The Use of Skype as a Synchronous Communication Tool Between Foreign Language College Students and Native Speakers

El Uso de Skype como herramienta de comunicación sincrónica entre estudiantes universitarios y hablantes nativos

Mario Guerrero

mguerrero3@fordham.edu

Fordham University, USA

The rapid growth and interest of college students in Computer Mediated Communication and social media have impacted the second language learning and teaching process. This article reports on a pilot project that attempts to analyze the use of Skype as a synchronous communication tool in regard to the attitudes of students in learning a foreign language when interacting with native speakers and engaging in conversation. The participants are Spanish foreign language students at Fordham University in New York City and English foreign language speakers at a Jesuit university in Bogotá, Colombia. Students were paired up and required to set up online conversation meetings. The results of the pedagogical experience of this pilot project suggest that students felt more interested in engaging in conversation with native speakers and exchanging personal and academic information as well as other aspects of their culture using the target language rather than completing language laboratory activities or writing compositions.

Key words: Computer mediated communication, Skype, socio-cultural competence, synchronous communication

El continuo interés y la rápida evolución de la comunicación a través de la tecnología y las redes sociales en estudiantes universitarios han transformado el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje de los idiomas extranjeros. Este artículo se centra en un estudio piloto que busca analizar el uso de Skype como una herramienta de comunicación sincrónica en cuanto a las actitudes de los estudiantes en el proceso de aprendizaje de un idioma extranjero con la interacción de estudiantes que son hablantes nativos para participar activamente en conversaciones. Los participantes de este proyecto son estudiantes de español como idioma extranjero en Fordham University en la Ciudad de Nueva York y estudiantes de inglés como idioma extranjero en una universidad jesuita en la ciudad de Bogotá, Colombia. Los estudiantes fueron emparejados con el propósito de organizar sesiones en línea y hablar usando el idioma que están aprendiendo. Los resultados de la experiencia pedagógica de este proyecto piloto indican que los estudiantes se sintieron mucho más interesados en conversar con hablantes nativos para intercambiar infor-

mación personal, académica y cultural haciendo uso del idioma que están aprendiendo en lugar de hacer ejercicios y escribir composiciones en el laboratorio de idiomas.

Palabras clave: comunicación a través de la tecnología, comunicación sincrónica, competencias socio culturales, Skype

Introduction

As a young college language instructor, I find myself always trying to provide my students with opportunities in which they can see a real purpose in using L2 (foreign language) outside the conventional classroom where interaction is often reduced to their peers and instructor. The idea of this project was to encourage my students to speak via Skype with other college students (native Spanish speakers) with like-minded interests—lifestyle, culture, education, and food—through the use of computer mediated communication (CMC). The idea of this project started in one of my graduate courses at Fordham University when I had to survey a sample of Jesuit undergraduate students and their likelihood to interact with their surrounding community. Fordham University's main campus is located in the Bronx. The New York Botanical Garden and the Bronx Zoo surround the campus. However, Fordham's main campus is located in a community where there is a large low income Hispanic and African American population whereas the demographics at Fordham comprise a mostly white upper middle class student body. The survey aimed to understand how much interaction existed between these two communities— Fordham students and the surrounding community. Based on the results of the survey, most of the students prefer to spend their free time either on campus or in Manhattan. I specifically also realized that my Spanish students would not take advantage of the Hispanic population to practice their Spanish skills as they felt English would be an easier way to communicate. Consequently, I thought that as a language instructor, I would need to provide my students with a setting in which they felt comfortable and made use of the target language specifically with native speakers who had similar interests or had experienced similar learning conditions.

This article summarizes a pedagogical experience with the purpose of sharing with other language teacher colleagues how I started and structured the project and also the reflections on its outcomes.

Literature Review

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)

CMC is defined as the process of creating, exchanging, and perceiving information via networked telecommunications systems facilitating the encoding, transmitting, and decoding of messages (Romiszowski & Mason, n.d.). CMC was the result of linking different computers

and having people interact by sharing messages and data. CMC spread rapidly and allowed people from geographically dispersed locations to communicate thus replacing travel and Face-to-Face (FtF) meetings with more efficient ways to instantly communicate. Different studies have shown that FtF gatherings give speakers—with higher positions or power in any organization—a larger portion of speech time while CMC meetings offer an equal share of the meeting participation (Walther, 1996). On the contrary, other studies suggest that CMC does not contribute to active participation because it is assumed that in many CMC discussions a few members dominate the floor and the rest of the members become *lurkers* or passive recipients. Both offline and online discussions have passive recipients; this implies that CMC does not discourage active participation and learning (Romiszowski & Mason, n.d.).

Allowing students to interact with others considering their mutual interests and giving them the freedom to make their own choices when learning a foreign language is essential to motivate them. Bastidas (2002) proposes that integrative and instrumental motivation affect foreign language learners. On the one hand, integrative motivation suggests the interest of learners in the community and of the culture that involves the second language. Instrumental motivation, on the other hand, refers to the specific goals of the students. Bastidas also shows the communicative need to use any foreign language as an aspect affecting learners' motivation. He explains that many language students feel demotivated to learn a foreign language because they think the L2 is neither important nor useful for them. Additionally, more than a real life experience, I wanted this project to be an exposure to the target language with native speakers. Fordham University is located in a highly populated Hispanic community in the Bronx. Unfortunately, many Fordham students do not take advantage of this opportunity to practice Spanish with native speakers. Noam Chomsky's innatist theory (Lightbown & Spada, 1993) suggests that after that *critical period* to learn a second language, students' exposure to input is essential to gain L2 proficiency. For this reason, a project including input exposure with native speakers would stimulate students' interest in engaging in conversations using the target language.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Communication

The continuous growth of Internet-based communication and college students' interest in social media and networking seems to have a greater impact in the way they interact with each other nowadays. These types of communication can be synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous communication or real-time communication refers to face-to-face discussions among people, whereas asynchronous communication (delayed communication) suggests a significant time delay between receiving and sending messages (Romiszowski & Mason, n.d.). Hence, the inclusion of a computer-based activity and synchronous communication in my instruction was necessary in order to encourage and engage my students in the L2 learning process. I believe that real time communication allows learners to provide instant feedback to

each other, to emotionally bond, and to be spontaneous. According to Celce-Murcia (2001), the use of media in language classes brings the outside world into the classroom and makes the learning process more exciting and meaningful. Nevertheless, the purpose of this project was not only the improvement of L2 speaking proficiency but also it aimed to raise awareness in students about other cultures. In other words, I wanted to promote and instill values of inclusion, tolerance, and diversity as a principle of life in this globalized world. Teaching culture in a language class results in better L2 communicators. Culture is understood as body language, gestures, concepts of time, traditions, and expressions of friendliness. Consequently, linguistic proficiency is not enough for a second language learner; rather, social and cultural competence are also fundamental for a more proficient and effective L2 speaker. Hymes (as cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001) also stresses the importance of socio cultural competence by saying that an individual who is not aware of the appropriateness concerning the accepted norms in a determined community is likely to be placed in a position of inequality.

Similar Projects

Other instructors and universities have implemented and explored a similar project as the one I proposed at Fordham University with positive results. Dickens (2009) shared an experience of two classes (one from the US and the other from Italy) in which students were initially paired up and required to interact with their partners discussing the different aspects of their lives and class topics using Twitter. After a couple of months the instructors decided that it would be appropriate to have them interact on video chat using Skype. Dickens' report about the experience is positive. Students were able to communicate in the target language and to simultaneously multitask (surf on Facebook, share videos on YouTube, Google information, etc.) Alas, most of the session was held in the students' native language. In a different experiment, Carney (2008) started a project in which an English class interacted with a Japanese class through the use of blogs, wikis, Skype text, voice, and video chat and the exchange of homemade DVD movies. Skype sessions in general were set up so that four English class students talked with one Japanese student. Each English class student had to prepare different questions to ask their Japanese partner. Some of the Japanese students were not able to speak due to the lack of web cams and computers. In general, this was a great experience for these students. The author recognizes the importance of CMC and its impact on foreign language classes.

Project Objectives

There were three major objectives identified at the beginning of this pilot project which will serve as an assessment of the achieved goals:

- Provide students with a space in which they can practice their listening and speaking skills in the L2 with native speakers by means of interactive and contextualized conversations online.
- Encourage students to learn from their partners' culture, country, and traditions.
- Give the students the opportunity to interact in real life situations using the target language.

Participating Institutions

The two participating institutions are private universities under *the Cura Personalis* (care of the other) philosophy and Jesuit tradition.

Fordham University is the Jesuit university in New York City. Fordham's Department of Languages and Literatures requires undergraduate students to take up to five levels of a foreign language aiming to develop the linguistic proficiency and cultural competence of Fordham students.

The Colombian university which participated in Bogota is a Jesuit university offering its community a quality Catholic education. The Department of Languages offers an undergraduate program qualifying its students to become language teachers.

Participants

A total of 50 students participated in this project. The participants are students from Fordham University (25 students) and from a Jesuit university in Bogotá, Colombia (25 students).

Fordham University students are native English speakers learning Spanish in high beginner level courses. Students in Colombia are native Spanish speakers in intermediate English courses. It is important to clarify that the Fordham students are studying Spanish (or any foreign language offered in the Department) as a mandatory language course for five academic semesters. Some of them might want to minor in this language. The students at the Colombian university are future language teachers who are majoring in English. Fordham students' average age is 19 years old whereas their online partners' ages in Colombia ranged from 20 to 45 years old. The technological skills of the students were not considered when implementing this project.

Pedagogical Proposal

This pedagogical experience attempts to determine if there is any relationship between the implementation of internet-based synchronous communication and the interest of foreign language students and native speakers to engage in conversation and learn about their culture.

In order to start this project, a written proposal was submitted to the Chair of Fordham's Department of Languages and Literatures and the Spanish Language Coordinator. In this document, objectives, description, proposed activities, projected timeline, proposed partners, and their responsibilities in the whole project were specified. The Chair at Fordham University had two important concerns about this initiative: (1) safety of students and (2) feasibility of the project. With the support of the Faculty Technology Center at Fordham University, I was able to persuade the Chair that there were no risks associated with the use of Skype for educational purposes and that its viability was directly related to the collaboration of the other university and the participation of the students. I should note that at Fordham University, foreign language students are required to attend the language laboratory two hours every week. For that reason, I decided to merge this project with the laboratory activities grade. As part of the curriculum at the Department of Modern Languages, language students are required to go to the language laboratory one hour a week. During this time (students are free to decide when to go to the laboratory from Monday to Saturday in a specific schedule) students listen to the audio section of their workbook as well as complete different grammar exercises online as part of their course evaluation. Goodson (2005) states that some faculty members and administrators are normally resistant to include technology in their instruction because of time constraints, their demanding academic workload, lack of training, and insufficient research proving the effectiveness of e-learning. It is common to see some institutions still reluctant to explore technological changes in instruction as was the example of San Jose State University (SJSU). The Associate Vice-President of San Jose State University proposed the banning of Skype at the University implying that Skype might infect the institution's computers with viruses and that Skype might distract students and professors in the classrooms. One faculty member expressed his concern and called the institution "luddite" about this issue and explained the reasons why Skype should not be banned: (1) Skype allows communicating at little or no cost with other colleagues around the world, (2) there are many international students who might use Skype to communicate with other students, and (3) foreign language instructors have started to use Skype to have their students communicate with other students who are native speakers of the language they are learning (Shaw, 2006).

When the Chair of the Department at Fordham approved this pilot project, I immediately contacted different universities in Colombia. However, I thought that it would be a good idea to work with another university under the same Jesuit philosophy. Fortunately, a Jesuit university in Bogotá, Colombia, responded with great interest and eagerness in starting the project as soon as possible. The Chair of the Department of Modern Languages in Colombia designated his advanced English speaking class to take part in this linguistic experiment. The groups were not chosen based on any specific criteria. My two Spanish courses would participate in this project. At the Jesuit university in Colombia, the Chair chose that specific

class because he was the professor in charge and had asked his students about their interest in partaking in this initiative, which had a positive reaction by the students. I clarified that this was intended to be a pilot project, which—if it were to result in positive outcomes—could be institutionalized by Fordham's Department, or at least it would encourage other instructors interested in creating a similar online community with their students. Community development in general refers to the notion of people living close to each other, face-to-face interactions, companionship, and support at different levels (Wellman, 1999). However, in online communities the lack of physical location, verbal, and nonverbal cues implies impersonal relationships not able to build a community. However, other studies suggest that online communities can be built if participants have similar interests regardless of their physical location which they might find as an obstacle to communicate Face-to-Face (Romiszowski & Mason, n.d.).

Once the project was presented and approved by the two universities, it was necessary to establish a clear set of stages and assigned responsibilities to each instructor in order to launch this initiative. Table 1 describes the different stages that were considered.

Table 1. Stages of the Project

Task	Observations	Person in charge
Outlining responsibilities	A list of responsibilities was outlined and shared with students, professors, and administrators.	Instructor at Fordham University.
Pairing off students	It was easier for the instructor in Colombia to pair the students as he had more students in his class than I did in my two classes.	Instructor at the Colombian university.
Choosing topics for each session	Both instructors agreed that each session should focus on content, culture, and grammatical structures, which would reinforce the topics learned in class.	Both instructors.

Task	Observations	Person in charge
Setting up a chronogram	Considering that the end of the semester was coming soon for both universities, it was important to use the time wisely.	Both instructors.

The first step was to inform all the participants (instructors, students, and administrators) about their responsibilities regarding this project as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants' Responsibilities

Instructors
• Pair off students based on their proficiency level
• Monitor students' attendance of their Skype meeting
• Make sure students are respectful with their peers' time
• Remind students to be punctual
• Decide the topics the students will be discussing
• Communicate with the other instructors if there are doubts or suggestions
• Provide a space for the students with the necessary technology to access to Skype
Students
• Be punctual
• Speak only the language they are required to speak during the session.
• Prepare enough questions to carry out the conversation.
• Submit a screen shot of their Skype conversation in order to confirm that they actually had a conversation with their assigned partner and the required time for each session
Administrators
• Establish the partnership between the two universities
• Attend the on line meeting in December to analyze the effectiveness of the project

Participants received an email with their respective responsibilities. Consequently, a list of Fordham students was sent to my colleague in Colombia. He was in charge of pairing off his students with mine. His class was considerably bigger (in terms of number of students) compared with my two classes combined at Fordham. There were not any specific criteria when pairing off the students—it was just a simple matching exercise from two rosters. Then,

each student received an email with a list in which they would find their matches for the four sessions. The list included names and emails. The final stage of the project required each instructor to choose the topics. It was the responsibility of each professor to decide the topics students would be discussing in every session. Each session was expected to last approximately 15 to 20 minutes and was expected to be conducted by students as follows: use of the target language previously determined (English or Spanish), personal introductions (as every session they were paired off with different partners), and discussion of a previously determined topic. The topics—varying from academic structure, personal interests, gastronomy, and so forth—were carefully selected so that students would have a wide exposure to new vocabulary, expressions, and especially culture. The sessions were organized as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Organization of the Sessions

Session	Language	Topic	In charge
One	Spanish	Exchange personal information (names, hobbies, favorite food, sports they practice) Also get to know about each other. Understand how easy or difficult it is to learn English or Spanish.	Fordham
Two	English	Compare academic structures from their schools and the differences in the educational systems.	University in Colombia
Three	Spanish	Compare lifestyle, culture, gastronomy, and currencies.	Fordham
Four	English	Understand how languages are taught in the US from elementary school through the university.	University in Colombia

Students were required to prepare questions and organize their ideas in order to have a meaningful conversation during the following week. Furthermore, each Fordham student was required to snap a screenshot of their Skype conversation records as proof that they did Skype with their assigned partners. All the conversations were set up by each student at different times and days (within a week's period)—this with the purpose of giving students the opportunity to organize their busy time and also to give students a sense of belonging to the project.

One important aspect to mention is that the administrators did not ever set up a meeting to discuss the outcomes or implications of the project due to the lack of time. When the project was over the university in Colombia was already in winter break.

Findings

In this section, the advantages and weaknesses during the completion of the project will be described. In addition, I will mention the opinions and thoughts of 18 participating students who were surveyed after the project was finished.

Starting the project was somewhat challenging due to the lack of time and the resistance of the administrators to approve the project. Additionally, communication between the two universities was slow. As previously mentioned, each student was randomly paired off with another one from the other university. In order to set up their online meetings they emailed each other. Some students reported that their partner did not respond to their emails in a timely fashion or kept postponing the meeting, and some never got an answer from their partner. One student said: "I thought it was very interesting and cool to learn about the life of a complete stranger! Sometimes communication was difficult but it was a good experience." This frustrated a big part of the students because it did not allow them to ever experience a conversation. "My student never answered my emails so we were not able to talk via Skype," a student added. Sometimes there were problems related to technological issues and Internet connection, which prevented students from having voice conversations. Nonetheless, students opted to chat instead. A great part of the participants described their *Skyping* experience as interesting and fun. In their own words they said: "I found it extremely useful and fun. It was very interesting to speak with my partner and I believe that she and I will probably continue speaking even though the assignment has finished. I would definitely do it again and hope I have the chance to in the future." Another student added: "I did enjoy interacting with a student from another country. I found it relatively easy to understand her but harder to express my own ideas. No matter the skill level or level of success, I think it is always helpful though to get practice speaking with someone who knows the language so well." Each session was supposed to last from 15 to 20 minutes. However, most of the sessions ended up exceeding this time limit because students truly enjoyed conversing with their peers. Other students thought it was rude to conclude a conversation in only 15 minutes and they allowed more time for this activity even if they were only text chatting. Only one student requested to be given a different Skype partner. One of them was more than 20 years older than the other participant, creating an uncomfortable environment in the younger student. Based on the student at Fordham, her Skype partner made her feel uncomfortable as in their first email that they had

exchanged, the student in Colombia had expressed that he had physical issues that prevented him from speaking. He was asking to have someone else participate in the sessions. The student at Fordham thought it was not a good idea and, as a Fordham professor, I am not allowed to ask her to do something when she has expressed that it makes her feel uncomfortable. Therefore a new Skype partner was assigned to her. Throughout the development of the project some students, who were able to set up their online meetings, expressed during class that they were bonding while many others felt discouraged because they never had the opportunity to speak.

It is important to note that this pilot project has led to a possible partnership between Fordham University and AUSJAL (Asociación de Universidades Confiadas a la Compañía de Jesús en América Latina), which is an Association of Jesuit universities in Latin America. A representative from AUSJAL has contacted me for the purpose of starting a possible project in which these types of online environments would benefit students from various Jesuit universities in South America and the United States.

Opinions of the Participants

A total of 18 participants in this project completed an online survey on Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) about three different aspects regarding the development of the project as shown in Table 4 and Table 5. The third aspect was an open-ended question in order to understand the opinions of the students and their likelihood to participate again in a similar project in the future. Surveymonkey.com provides users with free web-based surveys. I chose this website because the website helps you to create any type of survey with predetermined formats. Additionally, Surveymonkey.com does not require software installation; everything is self-explanatory and, most importantly, the basic features are free.

Based on the answers from Table 4, it can be inferred that after different Skype sessions, students mostly learned about their partners' culture regarding personal information, similar interests, and education. The results suggest that students in general were not able to exchange as much information as expected about their region's food, their schools' academic structure, and the quality of life in their countries.

According to Table 5, students seemed to have greater difficulty trying to set up a Skype session with their partners than expressing their ideas and carrying out spontaneous conversations. Additionally, participants also believed that understanding their partners' ideas was challenging.

Table 4. Cultural Appreciation

1. Which of the following aspects do you think Skype sessions helped you learn about your partner's culture?					
	Completely disagree	**Somehow disagree**	**Agree**	**Somehow agree**	**Completely agree**
Food	27.3%	27.3%	9.1%	27.3%	9.1%
Education	0.0%	8.3%	33.3%	25.0%	33.3%
Academic Structure	16.7%	8.3%	33.3%	33.3%	8.3%
Personal Information	8.3%	0.0%	25.0%	8.3%	58.3%
Similar Interests	0.0%	0.0%	41.7%	33.3%	25.0%
Quality of Life	8.3%	25.0%	41.7%	16.7%	8.3%

Table 5. Degree of Difficulty in Communication

2. Considering that your Skype partners were college students with similar interests but they were people you did not know, to what degree was it easy or difficult to interact with them using the language you are learning?				
	Very easy	**Easy**	**Difficult**	**Very Difficult**
Understand your partner's ideas	25.0%	16.7%	50.0%	8.3%
Set up a Skype session	16.7%	8.3%	33.3%	41.7%
Carry out a spontaneous conversation	25.0%	25.0%	16.7%	33.3%
Express your ideas	8.3%	33.3%	25.0%	33.3%

Finally, based on the surveyed student responses, it can be inferred that most of the participants thought that the Skype Project with a foreign country did allow them to learn something new about another culture. Many students were surprised that, different from the

US, the majority of Colombian college students live with their parents when they attend college. Also, students at the Colombian university do not use their institutional email account as frequently as many American college students do. In general, participants felt that the project was much more fun than going to the language laboratory and writing compositions. Although they expressed the reality that communication was somehow difficult due to technological inconveniences (e.g., internet connection, time flexibility, lack of web cam), participants acknowledged the importance of getting to know people from other countries who are native speakers. Most of the participants agreed that setting up meetings was by far the most tedious part of the project because of their busy schedule, the lack of interest of some of the participants, and the fact that they were talking to, literally, "a complete stranger." In addition, the idea of participating in a similar project seems to be a viable one for many of them because they think these types of experiences "forced them out of their comfort zone." Unfortunately, some other students were not able to provide any feedback because they were never able to speak with their Skype partner as they never got a response to set up a meeting.

Conclusions and Implications

The idea of this pilot project between Fordham University and the Jesuit university in Colombia was to understand if Internet-based Synchronous Communication would motivate foreign language students to engage in conversations with native speakers and learn about their culture. Despite the difficulties found in setting up meetings and the technological issues in some sessions, it can be stated that Internet-based Synchronous Communication made the learning process more meaningful and engaging. Students expressed their preference to participate in projects like this one instead of going to the laboratory. Many of the participants thought it made them feel more interested in the course as it was a more modern and interesting way to learn a language. The project was able to provide participants with a safe space in which they were able to make use of the L2 either by speaking, writing, and listening with their native speaker Skype partners. Additionally, students were exposed to conversations with different topics from which they not only learned from their partner's culture but were also able to share cultural information with their peers. It is not possible to determine the level of motivation that each student had in this project in order to engage in conversation because as an instructor I did not monitor any of the conversations; but in general, most of the participants who were able to talk via Skype, had a good experience and they are likely to do it again in another language course in the future. Besides, some students still talk to their Skype partners through the use of other social media networks such as Facebook or Twitter. Finally, as synchronous communication is part of college students' lives, it can be stated that the project helped participants to experience a real-life situation that involved daily topics of conversations of college students.

If other language instructors would like to start a similar project, it is important to allow at least a whole academic semester's planning to be able to have more than 50% of the students participate in the project if they are responsible for setting up their own meetings. Otherwise, setting up a group meeting can be an alternative to give everyone an opportunity to speak and monitor the participation and engagement in their conversations. It is also important to guide students who might not know much about technology. Creating an account and learning how to make calls on Skype seem easy but, as instructors, we cannot assume that all of our students know how to work with them. It is fundamental to consider the participants' skills regarding technology. Even though none of the students reported an issue with Skype, there might be situations in which participants are not aware of the use of the software, which would jeopardize the outcomes of the project. Finally, pairing off students appears to be a simple matching task. However, it is fundamental to ask your students in advance what their preferences (age, gender) are when being paired off because these aspects might affect your students' confidence to fully engage in conversation.

Acknowledgements

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The Author

Mario Guerrero holds a B.A. in Language Teaching from the University of Nariño in Pasto, Colombia, and a Masters of Science in Education from Fordham University in New York City. He has wide experience working with immigrants and refugees at the Mayor's Office of Adult Education in the City of New York serving as the Senior Administrative Intern of an English Program. Additionally, he has taught several English as a Second Language courses at the New Americans Initiative Department at the YMCA of Greater New York and English as Foreign Language in Colombia. At a college level, he has performed as a Spanish Instructor in different American universities where he has started different technology-based projects with his students. His research interests include technology-based learning processes, acculturation, and diversity.