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Developing Oral Skills Through Skype: A Language Project Analysis

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse L2 usage in the oral interaction between university students from Hong Kong and Spain. With that research focus on mind, we carried out a Skype-mate Language Project, which purpose was to enhance oral communication skills and cultural awareness of students learning English and Spanish as L2. The qualitative methodology used in this analysis was the observation of a series of conversations between Hong-Kong and Spanish undergraduates through Skype, using English and Spanish as their means of communication. Both Skype mates had the same list of topics and questions in both languages, what were their conversation scripts. Interactions had a minimum length of 30 minutes, at least 15 minutes speaking in each language. Video recording of conversations on campus was the technique used to keep evidence of these oral interactions. Once the conversations took place, a quantitative stage would come: all students were required to submit an online questionnaire on their difficulties in understanding. Therefore, this study follows a mixed methodology, where quantitative and qualitative methods are employed. Results show that non-verbal communication was key for mutual understanding when L2 level was low; more proficient speakers explained cultural issues and commented on them. Within such communicative complexity, discursive and cultural issues seem crucial and should be considered in the L2 teaching curriculum.

Keywords: L2 speaking, Skype, interaction, mixed-method research;

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze L2 development in the oral interaction between university students from Hong Kong and Spain. With that research focus on mind, we carried out a Skype-mate Language Project, which purpose
was to enhance oral communication skills and cultural awareness of students learning English and Spanish as L2. Technology tools can develop language learning. Moreover, technology motivates students as it provides them with authentic activities, that is, language used in real practice. Therefore, technology tools should be employed especially to develop the difficult oral language skills —speaking and listening (Levy, 2009) — and the six communicative competences —linguistic, discursive, strategic, sociolinguistic, sociocultural, and affective competences (Ifantidou, 2011; Yu, 2011).

In fact, this project focuses on a specific technology tool that addresses deficiencies present in foreign language classrooms (Blake, 2008): few opportunities to practice oral skills, and even fewer opportunities to benefit from practice with peers from other countries. These common handicaps can be easily solved by the implementation of socio-constructivist activities using Skype, which provides excellent opportunities for development of L2 listening and speaking. This methodological implementation is supported by socio-constructivist learning theories; these theories are especially appropriate to apply technology in Foreign Language Learning (FLL). Constructivism (Miño-Garcés, 2009, pp. 81-89) places the student at the centre of the learning process, making him or her responsible for developing knowledge instead of waiting for the teacher’s input:

![Fig. 1. Learning process.](image)

The focus is on active analysis of data and on applying the new information into previous one. In this case, language students interact and share their language knowledge, working as language users and evaluators at the same time.

2. Skype mate language project

Skype-mate language project aims to foster intercultural communication and to improve L2 use by online interaction between 20 Spanish and Chinese students of English and Spanish, respectively. Our research hypothesis is that listening and speaking skills are improved through the use of online Skype calls as result of a successful plan for Technology Implementation in Language Teaching (TILT). Actually, we will be able to check the educational, linguistic and cultural advantages associated with implementing this resource in the foreign language curriculum. In this Language Project, Skype-mates were given in advance similar lists of topics and questions in English and in Spanish to practise with their language partners; these questions were their conversation scripts so that they could practice before the real online call took place. Interactions had a minimum length of 30 minutes, at least 15 minutes speaking in each language. Both student groups had an intermediate level in their L2. Nevertheless, although their L2 fluency levels were good, results revealed that strong accents were a clear barrier for mutual understanding in some cases. Questions for the English conversations were the following ones (they were meant to serve as speaking guidelines for Skype-mates):

- Why do you study English?
- What aspects of English do you study?
- How is your university life?
- Are you living in a hall of residence?
- Which city in Spain are you from? What is it like?
- Do people in Spain usually have big families?
- How do you usually spend your holiday?
- Do you like travelling?
- If we went to Spain, which places should we visit?
- Do you have any recommendations for recent Spanish movies?
- Are you graduating soon?
- What will you do when you finish university?
In order to avoid boredom and repetition when asking and answering their questions, beneath is the list of conversation topics Spanish undergraduates received for initiating online interaction (the list has been translated into English, since these topics were part of the Spanish conversations):

- Personal details (name and nationality)
- Character and personality
- Mood and feelings
- Family
- Food
- Habits and timetables
- City and transports
- Leisure time and holidays
- Professional experience

Due to time difference, participants had time adjustments. Conversations had to take place in the afternoon or evening (Hong Kong time) whenever possible, which meant morning time in Spain. Video recording of conversations on campus was the technique used to keep evidence of these oral interactions. Afterwards, the tape was given to the students to work out the transcript of their part of the conversation, which was then sent to their teachers for correction.

Finally, all students were required to submit a questionnaire after each conversation, uploading the answers to the corresponding online blackboard. The questionnaire items analysed were the following ones:

- Conversation (time and duration; language/s used and duration);
- Overall experience explanation;
- Technical issues (hearing the Skype-mate, talking to the Skype-mate, writing if necessary, image, echo, other problems);
- Other issues: the Skype-mate understood his/her L2; s/he understood his/her Skype-mate L2; the Skype-mate guided the conversation in his/her L2; the Skype-mate kept the conversation in his/her L2 within his/her abilities; the Skype-mate talked at a good pace in his/her L2; the Skype-mate did not let him/her talk enough in his/her L2; s/he felt comfortable with her/his Skype-mate; s/he felt it was useful and would like to repeat the experience; new words or expressions s/he had learnt in the conversation (if any); questions s/he would like to have clarified by the teacher (things that Skype-mate said or did that s/he did not understand);
- Other comments and suggestions.

3. The power of mixed methods

Skype, defined by Godwin-Jones (2005) as “the people’s telephone,” is a free based voice over Internet application. It is basically a free worldwide Internet telephone service. Required hardware includes a microphone and speakers; it is recommended utilizing headphones to prevent distracting echoes from the conversation partner’s voice. Other features of the application include a chat window, which can be especially useful if the users have sound difficulties, besides the screen sharing capability, which offers obvious visual benefits to language learners. Although it is not an open source software, the “application programming interface” is open and third party developers are encouraged to integrate Skype functionality in their applications (Mullen et al., 2009).

Skype usage is increasing significantly, especially regarding usage on mobile devices (Harden, 2013). It would be interesting to compare the numbers concerning personal versus educational Skype usage, which is actually on rise (Mirtschin, 2008) since many online classes, seminars and conferences are delivered via Skype.

As we said, the qualitative methodology used in this analysis was the observation of a series of conversations between Hong Kong and Spanish undergraduates through Skype, using English and Spanish as their means of communication. Once the conversations had taken place, a quantitative stage would come, taking into account both
students’ transcripts of their conversations and their questionnaires. Therefore, this study follows a mixed methodology, where quantitative and qualitative methods are employed. Mixed methodology is the key to most educational settings, where situations are so complex and demand various perspectives for understanding (McKay, 2006; Arkin, 2010, p. 3341).

The communicative act taking place in an oral interaction is so complex that we cannot restrict its analysis to language features only (Hyland, 2005, p. 25): different levels of meaning and interpretation imply multi-functionality, and that cannot be regarded as a mere linguistic phenomenon.

4. Research findings

Results coming from this project can be categorised into different levels: linguistic level, sociocultural level, and kinaesthetic level. Observation of conversation videos proves how students kept on developing oral skills; each result category is described as follows.

The original purpose of this project was meant to address main L2 learning issues in real-time communication. In this case, English is the lingua franca employed by both Spanish and Hong Kong students to exchange information. During the second part of their interviews, Spanish was employed. In terms of fluency and accuracy, participants seem to be more confident when talking in English as they have been studying this language for a longer period of time. English sentences are longer and contain a wider range of formal and informal vocabulary. We could see how listening skills were improved too as conversations were repeated throughout the project (Jones, 2008). This relates to the discursive competence students are required to learn and practise as they study a second language.

Regarding sociocultural results, social rules of interaction also have an influence in the way participants communicate. Turn-taking (strategic competence) is respected by Hong Kong students, whereas Spanish subjects tend to interrupt their Skype-mates when these have not finished answering yet. Conversational rules are different depending on the country. Finally, kinaesthetic evidence shows that hand and head movements are also different in each student group: hand movement is more frequent in Spanish students, and both groups use it to apologise for saying something wrong. In the early communication stages, 60% of communication was non-verbal, until they could either fix technical problems or find themselves more confident in the L2. Videos also show that non-verbal communication was key for mutual understanding when L2 level was low; more proficient speakers explained cultural issues and commented on them. Within such communicative complexity, discursive and cultural issues seem crucial and should be considered in the L2 teaching curriculum.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, Skype is a powerful resource for second language teaching if used as support for well-defined learning objectives (Rao, 2007). As we have seen, it offers many L2 learning benefits, solving the problem of target language practice, especially oral skills. It also gives students opportunities to develop their communicative competences. Skype also provides authentic exchanges, motivating students. The disadvantages related to Skype are minimal in comparison to the benefits. Those could be possible time differences among partners and limitations of computer equipment or Internet connection (Walker, Davies & Hewer, 2012). Definitely, the possibilities are nearly endless and foreign language teachers can reach many rewards with this powerful innovation.

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