14	11	11
Chants/songs/rhymes about snow	13	13	9	9
Summer in Spain	13	21	11	16
Spanish FLES textbooks	12	12	10	10
Spanish names for K-1?	12	12	10	10
<i>Las Posadas</i>	12	12	10	10
Telling time activities	12	12	10	10
Simple or not so simple question	12	12	9	9
Days of week	11	11	9	9
Resources for Latin dances	11	11	6	6
First day of school	11	11	9	9
Mexico packets	11	11	10	10
Pre-school Spanish curriculum	11	11	7	7
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>403</b>	<b>491</b>	<b>299</b>	<b>336</b>
	Mean: 15.5 Median: 14	Mean: 18.9 Median: 17	Mean: 11.5 Median: 11	Mean: 12.9 Median: 11.5

This table shows the threads that we focused on in our subsequent analysis of text topics and interactive topics in listserv postings.

## ■ Categorizing the Topics and Exchanges on the Listserv

As mentioned above, listserv discussions may be categorized in two different, but cross-cutting, ways. Text topics (i.e., summarizing titles) focus on the sort of information sought and provided; they are identified through the propositional content and the semantic features of a posting or a series of postings. Interactive topics (i.e., the shared and negotiated focus of the interaction) focus on how issues or topics of interest are jointly negotiated and constructed through the discourse. Text topics and interactive topics are simultaneously realized in peer-to-peer listserv exchanges, but we separate them in our analysis because they reveal different aspects of participants' interests. Text topics are categories of ideas, while interactive topics are ways of developing ideas. Our interest in using listserv postings as a resource for enhancing the Web site led us to concentrate initially on text topics, but we soon realized that to understand more fully what participants were doing and saying, we needed to study interactive topics.

## ■ Text Topics: Ideas

The kind of information that listserv participants repeatedly seek and provide falls into the following general categories:

*Teaching a certain topic or skill in a foreign language.* Participants routinely ask for advice on reviewing vocabulary or on teaching specific lesson units, such as teaching numbers, days of the week, months of the year, holidays, and telling time. They ask for and provide help in designing particular units: One popular thread, for instance, has the subject heading “Need ideas for unit on Spain for grades P[reschool] – 3”; other discussions are about a “market unit” and a “unit on school.”

*Translating.* Teachers often request help with foreign language expressions. Most often they want to know the Spanish (or French) word for an English term, but occasionally they ask for the meaning of a foreign language expression.

*Curriculum and teaching materials.* Teachers ask and advise each other about textbooks for Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES) classes; curriculum materials for preschoolers; and titles and purchase information for books, songs, and craft materials.

*Managing classrooms.* Teachers frequently discuss issues of classroom management, including how to handle the first day of school, how to motivate students, whether to give students names in the target language, and how to teach successfully when one does not have one's own classroom but rather travels from classroom to classroom—a problem unique to early foreign language teachers.

*Professional development.* Listserv participants often exchange information about summer programs or workshops for teachers and pose questions about teacher licensing.

## ■ Interactive Topics: Jointly Created Focus

In addition, we characterized listserv discussions not only according to what sort of information teachers sought and provided, but also how they jointly negotiated interactive topics. We distinguished interactive topics depending on how predictably the topics progress.

*Type 1*, the majority of threads, are exchanges in which participants implicitly agree from the onset about both the text topic and interactive topic, and relatively little topic shift occurs. Thus, participants maintain the topic proposed by the original poster. The thread consists of an initial query and a series of responses.

In *Type 2* exchanges, participants shift the topic slightly, but to one that is clearly related to the original query, frequently on a semantically higher level of abstraction. For example, several participants may have discussed the merits of specific Spanish summer programs abroad when one person introduces the more general text topic “Master’s degree programs for K–8 foreign language teachers,” and the interactive topic becomes “What does one need to consider when choosing a master’s degree teacher program?”

*Type 3* threads are intended by the original poster as an invitation to argue for or against a position or at least list pro’s and con’s of a potentially controversial issue. In none of the discussion in *Type 1*, *2* or *3* does any challenge arise about implicit assumptions carried by messages.

In *Type 4* discussions, on the other hand, an assumption is challenged: Someone voices disagreement with the implicit premise of a previous posting, and subsequent posters align on one side or another. As they do so, the topic veers away from the one originally proposed (the initial post frequently having been a simple request for information). The newly raised controversy is itself evidently of high interest, judging from the number of people who participate in the discussion.

### ***Type 1 Discussions: Requests for Information/Supplying Information***

The discussions in *Type 1* are structurally the most straightforward (and the other types may be considered departures from this type of structure). An original poster asks, typically, for advice on teaching materials, and others provide it. Responses are straightforward, with people supplying the information requested: teaching tips, names and descriptions of games and songs that are relevant to the question posed, and relevant books or links to Web sites to locate more resources or information. There may be clarification questions or follow-up questions and answers in the course of the discussion, but the topic proceeds in a predictable manner with everybody agreeing on the ideas discussed and the purpose of the exchange.

Two typical examples are the discussions of “Songs to teach the months of the year” and “Vocabulary review drills.” The first extends over four days and involves 13 participants; the second goes on sporadically for a month with 14 participants. In each case, the original poster conveys that she lacks some information, and the message serves as a request to any listserv members who may have that information.

---

**EXAMPLE 3**

---

**Subject: Song to teach the months of the year**

*Hola noticieros,*

*My colleague asked me if I knew of a simple song to teach the months of the year. I told her someone on nandu had suggested teaching the months to the tune of the Adams family, but I could never get the right rhythm. Has anyone found a song that worked for them?*

*Mil gracias*

---

**EXAMPLE 4**

---

**Subject: vocab review drills**

*Does anyone have a suggestion for a great vocabulary review drill/game?  
(for kindergarten)*

The subject line announces what sort of information the poster needs, and the request is voiced explicitly and in more detail in the body of the message. The message may optionally contain a greeting or a thank you anticipating replies that will provide the required information (Example 3 has both). It may contain some background to the request, as in Example 3, where the poster explains that she is asking on behalf of a colleague and tells what she has tried already.

Responses then are posted. In the “Songs” discussion, six different songs are suggested (three of them by more than one person), and in “Vocabulary,” six different games are proposed. Example 5 is one of these games. (It is reproduced here in its entirety to illustrate how the length and level of detail of many of the messages on the listserv is precisely what makes them useful to participants.)

---

---

**EXAMPLE 5****Subject: RE: vocab review drills**

*I play a game called Buzz Word. Put up pictures of the vocab you are studying on the overhead. Send one student out in the hall. The rest of the class (secretly) picks one of the words to be the "buzz word" and then the "exiled" student gets to come back into the room. He/she points to a word on the overhead and says it in the TL. If that word is NOT the buzz word the rest of the class says it back to him/her, and the turn continues with another vocab word. If it IS the Buzz word the class says "buzz" and the turn is over. I do this with my 8th graders and they love it. Since you use pictures instead of words, I think kindergartners could try it. Hope this makes sense!*

In addition to messages containing suggestions, each discussion contains several "follow-up" messages (six in "Songs" and seven in "Vocabulary"). In follow-up messages, a participant asks for clarification or further information about something mentioned previously, and the previous poster supplies it—for instance, where to find a song that was recommended. Finally, "Songs" (but not "Vocabulary") contains one message of appreciation to a previous poster ("Thanks for sharing your 'Macarena' months song...what a great idea!"); such expressions of appreciation appear from time to time throughout the discussions and indicate that the original request has been fulfilled and that the thread is successfully closed.

Thus, the structure of the simplest form of discussion is:

- 1 Request for information by the first poster
- 2 Provision of information by several subsequent posters
- 3 (Optional) Follow-up questions and answers—may occur anytime
- 4 (Optional) Expression of appreciation—may occur anytime

*Using simple question/answer threads to enhance the Web site.* We originally assumed that certain questions would come up often and that the answers to them would be relatively concise and self-contained. On occasion, participants do provide concise information, such as links to Web sites or book recommendations, as in Example 6:

---

---

**EXAMPLE 6****INITIAL POST****Subject: Las Posadas**

*Does anyone know an easy way to make farolitos?*

### **REPLIES**

#### **Re: Las Posadas**

*You can find directions for making luminarias out of paper lunch bags. /see pg 137 December BIENVENIDOS BY T.S. Denison & Co.*

#### **Re: Las Posadas**

*A really pretty way to make lanterns is as follows:  
<http://www.kidsdomain.com/craft/lantern1.html>  
Hope this helps.*

The Ñanduti Web site could be enhanced if it presented listserv recommendations like these compiled as lists of Web sites grouped into categories (general materials, songs, games, and curricula). In addition, it could provide a list of books recommended by listserv participants, filling in authors, titles, and publishing information that was not given by participants. In this way, mining the listserv for generally useful information that is readily incorporated into a FAQs section would be quite feasible.

However, in numerous instances listserv members' recommendations are not easily compiled into succinct packages. Participants provide so much information to one another on the topics that they find interesting and useful that it would be difficult if not impossible—and not helpful—to summarize it. Postings detail exactly how to perform activities, such as playing a game, as in Example 5 above, in which the respondent explains how to play “Buzz Word.” Similarly, Example 7 is one of over 40 messages about teaching Spanish numbers. It lists and describes several suggestions. Just as in the “Buzz Word” case, it is precisely the length and level of detail that the poster provides which make this contribution informative and potentially useful for readers:

### **EXAMPLE 7**

#### **Subject: Re: Numbers to 1000**

*More ideas for teaching numbers:*

*1) Matamoscas (flyswatters...you can write the key numbers on the board) 5 min warm-up (not a competition, more like personal satisfaction) (¡Maten el número 40!)*

*2) Chicos y Chicas (Escriban el número 30, el número 30) Gana él que es más rápido y correcto (also about 5 min or they get too crazy)*

3) Olé (can go on as long as you can stand it ...I usually do 3 rounds of the class and give stickers to those still standing) For fifth graders who are reviewing numbers, you can do 3's and multiples of 3's. It will stump them. If that's really too hard, do 5's and multiples of 5's.

4) Cake Walk I actually use this for a fiesta outside, but not in this weather. It's in the book "Cuadros de Familia" If you have a classroom, or can use space out in the hall,. Either use sidewalk chalk or magic marker on an old sheet that you tape down. Write the numbers that you are highlighting. Put on music that makes them want to dance (cha-cha's and rumbas or salsa). Have one child in charge of putting CD player on pause. Another child is in charge of numbers. You say: Saca un número. ¿Qué número es? Número 60. Vete a comer una galleta. ¡Música! and they dance around again until the next gets a cookie. If child doesn't know his/her numbers, could miss chance for cookie. If you want to do something cultural use the Goya cookies or make dulce de leche served on Graham Crackers (but very sticky).

In order to know how to play the games mentioned in these messages, teachers would need access to the full description. Because this is not easily done on the Web site, except by linking to other resources, the site developers should not try to fully answer questions such as "What activities are useful for teaching children about numbers in foreign languages?" Instead, the Web site can direct people to various discussions on the listserv (by subject line and/or by date). It can indicate what topics have received a lot of attention from listserv members and the sort of suggestions that appear in participants' contributions. For the topics "Teaching numbers" and "Reviewing vocabulary," for instance, most of the contributions consist of games, as opposed to drills or songs. It can also direct people to all the appropriate parts of a discussion. For instance, listserv members wondering how best to teach numbers in a foreign language could benefit from reading contributions posted under several headings. In addition, the Web site can link to an activity-submission template that interested contributors can fill out; the template can include the title of an activity, the audience, the materials, and the steps.

Thus, even in discussions in which topic remains constant (Type 1), it would not benefit users if the Web site were to summarize all the responses. The detailed information that participants offer one another—the very number and unwieldiness of their ideas—is necessary for anyone who requests ad hoc information for their specific situation. Just as details are crucial in narrative (Adger, Hoyle, & Dickinson, 2005; Johnstone, 1990), details are crucial in the listserv participants' suggestions. They rarely advise one another to just play, for example, "Go Fish" (and when someone did, another participant admitted she needed detailed instructions). Instead, they not only recommend games but also explain exactly how to play them, in order to make their contributions useful.

### **Type 2 Discussions: Requests for Information With Topic Shifts**

In the second type of discussions, the topic shifts slightly. The responses do not all relate directly to the query originally posted, and a discussion emerges that is broader than that envisioned by the original poster. All the contributions do relate to the same higher order topic.

One example is a thread with the subject heading “Spanish family” that ran over six days with 14 posts by 12 different listserv members.

#### **EXAMPLE 8**

**Subject: Spanish family**

*I have been teaching the unit on family.*

*I know that the word for great-grandfather is bisabuelo,  
but I can not find the translation for great-great grandfather.*

*Please help.*

*¡Mil gracias!*

The poster gives some background about why she needs to know the Spanish expression for great-great grandfather (“teaching the unit on family”), gives more background about what she already knows (“the word for great grandfather is *bisabuelo*”), claims that she was unsuccessful finding the necessary information, asks for help, and closes with a thank you that anticipates relevant responses. Within a few minutes, two posters provide the required information, “*tatarabuelo*.” At this point, the request for information has been fulfilled, the proposition is complete, and the exchange could end. However, the original poster follows up with a second request for information about the word-formation rule that applies in this case.

#### **EXAMPLE 9**

*In English we keep adding “great” to the front when we keep going back.*

*What is done in Spanish?*

*How far back can you go?*

*Thanks for your help.*

*abuelo= grandfather*

*bisabuelo= great grandfather*

*tatarabuelo= great great grandfather*

*????????=great great great grandfather*

*????????=great great great great grandfather*

Two posters reply supplying the requested information (although they do not agree exactly):

---

---

**EXAMPLE 10**

*Tataratarabuelo and as many times you need tatará you add.*

---

---

**EXAMPLE 11**

*It works the same in Spanish:  
tatarabuelo,  
tatatatatatata...abuelo, etc, je, je.  
But the truth is that we would probably say: "my grandmother's  
grandmother"... to make it more intelligible.*

Thus far the discussion has focused on the translation of a particular word. The next poster in this thread, however, shifts the topic by asking how to say "foster family" in Spanish. The shared text topic of the thread is still "expressions for family members in Spanish," and the negotiated interactive topic is still "requesting help with expressions in Spanish."

---

---

**EXAMPLE 12**

*Earlier last week I asked if anyone knows  
how to say foster family in Spanish. [Request]  
I didn't get any responses. [Reason for request]  
Doesn't this exist in Spanish? [Request 2]  
Thanks for any help. [Thank you]*

The subsequent replies either supply the term for foster family in various Spanish-speaking countries (which also answers her second request—whether the term exists in Spanish) or if they are unable to do so, offer an alternative explanation, for example:

---

---

**EXAMPLE 13**

*The only thing I know is *madraste y padrasto* for stepmother and stepfather.  
I've never heard of the terms for foster parents.  
I think I even asked my mom ... and she didn't know the correct term (...),  
but then she hasn't lived in Mexico for many years.*

---

---

**EXAMPLE 14**

*In Puerto Rico we use "Foster family" = Familia de crianza o Familia adoptiva.*

---

---

**EXAMPLE 15**

*In Spain, we call it "familia de crianza".*

Thus, a relatively specific request for information has shifted into a much more general discussion about family expressions in various Spanish-speaking countries.

Such translation questions come up frequently. Although most are usually resolved with fewer than 10 responses, a search yielded several subject headings, including:

- How do you say skateboard?
- How to say "hop scotch" in Spanish
- Weather expressions in Spanish
- Grilled cheese in Spanish

Interestingly, once a thread has been started about translating any particular term, posters feel free to shift the topic to other areas they perceive as topically related, as in the next example:

---

---

**EXAMPLE 16**

*Subject: Translation help*

*Does anyone know how to say "the parts of speech" in Spanish?*

Over the next two days, three posters supply exactly the same requested information, "las partes de la oración." A fourth poster replies to the last of these messages with:

---

---

**EXAMPLE 17**

*Como se dice "kabobs" en español???*

The next three posters discuss the various expressions for kabobs in different Spanish-speaking regions, for example, *brochetas*, *anticuchos*, and *kabobs*.

*Using topic-shifting threads to enhance the Web site.* Examples like those discussed here help the analyst identify topics of interest and categorize different threads. In their responses, listserv participants indicate what they consider an appropriate response, thus making explicit how topics are related on higher levels of abstraction. From the many exchanges about translation, it is clear that teachers want and expect their colleagues to help them out when they have a quick translation question. The person posting the query as well as other readers benefit from getting responses from people with different language and cultural backgrounds, information that is frequently not readily available in print or online dictionaries. This is particularly the case when respondents provide contextual information about the appropriateness of a certain expression, for example:

---

**EXAMPLE 18**

---

**Subject: Question for native speakers**

*Hola listeros,*

*To you native speakers out there—in a slang phrase book, I saw the phrase ¡Porras! which was translated as rats! Have you ever used it? Is it appropriate for use in school! Gracias, Connie*

A simple link to online dictionaries would not be sufficient to answer these kinds of questions. In fact, in a similar exchange, one respondent, who was new to the listserv, suggested that the poster should “check a dictionary,” thus challenging the appropriateness of the request. Several listserv members adamantly defended the original poster’s “right” to post the question on the listserv, insisting that “this is what a listserv is for.”

Thus, it seems that questions about translation, which often fall into Type 2, are best suited to listserv discussion, not to summary on a Web site.

### **Type 3 Discussions: Controversial Threads by Design**

Some posts that initiate a thread are intended to be controversial. Frequently, these threads are started by listserv members who are students enrolled in teacher training classes. Interestingly, many attempts to generate a discussion in which listserv participants are expected to argue for or against a position are not picked up. The postings that do generate response are of practical interest to listserv participants, as in Example 19.

---

---

**EXAMPLE 19****Subject: teaching arrangements**

*I am a junior at Iowa State University.*

*I am considering becoming a foreign language teacher when I graduate.*

*I was wondering if any of you have your own classrooms to teach out of.*

*In all of the examples I have seen, the teachers teach off of carts and travel from classroom to classroom.*

*Could anyone comment on these type of situations and maybe the pros and cons to each?*

The replies are quite varied both in terms of ideas expressed as well as in respondents' interpretation of "What is it we're talking about?" Some replies focus on the disadvantages of teaching from a cart, relating the practice to the perceived overall lower status of foreign language teachers. Others give suggestions on how to advocate for a classroom. Yet another group focuses on how to overcome the disadvantages of teaching from a cart, shifting the topic to practical solutions, including where to acquire the best cart. For example:

**REPLIES:**

---

---

**EXAMPLE 20**

*Actually, HAVING a cart and being able to wheel it around the school is a bonus.*

---

---

**EXAMPLE 21**

*[several suggestions]. I think as long as you have open communication with the teachers and are somewhat organized, the travelling cart is do-able.*

---

---

**EXAMPLE 22**

*My district built us carts that are fantastic!*

*Our operations department built them for us but I bet they would be a great project for a high school shop class.[detailed descriptions follow]*

---

---

**EXAMPLE 23**

*For anyone who wanted to know where I got my carillo*

*I asked the last teacher and she said it was ordered from Carlex or Teacher's Discovery...*

*Using pro-and-con discussions to enhance the Web site.* The “traveling foreign language teacher” is a topic that is discussed quite frequently and is of concern to many listserv members. Again, as with other threads, replies recount personal experience and provide detailed information. Although it is not possible to capture the richness of the peer-to-peer discussion on the Web site, developers can provide summaries of practical suggestions and links to materials (i.e., where to buy a cart), especially because this is a recurring topic on the listserv.

#### **Type 4 Discussions: Topic Change and Controversy**

The fourth type of discussion is characterized by topic change: Within a discussion, the topic proposed by the initial posting becomes overshadowed by a second topic (although the original one does not necessarily disappear). Someone challenges an implicit assumption made by a previous poster, and subsequent posters then take sides with one of the positions. Discussions of this sort are not frequent, although two are found in the list of threads with more than 10 responses. However, the amount of participation indicates that some controversial matters are of high interest.

An example is a discussion that took place over four days and included 45 messages from 23 different people. It was initiated when someone asked for recommendations of Spanish chants:

---

---

#### **EXAMPLE 24**

**Subject: partner chants**

*Does anyone have any partner chants (such as miss mary mack, patti cake) that are culturally authentic in spanish? Thanks.*

The first response offered and gave the words to a chant called “*Arroz con Dulce*.” The second was a clarification question about the definition of partner chant. The third response was:

---

---

#### **EXAMPLE 25**

**Subject: RE: partner chants**

*I use to play with this chant:*

*En un convento  
Borom-bombom  
Había una negra  
Borom-bombom  
Con tres negritos  
[etc.]*

With the next message, the tone of the discussion changed:

---

**EXAMPLE 26**

---

**Subject: RE: partner chants**

*Oh my goodness! How appalling and shameful! This chant might be acceptable and popular in Latin America but we certainly can not expose our children to this racism. I find the language offensive and humiliating. I pray that no one is using this song or any like this that offends other races in the classroom.*

*Disgusted in DC*

Within a few minutes the poster who had offered the chant wrote again, apologizing for any offense but explaining her linguistic background and calling for understanding:

---

**EXAMPLE 27**

---

**Subject: RE: partner chants**

*I'm very sorry if you got offended by these words. I had not intention to do it so. I'm from Argentina where a lot of people call "negra or negro" to our friends in a very affective way! I still have my nickname "negra! I understand that there may be a lot of people like you who feel "disgusted" with the words but it'd be very nice to be open and try to find out what is good and why in other countries. When I posted this chant It never crossed my mind that it will be so offensive and humiliating because I used to play it all the time. And of course, now I understand that the meaning of "Negro" in Spanish is far from the "English one!*

*I am very sorry to make you feel disgusted, humiliated and offended!*

From this point on, there were six more messages answering the original question—Spanish chants—but the main thrust of the discussion (34 more messages) turned to the new issues of cultural awareness, the appropriateness of using certain words, and whether context makes a difference to appropriateness. Not all the discussion took place in the original thread; four more threads were started (maybe because some posters realized that the subject line “partner chants” did not convey what they were now talking about). But the new threads were all clearly part of the same discussion: All occurred within a four-day period, referred to a previous post, and either took a stand on or voiced uncertainty about cultural appropriateness.

In this discussion, the new topic was sparked when one poster took exception to another poster's statement that seemed to contain an implicit assumption. That is, implicit in the chant from Example 25 is the assumption that it constituted an appropriate, unobjectionable answer to the query in Example 24. It is not possible to tell whether the participants reached agreement, but by exchanging (and in some cases modifying) their views, they together constructed a text that offers enlightening perspectives. The positions advanced were:

- ❑ Words like “*negrito*” are not insulting but rather affectionate when used in Latin American Spanish. Posters who expressed this opinion agreed with the original poster (e.g., “I am from Cuba and I agree with you. It is part of the culture.”)
- ❑ We cannot apply U.S. sensibilities to words from other languages and cultures (e.g., “Teaching a language is not just teaching words...it is learning new sounds, expressions, and ways of seeing; it is learning how to act in another culture...”)
- ❑ Such words are indeed insulting and hurtful, even if they may be intended affectionately and even to native speakers of a variety of Latin American Spanish. Furthermore, other expressions typically used in some varieties of Spanish (e.g., *gordo*) are equally hurtful.
- ❑ The questions raised in the current discussion are valuable to us as teachers (e.g., “I have long wondered how [this] could be explored in the context of teaching Spanish in the cultural landscape of the U.S..... Do we bring [these issues] to young learners at all?”)

After the original objection, the discussion was cordial and academic. Several participants, including the person originally offended, wrote long, detailed, considered messages explaining their views, and in the course of the exchange, some participants acknowledged that they had learned from it (e.g., “All the discussion has opened my eyes”).

*Using controversial discussions to enhance the Web site.* In light of the interest aroused by such a controversial topic and especially the thoughtful exchange of views posted during this discussion, the Ñandutí Web site should highlight it. Under a heading labeled “Issues in cultural understanding,” the issue can be briefly summarized as one for which there is no single correct conclusion, and the Web site can suggest introductory readings in cross-cultural communication. However, as with the detailed descriptions of games that are offered in other discussions, no summary can do justice to the nuanced views expressed by participants here; thus the Web site will link to all the threads of this important dialogue.

---

## CONCLUSION

Teachers—especially K–8 foreign language specialists—benefit from access to a forum (whether online or face-to-face) for exchanging information, experiences, opinions, and expertise with their peers. The amount of traffic on the Ñandu listserv attests to the interest that such an online forum holds for practitioners: They use the listserv to request specific information, to solve practical problems, to exchange ideas with their peers, and sometimes to discuss controversial issues.

Our research questions concerned the relation between the listserv and the Web site: The analysis of peer-to-peer listserv postings was driven by whether and to what extent insights about those postings could be used as a resource to enhance the Web site. In particular, we wondered about the possibility of mining listserv content in creating a FAQs section. Answering our questions required close attention to what was happening on the listserv and contributed to a better understanding of Ñandu listserv interaction itself. In the course of the study, we learned about the purposes for which participants use the listserv and how it helps them in their professional learning and practice. Analysis of their postings will allow us to improve our Web site by addressing issues that foreign language teachers find most relevant in their daily practice, thus fulfilling one of the key requirements of successful professional development resources (Sparks, 2002). Our examination of listserv interaction, however, has reinforced our belief that these two online tools complement each another but serve different purposes.

We focused on postings that generated the most replies, assuming that frequency of certain topics would give us a good understanding of what types of information are of the most interest to listserv members, and by extension our Web site audience. We identified several content areas that listserv participants talk about regularly and that generate multiple responses, for example, requesting advice on how to teach a certain language skill or lesson unit, how to locate appropriate teaching materials, or recommendations for professional development. Some questions come up often enough on the listserv and their answers are general enough that they may, in fact, contribute to a FAQs section on the Web site. Cases that fall into this category are those to which fairly authoritative answers exist: lists of books, Web sites, or study-abroad programs.

However, closer analysis of the responses revealed that only a minority of them are concise or potentially helpful out of their original context. Instead, because questions are often very specific to the poster's needs, useful replies should—and do—offer a high degree of specificity. Questions about teaching language skills or about finding materials occur regularly and frequently, as do “need-to-know-now” queries such as the foreign-language translation of an English expression. Informational exchanges are eminently suitable for listserv discourse and cannot be easily used for enhancing our Web site content. Thus, although a question may indeed be frequently asked

(and answered) by listserv members, it may be quite different from the sort of issues addressed by FAQs. However, the Web site could be enhanced by acknowledging the great interest shown in various topics and providing links to listserv discussions in all their detail, so that readers could use the information to improve their own practice.

On some occasions, listserv participants discuss the pro's and con's of a controversial issue. Posters argue from their personal and academic experience, offering as evidence for their positions accounts of what they have seen, heard, and thought about. Through the exchange of views, they construct a text that presents varied facets of the issue. It is not usually a succinct text, although it could be profitably consulted by other teachers wondering about the same problem. The Ñandutí Web site can call attention to issues on which disagreement is to be expected, provide some material about the issue, and let participants speak for themselves on the listserv.

We plan to use the results of our analysis of peer-to-peer listserv postings as a resource for Web site enhancement in three ways.

- ❑ First, we have identified several higher level topics of interest. To address them, we will cull practical and useful information from listserv responses to include on the Web site in a FAQs section.
- ❑ Second, we have found that it is the way that listserv participants jointly come up with suggestions and solutions that makes the information so useful. Therefore, we will refer our Web site users to the corresponding threads in our archives.
- ❑ Third, some issues that generate frequent postings—often translation questions but also extended discussions—are suitable only for the listserv. We can alert our Web site users to some controversial issues and direct them to especially productive archived threads, but in addition we will urge our Web site users to make more use of the listserv and encourage them to post their questions there. In fact, the Ñandu moderator often posts questions on behalf of Web site users who have contacted her and relays back the listserv responses.

Finally, the findings of this preliminary study can inform revisions of current teacher education curriculum to help teachers prepare for the realities of elementary and middle school language teaching; to help develop and improve online tools for teachers by spotlighting teachers' uses of a listserv and the connection between listserv content and Web site content; and to demonstrate the usefulness of applying discourse analysis to computer-mediated communication as well as a better understanding of the variety, or genres, of online discourse.

---

## REFERENCES

- Adger, C. T., Hoyle, S. M., & Dickinson, D. K. (2005). Locating learning in in-service education for preschool teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 41, 867–900.
- Austin, J. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Baym, N. K. (1995). The performance of humor in computer-mediated communication. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 1(2).
- Baym, N. K. (1996). Agreements and disagreements in a computer-mediated discussion. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 29, 315–345.
- Beaudin, B. P. (1999). Keeping online asynchronous discussions on topic. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 3, 2. Retrieved April 25, 2005, from The Sloane Consortium: [http://www.aln.org/publications/jaln/v3n2/v3n2\\_beaudin.asp](http://www.aln.org/publications/jaln/v3n2/v3n2_beaudin.asp)
- Brown, G., & Yule, G. (1983). *Discourse analysis*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Cherny, L. (1999). *Conversation and community: Chat in a virtual world*. Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language and Information.
- Club Plus Internet. (n.d.). *Glossary*. Retrieved May 3, 2005, from Club Plus Internet: <http://www.clubplus.net/english/glossary.htm>
- Coupland, J. (Ed.). (2000). *Small talk*. Edinburgh: Pearson.
- The Education Alliance at Brown University. (2001). Virtual communities of learners. *Education Notes*, 3(2), 6–7. Retrieved March 16, 2005 from The Education Alliance at Brown University: [www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/ed\\_notes/ednts\\_nov01.pdf](http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/ed_notes/ednts_nov01.pdf)
- The Education Alliance at Brown University. (2004). *Collaborating online, in person, in practice*. Providence RI: Author. Retrieved March 16, 2005, from The Education Alliance at Brown University: <http://www.alliance.brown.edu/stories/story0804.shtml>
- Ezarik, M. (2001). Spread the word. *District Administration*. 37. Retrieved March 28, 2005, from <http://www.districtadministration.com/page.cfm?p=104>
- Garcia, A. C., & Jacobs, J. B. (1999). The eyes of the beholder: Understanding the turn-taking system in quasi-synchronous computer-mediated communication. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 32, 337–367.
- Georgakopoulou, A., & Goutsos, D. (1997). *Discourse analysis*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

- Gulati, S. (2004). *Constructivism and emerging online learning pedagogy: A discussion for formal to acknowledge and promote the informal*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Universities Association for Continuing Education, University of Glamorgan. Retrieved June 27, 2005, from Education Online: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00003562.htm>
- Hamilton, H. E. (1998). Reported speech and survivor identity in on-line bone marrow transplantation narratives. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 2, 53–67.
- Harrison, S. (1998). E-mail discussions as conversation: Moves and acts in a sample from a listserv discussion. *Linguistik Online* 1(1/98). Retrieved April 29, 2005, from <http://www.linguistik-online.de/harrison.htm>
- Hawkes, M., & Romiszowski, A. (2001). Examining the reflective outcomes of asynchronous computer-mediated communication on inservice teacher development. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 9(2), 283–306. Retrieved April 25, 2005, from <http://www.homepages.dsu.edu/hawkesm/documents/JTATE.pdf>
- Herring, S. C. (1996). Two variants of an electronic message schema. In S. C. Herring (Ed.), *Computer-mediated communication: Linguistic, social and cross-cultural perspectives* (pp. 81–106). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Herring, S. C. (1999). Interactional coherence in CMC. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 4. Retrieved August 12, 2005, from <<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol4/issue4>><http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol4/issue4>
- Herring, S. C. (2001). Computer-mediated discourse analysis. In D. Tannen, D. Schiffrin, & H. Hamilton (Eds.). *Handbook of discourse analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Herring, S. C. (2004). Computer-mediated discourse: An approach to researching online behavior. In S. A. Barab, R. Kling, & J. H. Gray (Eds.), *Designing for virtual communities in the service of learning* (pp. 338–376). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hersch, R. (1997). *FAQs about FAQs*. Retrieved May 3, 2005, from Internet FAQ Archives: <http://www.faqs.org/faqs/faqs/about-faqs/>
- Internet FAQ Consortium. (2005). *Internet FAQ archives*. Retrieved May 3, 2005, from <http://www.faqs.org/faqs/>.
- Johnstone, B. (1990). *Stories, community and place: Narratives from middle America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Johnstone, B. (2002). *Discourse analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project. (1999). *Standards for foreign language learning: Preparing for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Yonkers, NY: Author.
- Sacks, H. (1995). *Lectures on conversation*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Schegloff, E., & H. Sacks. (1973). Opening up closings. *Semiotica*, 7, 289–327.

- Schiffrin, D. (1988). Sociolinguistic approaches to discourse: Topic and reference in narrative. In K. Ferrera, B. Brown, K. Walters, & J. Baugh (Eds.), *Linguistic change and contact* (pp. 1–17). Austin TX: Dept of Linguistics, University of Texas.
- Schiffrin, D. (1994.) *Approaches to discourse*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Searle, J. (1969). *Speech acts*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Sparks, D. (2002). *Designing powerful staff development for teachers and principals*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.
- Stromer-Galley, J., & Martinson, A. M. (2004). *Coherence or fragmentation?: Comparing serious and social chat online*. Paper presented at the Association for Internet Researchers Annual Conference, Sussex, England, September, 2004. Retrieved April 30, 2005, from University of Albany: <http://www.albany.edu/~jstromer/aoir2004.pdf>
- Tannen, D. (1989). *Talking voices: Repetition, dialogue, and imagery in conversational discourse*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tannen, D., Schiffrin, D., & Hamilton, H. (2001). *Handbook of discourse analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- van Dijk, T. A. (2004). *From text grammar to critical discourse: A brief academic autobiography (Sections 1 and 2)*. Retrieved July 14, 2005, from <http://www.discourse-in-society.org/teun.html>
- van Dijk, T. A., & Kintsch W. (1983). *Strategies of discourse comprehension*. New York & London: Academic Press.
- Werry, C. C. (1996). Linguistic and interactional features of Internet relay chat. In S. C. Herring, (Ed.), *Computer-mediated communication: Linguistic, social and cross-cultural perspectives* (pp. 47–63). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Wikipedia. (2005). *FAQ*. Retrieved May 3, 2005, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FAQs>
- Wood, L., & Kroger, R. (2002). *Doing discourse analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.



---

## ■ APPENDIX

### ***Ñandu Welcome Message Sent to Subscribers***

Welcome to the Ñandu listserv!

Please keep this message for future reference about I. Posting Guidelines and II. List Commands (below).

Ñandu is the listserv for school district personnel, superintendents, teachers, and teacher educators committed to improving early language programs by sharing information and expertise. This forum is made possible by the Improving Foreign Language Instruction in Schools project of the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB).

LAB staff at the Center for Applied Linguistics manage this list to bring new research and information to you in a timely manner. This information will come from a variety of sources, but YOU are the most important source. Please share your work, ideas, and questions with others interested in early start, long-sequence language programs.

To report problems with the list, please send a message to [nanduti@cal.org](mailto:nanduti@cal.org) or to [ingrid@cal.org](mailto:ingrid@cal.org).

### ***I. POSTING GUIDELINES***

Ñandu provides members interested in early foreign language learning with a means of sharing ideas and experiences. Please follow a few guidelines to make this listserv a useful and enjoyable tool for all of us.

- 1** Messages should be related to the topic of the listserv as described above.  
To post to the list, mail your message to [nandu@caltalk.cal.org](mailto:nandu@caltalk.cal.org).
- 2** Use SUBJECT headers that accurately describe the content of your posting. If you change the topic in your reply, indicate this in your subject line. Be especially careful if you receive a daily DIGEST and are replying to a posting.
- 3** Delete lengthy previous messages in your reply. Instead, summarize the message to which you are replying or include just a brief extract.
- 4** Remember to sign your message and include school name or location (if appropriate) at the beginning or end of your posting, so that readers know from whom it is coming.

- 5 Please do not send attachments in your postings. Some members cannot open them, while others are weary of opening unsolicited attachments. If you have something that is too long to be posted, ask interested listserv members to request the document from you outside the listserv.
- 6 Send personal messages to the individual to whom they are intended, not to the entire list. All Ñandu subscribers are very busy, so please be courteous and make sure that you check the TO: line in your message when responding to a post. REPLY will send your message to the whole list and cannot be recalled once it has been sent. You may use FORWARD or SEND and cut and paste the addressee's e-mail address. Depending on your e-mail software, you usually get the poster's e-mail by double-clicking on the FROM line. Be especially careful to avoid "me too" or "I agree" messages that do not add to the discussion
- 7 Remember that any LISTSERV commands, which change your user settings (see below), should be sent from your own computer to nandu-request@caltalk.cal.org and not to the whole listserv.
- 8 Messages of a commercial nature or chain letters are not allowed. If you are in doubt, check with our moderator at ingrid@cal.org.

Thank you for following these guidelines.

Thank you for joining Ñandu. We look forward to lively and informative discussions!

Ingrid Pufahl  
LAB at Brown Foreign Language Project  
Center for Applied Linguistics

## THE EDUCATION ALLIANCE AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

---

Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (LAB)

### LAB Directors and Board

Adeline Becker

*Executive Director, The Education Alliance*

Mary-Beth Fafard

*Executive Director, The LAB at Brown University*

Peter McWalters

*Chair, LAB Board of Governors*

Aminda Gentile

*Vice Chair, LAB Board of Governors*

### Board Members

Rafael Aragunde Torres

Alice Carlan

Richard H. Cate

Charles F. Desmond

Edward J. Doherty

David Driscoll

Michele Forman

Susan A. Gendron

Noreen Michael

Richard P. Mills

Elizabeth Neale

Peter J. Negroni

Basan N. Nembirkow

C. Patrick Proctor, Sr.

Robin D. Rapaport

Betty J. Sternberg

Lyonel B. Tracy

## Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory

222 Richmond Street  
Suite 300  
Providence, RI 02903

**e-mail:**

[info@alliance.brown.edu](mailto:info@alliance.brown.edu)

**web:**

[www.alliance.brown.edu](http://www.alliance.brown.edu)