Virtual Conversations: Research and Practice in Online Language Exchanges

Conversaciones virtuales: Investigación y práctica en los intercambios de lengua en línea

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Abstract

Advances in digital technology have created interesting opportunities for language learners to engage in conversation with native speakers. These opportunities provide the possibility for tremendous growth in language and culture learning (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016) in ways that until recently did not exist. These interactions can take a variety of forms. Some instructors create highly controlled interactions with specific activities and pre-assigned partners. Others students are asked to connect to social media style sites where they experience enormous autonomy in choosing when they interact, who they interact with, and what they speak about (Malerba, 2012). Online exchanges with native speakers also vary according to the linguistic competence of the speakers. Generally, online exchanges have been used with learners who are at intermediate or advanced skill levels. However, the present study builds on recent research suggesting that even novice level learners can benefit from interacting with native speakers online (Satar & Özdener, 2008; Schenker, 2017). In this study, the authors examined novice students' perceptions of learning and changes in comfort level after participating in a series of online and in-person exchanges over the course of a semester. The study compared students' perceptions of online interactions generally with those of in-person exchanges and also compared the results of the use of various services. Results suggest that students in all of the groups, online and in-person, felt more comfortable interacting with native speakers and felt that they improved their language skills by engaging in these activities. With that said, students in the in-person group tended to feel more comfortable speaking with native speakers, but students in most of the online groups felt that the one on one nature of the interactions in the online settings led to the most growth.

Keywords: online learning; language exchanges; native speaker; authentic interaction; conversation labs

Resumen

Los avances en la tecnología digital han creado oportunidades interesantes para que los estudiantes de lengua participen en conversaciones con hablantes nativos. Estas oportunidades brindan la posibilidad de un enorme crecimiento en el aprendizaje de lenguas y culturas (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016) en formas que hasta hace poco no existían. Estas interacciones pueden tomar una variedad de formas. Algunos instructores crean interacciones sumamente controladas con actividades específicas y compañeros asignados previamente. A otros estudiantes se les pide que se conecten a sitios al estilo de las redes sociales donde experimentan una enorme autonomía para elegir cuándo interactúan, con quién interactúan y de qué hablan (Malerba, 2012). Los intercambios en línea con hablantes nativos también varían de acuerdo con la competencia lingüística de los hablantes. En general, los intercambios en línea se han utilizado con estudiantes que se encuentran en los niveles intermedios o avanzados. Sin embargo, el presente estudio se basa en investigaciones recientes que sugieren que incluso los principiantes de nivel principiante pueden beneficiarse de la interacción en línea con hablantes nativos (Satar & Özdener, 2008; Schenker, 2017). En este estudio, los autores examinaron las percepciones de los estudiantes principiantes sobre el aprendizaje y los cambios en el nivel de comodidad después de participar en una serie de intercambios en línea y en persona en el transcurso de un semestre. El estudio comparó las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre las interacciones en línea en general con las de los intercambios en persona y también comparó los resultados del uso de diversos servicios. Los resultados sugieren que los estudiantes de todos los grupos, en línea y en persona, se sintieron más cómodos interactuando con hablantes nativos y sintieron que mejoraron sus habilidades lingüísticas al participar en estas actividades. Dicho esto, los es-

tudiantes en el grupo en persona tienden a sentirse más cómodos al hablar con hablantes nativos, pero los estudiantes, en la mayoría de los grupos en línea, sintieron que la naturaleza de las interacciones en línea de hablar uno a uno condujo a un mayor crecimiento.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje en línea; intercambio lingüístico; hablante nativo; interacción auténtica; laboratorios de conversación

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, language and culture learning are becoming more and more important. Often, interacting extensively with native speakers is considered one of, if not the most important component in gaining communicative competence, because it allows for extensive input, interaction, noticing, and negotiation of meaning (Ellis, 2015). These interactions also pave the way for increased cultural competence gained simultaneously with enhanced language skills.

In the past, the opportunity to interact with native speakers was afforded primarily to those who were able to travel, generally long distances, to spend time in the country where the target language was used widely. However, today, the advent of internet communication technology and its widespread use makes interaction in the target language almost as easy as clicking a mouse or tapping the screen of a smartphone. These types of interactions hold great promise for language and culture learning and have captured the attention of researchers and practitioners who have examined various aspects of these interactions (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2017). Research on such interactions has included the development of cross-cultural understanding as well as language learning and the ways in which meaning is negotiated depending on the technological affordances of a particular medium (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016; Yanguas, 2010). The purpose of the present study is to share initial results of one institution's efforts to implement a program of online exchanges between beginning level students of Spanish and native Spanish speakers, particularly emphasizing the impact of the project on students' perceptions of learning and their levels of comfort in conversing with native speakers.

Review of literature

Over 20 years ago, practitioners began to report their experiences with implementing these activities (Warschauer, 1995). Initially, implementing interactions with native speakers through digital technology was something carried out only by experienced practitioners of computer assisted language learning. Gradually these exchanges have become more mainstream, and research on the topic has continued to expand as well. Simultaneously, the nature of these interactions has changed as the technology has improved, moving from email to discussion forums to instant messaging and ultimately multimedia with synchronous video and text.

The changes in such interactions hearken back to the stages of computer assisted language learning (CALL) generally, which were described by scholars many years ago (Warschauer, 1996). The first stage was behavioristic in nature, emphasizing repetition and drills. The second stage was communicative CALL where computers could act as stimuli for communication. Online interactions with native speakers are situated in the last stage, integration, where various digital technologies come together and, in this

case, facilitate direct synchronous contact between learners who can also access a vast sea of information to aid their learning and communication.

These interactions are referred to by several names, telecollaboration and online exchanges being two of the more common monikers (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). Reviews of the research regarding telecollaboration and online exchanges have generally examined one of four areas: increased linguistic competence, the possibility of improved intercultural competence, the development of learner autonomy, as well as how online exchanges may enhance digital literacies (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). Multiple forms and flavours exist within these activity types and in some cases, teachers create class-to-class exchanges where class members from one linguacultural group interact in structured ways with a class whose members belong to another linguacultural group. Other activities include asking students to engage freely with other language learners through social media sites created to foster reciprocal language learning. The latter provides learners' with great autonomy since learners seek and choose their own partners and are generally free to pursue their own topics of conversation and use the features of a given site as they prefer (Malerba, 2012).

Currently, most tellecolaborative projects seem to involve bilingual exchange conversation partners who are learning each other's native languages and spend time speaking both. Although many practitioners feel that implementing online exchanges is challenging and time consuming to organize, almost all feel that they are positive experiences (Helm, Guth, & O'Dowd, 2012).

Most research on telecollaboration for language learning has focused on the participation of intermediate or advanced learners, however, some believe that synchronous computer mediated communication (SCMC) should have a prominent place at beginning levels as well (Schenker, 2017). There is, however, some debate regarding this point. Scholars have noted difficulties with beginning learners using SCMC to interact with native speakers (Lee, 2007), such as insufficient vocabulary to negotiate meaning, difficulty dealing with unfamiliar regionalisms or simply lack of confidence due to a recognition of their linguistic weaknesses. Other scholars have echoed these concerns and believe that synchronous digital communication is appropriate at higher levels of study but inappropriate for beginning learners due to their lack of vocabulary and low communicative competence (Olaniran, 2009).

Some recent studies have sought further insight on the topic and indicate that, despite their limitations, beginning learners do benefit from SCMC. One study tracked the learning of novice level speakers of French at a Taiwan university who engaged in a variety of learning activities and found that learners in all of the groups were able to improve their skills, including those using SCMC (Ko, 2012). Another study on the topic divided novice level learners of English into three groups, voice chat, text chat, and a control group (Satar & Özdener, 2008). After extensive use of these mediums for communication, both the voice chat and text groups significantly improved their proficiency levels, suggesting that both tools can be valuable for beginning learners.

Attitudinal Factors in SCMC

It is important to remember that language gains are only one possible benefit of online language interactions. Satar and Özdener (2008) compared students' level of anxiety before and after their SCMC experiences. Their results indicated that the text chat group experienced a significant decrease in anxiety. The voice chat group's anxiety

also decreased but the decrease was not statistically significant. This is an interesting finding because it shows that novice learners can participate in synchronous verbal communication and, at least over the course of several interactions, experience no increase in their anxiety. Research on other attitudinal factors also implies that beginning level students benefit from participating in online interactions with native speakers. One study asked novice level learners of German to engage in synchronous voice chats with native speakers of German on five occasions over the course of a semester (Schenker, 2017). These students did not demonstrate greater improvements in language skills than students who did not participate, but their motivation to learn German increased compared to other students. They also showed more interest in studying abroad in Germany and expressed more interest in taking additional courses in the language.

Review of Literature Conclusion

Taken together, the research reviewed here highlights several important points regarding online interactions with native speakers. First, the use of online exchanges for language and culture learning is increasing and is seen as an effective means of gaining important linguistic and cross-cultural skills (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). Research has also found mixed results in terms of improving attitudinal factors through such activities (Satar & Özdener, 2008). Finally, there is some discussion about whether or not SCMC with native speakers is appropriate for beginning level language learners (Olaniran, 2009; Schenker, 2017). The present study will attempt to provide insight into these areas by asking novice language learners to engage in SCMC with native speakers and then examining their perceptions of the experience.

Methodology

The present study will provide an initial examination of the efforts made at the researchers' institution to implement a program of online exchanges in beginning and low-intermediate level Spanish classes. This study stems from a larger study that is ongoing. These initial findings will inform the researchers' future work on this topic.

Research questions

1. What are students' perceptions of interacting through SCMC with native speakers in various online and in-person settings?

2. Which platforms or settings for SCMC with native speakers seem to provide students with the greatest opportunities for language learning in this context and why?

Participants, setting and motivation

Participants were all students in beginning level Spanish classes at the researchers' institution. Students ranged in age from approximately 18 to 23 years old. Approximately 414 students participated in the present study.

The university is a private institution of approximately 30,000 students located in the western United States in a medium-sized city. Roughly 80% of the population in the area speaks English as their first language while 10% speaks Spanish as their first language.

The lower-division Spanish program at this institution is structured somewhat differently than the traditional four-semester sequence of 101, 102, 201, 202, which is common in the U.S. This is due to the fact that, in the upper division courses where students are completing requirements toward a major or minor in Spanish language and literature, most students have returned recently from one and a half or two years in a Spanish-speaking country as volunteers for a religious organization. They generally return with skills in the Advanced-Low range according to the ACTFL Guidelines (Dewey & Clifford, 2012) and bypass the lower-division program entirely. Because of this dynamic, the lower-division program consists of Spanish 101 and 102, which is reserved for true beginners with nearly zero prior experience with Spanish. Following these courses, there is also a yearlong sequence, Spanish 105 and 106, which is specifically designed for students with a few years of experience, generally from high school courses, that need a brief refresher before tackling more intermediate level skills. The lower-division program also includes a third yearlong sequence, Spanish 205 and 206, which acts as a bridge to upper division coursework. The students that participated in this study were enrolled in either Spanish 101-102 or Spanish 105-106.

After reflecting on the specifics of this teaching context, the authors felt that implementing online language exchanges could enhance students' experience and increase learning in lower-division Spanish classes. For many years, the department has organized in-person conversation labs, where groups of students meet with native speakers for an hour each week that is dedicated exclusively to conversation. The purpose is to develop students' conversational fluency, and increase their confidence by seeing that they can understand and be understood by native speakers. The plan has worked reasonably well, anecdotally at least, students often improve their skills and gain confidence. However, the plan also has some drawbacks. Despite training, the lab attendants can dilute the experience by resorting to English more often than was hoped. In addition, due to convenience or the popularity of some of the lab attendants, certain sessions can become extremely popular, with 10, 15 or even 20 students attending, meaning that students would not be able to engage in meaningful one-on-one conversation with the native speaking lab attendant. Finally, with a large lower-division program, there were many logistical challenges such as finding classroom space, training attendants and dealing with turnover that make the maintenance of the conversation labs an ongoing struggle.

With these challenges in mind, the authors decided to experiment with a variety of services that would allow students to engage with native speakers directly using technology. Each semester, students in some sections would be asked to participate in the online exchanges while other sections would continue to participate in the in-person conversation labs. This was done in the hope of finding a more convenient and effective alternative for helping students to increase their confidence and enhance their fluency.

Services used to connect students and native speakers

The following section is a description of the various services and platforms used in this study. Each provided synchronous audio, video and text chat, but each offered its own unique combination of features and options.

The in-person conversation labs took place on campus once a week for an hour. The institution hires native Spanish speaking students to engage small groups of students, in discussions related to the themes of the class each week throughout the semester.

WeSpeke is a free service that bills itself as the "Facebook of language learning". People from all over the world who are interested in language learning create a profile, similar to those found on a variety of social media sites, which includes their hobbies and interests, but also lists their native language(s) and the languages they are interested in learning. WeSpeke matches users based on their interest in learning each other's native languages plus shared interests. Users can interact with their matches or contact anyone who has a profile on the website. Generally, members of the site will spend some time interacting in both languages.

TalkAbroad is a paid service where students set an appointment to interact one-on-one with a native speaker who is compensated for having brief conversation of half an hour in the target language. An audio recording of each session is provided for instructors.

EnVivo is also a paid service similar to TalkAbroad. Students make an appointment to interact with a trained native speaker for approximately half an hour. However, in this case, interactions may be one-on-one but sometimes up to four could be present. Teachers can provide the course syllabus or other instructions to the conversation partners to ensure that the online interactions work symbiotically with the other aspects of the course. A video recording of each session is provided for the instructors.

Boomalang is in some ways a hybrid of the paid and unpaid services previously described. Students of Spanish and students of English around the world can sign up and interact freely with no cost. However, they can also pay for sessions with selected native speakers of the target language for a fee.

Procedures

Each semester from 2014-2017 a portion of the lower division courses were assigned to participate in the in-person conversation labs and a portion of the courses were asked to engage in conversations with native speakers through one of a variety of services. At the beginning and end of each semester, students completed a survey regarding attitudinal factors related to learning Spanish and their perceptions of the program and their learning. During some semesters, students were also asked to complete weekly surveys and reflections where they would share how successful their interactions were that week and give insight into what was discussed and what students learned from the exchange.

As the supervisors of the courses, the authors would evaluate the effectiveness of these activities and, in an effort to improve, try new services to promote students' learning through interaction outside of class. Over the past several years, four different services have been used in addition to the existing in-person conversation labs.

Data Analysis

Surveys included Likert-scale type questions where students indicated how true a particular statement was for them. For example, students were asked, "How true is this statement for you? I feel more comfortable speaking with native speakers after engaging in the online exchanges". Students would then respond on a scale of one to six with one representing strongly disagree and six representing strongly agree. The answers to these questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as the mean and standard deviation to give basic information about students' attitudes and perceptions. Because this study is more exploratory in nature and there are many variables in play, the researchers avoided the use of inferential statistics to avoid drawing conclusions about causation.

The survey also asked questions that are more open-ended such as "Do you feel that your language skills improved through the online exchanges (listening, speaking, reading, writing)? Why or why not?" Such questions provide a set of rich, descriptive data where students explain themselves directly. This set of data was analyzed using qualitative methods where the researchers immersed themselves in the data and rigorously examined it for patterns and themes relevant to the research questions posed previously.

Results

Research question #1. What are students' perceptions of interacting through SCMC with native speakers in various online and in-person settings?

In order to provide insight into this question, the authors examined students' initial responses to being assigned to participate in online exchanges prior to participating and after completing the assignment. Students explained their feelings in an open-ended survey question. When students first began the assignment, they reported negative feelings of discomfort, for example, one student felt, "Really nervous, kind of annoyed". Others explained that they are "more uncomfortable doing internet talking or interaction with people, I like seeing them face to face…" or that they felt, "uneasy due to having to cross language barriers with people I have never met before".

Gradually, these feelings gave way to more positive attitudes towards online exchanges. Students reported feeling more comfortable after realizing that the people they were talking with were real people. One student commented that, "[It] wasn't as bad as I was expecting. Like it was easier to talk to [native speakers] than I thought like when you see that they are actual people". Others reported that pushing past the initial discomfort reduced their anxiety, "I feel like once you get past the first like 5 minutes then it just flows and it's not that bad".

Towards the end of the assignment, students tended to feel more comfortable and positive towards online exchanges and cited many benefits. Some students reported feeling empowered through their experience with comments such as, "I thought it was a really great opportunity and felt empowered and like I was actually learning Spanish every time I got done with a conversation". Other students were able to develop a friendship and spoke to the same person regularly for more time than was required,

"Today I was on and it went really well. I have been able to talk with the same person [and] we have full conversations now… Usually we talk for about an hour…"

Often these positive feelings spilled over into increased confidence in speaking with native speakers outside of class in their personal lives. One student explained, "If I can talk to a random stranger in a videochat online, find confidence in speaking Spanish, and get over irrational fears related to such a social exchange, I can certainly talk with a friendly person face to face". This comment seems to suggest that having met the challenges inherent in speaking online, other types of interactions seem easier. Other students expressed similar sentiments, "Before WeSpeke I didn't really want to speak in Spanish with native speakers because it made me feel self-conscious, but after using WeSpeke I feel more comfortable at least attempting to speak in Spanish with natives". At least some students felt that speaking with people who are also trying to learn a language helped them to feel more comfortable in interacting in Spanish, "They are trying to learn English and are having the same issues that I am, so it was comforting to know that everyone struggles when learning a new language". Students seemed to feel that the frequency of these interactions also increased their comfort level, "It is not as scary anymore speaking with native speakers after doing it for a few months".

Quantitative data also suggest that students felt at least somewhat more comfortable speaking with native speakers due to their participation in online exchanges, regardless of the service that they used for the assignment. Students were asked to respond to the following question, "How true is this statement for you? I feel more comfortable speaking with native speakers after engaging in the online exchanges". Using a scale from 1-strongly disagree to 6-strongly agree, the average score was 3.88 out of 6.

Figure 1 shows that how comfortable students felt interacting with native speakers changed more or less over the course of the assignment depending on the service that they used. Data indicate that students who used EnVivo increased how comfortable they felt with native speakers more than students who used other services.
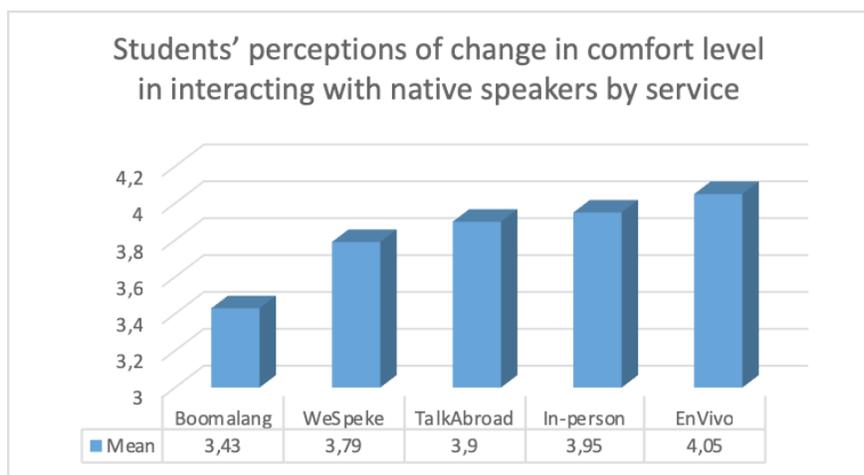

Figure 1. Students' perceptions of change in comfort level in interacting with native speakers by service

Research question #2. Which platforms or settings for SCMC with native speakers seem to provide students with the greatest opportunities for language learning in this context and why?

Insight regarding this question was provided through both open-ended and quantitative questions. Students were asked, "Do you feel that your language skills improved through the online exchanges (listening, speaking, reading, writing)? Why or why not?" On a scale from 1-disagree to 3-agree, the average score for all settings was 2.57 out of 3, showing that students agreed at least somewhat. Next, the researchers calculated a mean for the students that used each of the services, as shown in Figure 2 below.
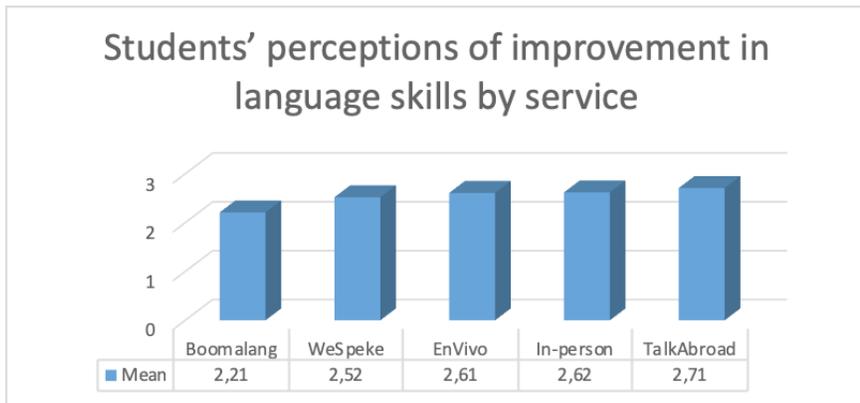

Figure 2. Students' perceptions of improvement in language skills by service

These results indicate that students felt that, regardless of the service used, their interactions with native speakers helped to improve their language skills. With that said, students who used some services believed that they learned more than students who used other services.

Next, the researchers read students' responses to the follow-up question regarding why they believed that they had improved through their experiences interacting with native speakers online. Some students suggested that one-on-one attention led to more improvement as compared to the conversation labs where many students could be present. One student explains, "I feel that I improved greatly in my speaking through talkabroad.com. Much more so than in the conversation labs. You get more one on one attention, and English really isn't an option with communicating". Similarly, some students noted how interacting with native speakers helped them to improve their word choice and improve their vocabulary, stating that "It was nice to have a native speaker help me better understand the proper use of various words in different context. Such as which word is better when trying to convey a certain thing". Other students believed that they improved by receiving direct feedback from their interlocutors, "I know that my listening, writing, and speaking skills were improved because those who I would talk to would correct me and show me the correct way". Some students honed in on improvements in a specific skill, "From my participation in

WeSpeke, I may have improved my Spanish speaking. However, I know for a fact that I improved my Spanish listening, and that is a big deal for me".

Students in the in-person conversation labs, also noted that the number of students present could be an important factor in their learning with one student stating, "I've learned a lot in this lab. It was small and so we got a lot of one on one time" and on the flip side, "They often just felt like another Spanish class to me. If the group was too big, I didn't really get to speak that much anyway".

Some students had the opportunity to participate in both the in-person conversation labs and the online exchanges. This allowed them to contrast the positive and negative aspects of each. After examining these students' responses, it seems that if students preferred the in-person conversation labs it was generally due to feeling more comfortable having other students present, "I enjoy the on-campus better because I am around familiar classmates". Others felt the convenience of having a scheduled lab was an advantage, "... on-campus conversation labs are more scheduled and you can rely on someone being there (for the most part...)" as well as avoiding technical difficulties, "Much easier to connect and focus on the learning experience, instead of worrying that your connection would drop for the 5th time".

However, students who preferred the online exchanges usually felt that they provided more and better quality practice. One student remarked, "I liked the online exchanges way better. The on-campus conversation labs just felt like another class period where they try and fill up time with Spanish activities. Usually you wouldn't talk about what you were currently learning. I like WeSpeke better. It is way more realistic". Another student commented, "I feel the on-campus labs were fun sometimes, but they didn't stretch my ability to speak Spanish one on one like the talk abroad did".

Discussion

Discussion of Research question #1. What are students' perceptions of interacting through SCMC with native speakers in various online and in-person settings?

As mentioned previously, there is some discussion in the field of language teaching about whether or not beginners should or could learn from SCMC with native speakers (Ko, 2012; Lee, 2007; Olaniran, 2009; Satar & Özdener, 2008; Schenkner, 2017). Perhaps, the main finding of this study then is that novice and/or beginning level language learners report improved language skills due to their participation in online language exchanges with native speakers. Similarly, students report that their comfort level in speaking with native speakers increased due to their interactions with native speakers. This is meaningful because it shows that not only can novice or beginning level students learn language by interacting with native speakers online, these interactions actually help them to feel more comfortable using the language. This is not to say that all students felt completely at ease all of the time rather that after these interactions they felt more comfortable than they did previously. This finding should be encouraging to teachers who would like to have their students engage in these interactions but worry that the experience would be too intimidating.

Discussion of Research question #2. Which platforms or settings for SCMC with native speakers seem to provide students with the greatest opportunities for language learning in this context and why?

The present study's findings were similar in some ways to Satar and Özdener's (2008) findings. In their study, students' language skills improved in both synchronous audio and text chat, but students' anxiety only went down through the use of text. In the present study, students all claimed that their language skills and comfort level improved regardless of the platform that they used to engage with native speakers. However, the use of certain platforms with different features fostered greater perception of language gains than others. Likewise some platforms led to more increases in comfort levels than others.

In this study, learners who used a service called TalkAbroad felt their interactions led to more learning than students who used other services. These findings are probably due to two factors related to the structure of the platforms. TalkAbroad requires students to interact one-on-one, giving students more opportunities to use the language as compared to, for example, EnVivo which allows students to participate with another student during the same session or the in-person labs which can have many students present, up to ten or fifteen at a time. However, WeSpeke requires one-on-one interaction due to its design but students reported learning less with WeSpeke than with some other services. It seems that the nature of the interaction in each platform would explain the differences. TalkAbroad, EnVivo, and the in-person labs all use paid employees who are native speakers to converse with students. Using paid employees means that the conversation partners should be present and focused for a set amount of time, will be expected to stay in the target language and have some idea of the topics covered in class and the skill level of the learner. In contrast, WeSpeke is free to users around the world, and students interact with whichever native Spanish speakers are on the site and are willing to engage. Because of this, students' conversation partners on WeSpeke may approach the interactions very differently. For example, they may be available for only a short time, switch languages frequently and be unaware of the learner's skill or the focus of their class. All of which could lead to less intense or regular practice.

On the other hand, students who used, EnVivo, one of the paid, online services, reported that their experience led to them becoming more comfortable with native speakers than any of the other services. What could explain this result? Probably two things, one, EnVivo allows more than one student to participate in a given conversation at a time, depending on who signs up for a specific time slot. Students, therefore, can have interactions with a native speaker one-on-one or with up to three other students, with an average of two to three speakers in a given session. Similarly, the in-person conversation labs ranked high in terms of increased comfort in speaking with native speakers and also employ paid conversation partners. However, the in-person labs often had even more students present, nearly a full class at times, which would imply that students in the labs would be even more comfortable. It is important to remember though, that the question was not necessarily how comfortable a student felt, but rather how much did a student's comfort level increase. It may be the case that students having one or two other students present made the interaction challenging but not overwhelming. In turn, students learned that they were able to engage successfully which led to increased comfort in interacting with native speakers.

The explosion in international internet usage with accompanying increases in the bandwidth and speed of internet connections allows for the type of communication that is discussed in this article. With these events, a large number of services and platforms allowing native speakers of one language to communicate with students of that language have been created, each with different features. The sheer number of options available can leave instructors and administrators confused as to how to proceed.

After testing a variety of services and examining the experiences of students, it seems that the first step should be for practitioners to clearly establish the goals that motivate them to implement online exchanges. In some cases, intensive language practice is the main emphasis. In other cases, teachers may want to emphasize cultural understanding, increase students' confidence or simply allow students to see firsthand that studying the language can provide opportunities for real communication. Once the goals and motivations are established, other aspects of the specific context can be factored in. For example, students' age, years of study and/or prior experience with the language can all push instructors towards one service or another. Similarly, the financial resources that can be dedicated to these activities should be taken into consideration. For example, if the students and/or the institution cannot dedicate any funds to these activities, it would eliminate the use of paid services.

Discussion of selecting appropriate platforms for SCMC

Each platform has certain features that make it more or less appropriate for helping students reach the goals of instructors given the unique aspects of their setting. As the researchers examined different services, they developed a list of features that seemed valuable in determining whether to use a specific service with their students. Table 1 below provides a grid with the list of features across the top as well as a list of the services that were used in this study, allowing for a comparison of each.

Table 1

Grid of important features of online exchange platforms

Service/ Platform	Paid?	Trained/ Untrained	Teacher or Not?	Format i.e. Audio/ Text	Reciprocate i.e. use both langs.	Time	UniqueTech.	Org. for Teach
WeSpeke	Unpaid	Untrained	Not teachers	Audio/ Video,Text	Yes	assign	Yes	No
Talk Abroad	Paid	Trained	Not teachers	Audio/ Video,Text	No	30 mins.	Yes	Yes
Booma lang	Both	Both	Not teachers	Audio/ Video,Text	Yes	assign	No	Yes
EnVivo	Paid	Trained	Often	Audio/ Video,Text	No	30 mins.	Yes	Yes
In-person	Paid	Trained	Not teachers	n/a	No	1 hr.	No	Some

Having a paid interlocutor seems, from the results, to encourage increased learning because there was more focused use of the target language. Similarly, trained inter-locutors or teachers might be more likely to center the conversation around the topics of the class. This could be an advantage or disadvantage. Untrained partners or part-ners who were not teachers might take conversations in a variety of directions that could be more interesting, challenging, or unexpected which could benefit learning in different ways. They also might be less likely to change their speech to accommodate beginning learners' nascent comprehension skills.

Additionally, the expectation of reciprocity, where conversation partners are compen-sated not with money but the opportunity use and learn the students' native language could be both a positive and negative for some students. Needing to use both lan-guages uses more of students' time for the same amount of time spent practicing and/or reduces the total amount of time available for practicing. On the other hand, students may benefit from speaking in their native language in addition to the target language by feeling more comfortable in attempting to speak as they realize that their conversation partners are also struggling. Speaking their partners' target language might also help them to understand how their target language and their native lan-guage differ as they see common mistakes made in their native language such as in pronunciation, grammar, or word choice.

Other aspects of the services that are included above refer mostly to the technical fea-tures of the sites such as "Unique Tech." and "Org. for Teach". Unique tech refers to as-pects of each site that could affect learning or convenience. Each of the sites above al-low for synchronous audio, video, and text chat, but each has unique features as well. WeSpeke, for example, allows users to suggest a topic by clicking a button labeled, "Talk About" or give feedback or ask partners to slow down by clicking related buttons rather than interrupting their partner's speech directly. "Org. for Teach" refers to the way a particular service or platform may or may not intentionally help teachers to or-ganize their students' participation. Examples, might include, mass registration of all students at one time, the possibility of audio or video recordings of interactions, or an instructor dashboard providing information about student participation. The presence of such features could provide a level of convenience or foster communication in such a way that instructors might be convinced to use a particular service over another.

Discussion-Implications for practitioners

The research presented here has led the authors to provide the following information for practitioners.

- **Begin with clear goals.** All decisions regarding teaching and learning should be taken in accord with specific goals that will dictate which platforms might be suitable as well as the specific tasks that learners will engage in.

- **Prepare students and increase difficulty of tasks as skill and confidence increase.** Students with little to no competence in the language will not be able to engage with native speakers in the same ways as more advanced students. Just as learning goals will shape activities and the choice of platform, so must the students' abilities. Students may be asked to engage initially in pairs or small groups, working together, perhaps just sending written messages and then en-gaging in longer and longer one on one conversations as they go on.

- **Allow students to struggle.** Often teachers want interactions with native speakers to be easy and anxiety-free, but students will often rise to the expectations of their instructors. The results here suggest that beginning level students improve more in terms of their affect and their language learning when they engage in interactions that are difficult without being overwhelming.

- **Consider paid and unpaid services.** Finding sufficient funds to pay for interactions with native speakers can be extremely challenging. Instructors should consider ways to use unpaid and paid platforms in the service of their goals. For example, a recorded interaction with a paid conversation partner could be used as a culminating experience with students engaging with native speakers on their own through un-paid services prior to that experience.

Conclusion and future directions

The results of the present study support the findings of previous studies that suggest that novice learners can improve their language skills by engaging with native speakers in synchronous computer mediated communication (Ko, 2012; Satar & Özdener, 2008). They also support the idea that beginning students who engage in these activities feel increasingly comfortable in interacting with native speakers (Schenker, 2017). The results also indicate that the variety of ways that services differ can affect students' learning and comfort level. However, this study is limited to being an exploratory study. Future studies should continue to examine the role of synchronous online interactions with native speakers in beginning level language and culture learning.

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