



The effects of virtual exchanges on oral skills and motivation

Laia Canals, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)

Abstract

The present study aims to assess the benefits of participating in a virtual language exchange (VE) for practicing oral skills with native speakers by measuring learners' motivation to learn the language, communicate, and collaborate. The oral language development of advanced learners of English at a Spanish university was compared with a control group from the same class who did not participate in the VE. This study's motivation was two-fold: 1) pilot testing the VE project before making it mainstream and offering it as an integral part of this university's language courses, and 2) testing whether that increased advanced learners' purpose and motivation to communicate with others in the target language. Data were gathered from learners' oral grades and two questionnaires to report on the participants' experiences and examine the VEs' potential to support the development of oral skills. Quantitative analyses of learners' oral grades and questionnaires revealed that the VE contributed to boosting their oral skills, increased their motivation to learn the foreign language, and added a sense of purpose to collaborate with other learners while carrying out communicative tasks. Findings also suggest that improvement in oral skills was more noticeable among lower-proficiency learners taking part in the VE.

Keywords: Computer-Mediated Communication; Task-based Instruction, Collaborative Learning, Video

Language(s) Learned in This Study: English

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Introduction

Virtual exchanges (VEs), also known as telecollaboration, online intercultural exchanges, e-tandem or teletandem, have been approached and examined from a myriad of different perspectives.¹ Within the field of language education, these exchanges can take different shapes in terms of the type of interlocutor and pair compositions (native speakers, non-native speakers, pre-service teachers), they can focus on developing certain skills (oral, written, interpersonal, critical thinking) and competences (intercultural, communicative, digital), and have evolved over time alongside technical developments which enable increasingly complex and multimodal interactions between learners.

O'Dowd (2018) examines the work done on VEs in different contexts and for varied educational objectives, and provides both a historical account and a thorough description of current developments in the field. In the same article, the author recommends using the umbrella term *virtual exchange* to refer to all types of programs which facilitate online interpersonal communication among learners in different parts of the world to learn languages or other subjects. The author of the present paper has decided to use O'Dowd's terminology to refer to the exchange, which is the focus of the present research.

The current article begins by examining the research conducted on oral and video synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) before moving on to examine several considerations regarding the effects of choosing a native-speaker or peer-expert type of exchange. In addition, the article explores previous research which examines the benefits of VEs for oral skills development and motivation to learn the target language, and to conduct collaborative work. Then, it presents the current study's data which

underlines the benefits learners can obtain by participating in a VE in terms of progress in their academic performance, and particularly their oral skills. Additionally, it presents the learners' level of satisfaction with the exchange and the effects it had on their motivation and willingness to communicate with native speakers to carry out a collaborative task. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of the affordances of VEs both at the classroom and institutional level.

Oral Interactions in SCMC

Even though there are several VE projects which incorporate audio, video, and text chat (Wang, 2004; Jepson, 2005; Rosell-Aguilar, 2005; Lee, 2007; Develotte, 2009; Guth & Marini-Maio, 2010; Guth & Helm, 2011), research comparing the benefits of one or another modality of SCMC over the other is still scarce. As Yanguas (2012) points out, there is a need for research which demonstrates the benefits of using video in SCMC and the role it can play on the development of a second language (L2), specifically on oral skills. The present article attempts to contribute to this body of knowledge by measuring the effects of an interactive SCMC VE on the learners' oral language proficiency.

Yanguas (2010) compared intermediate-level learners of Spanish in 15 learner-to-learner dyads in two oral SCMC groups (video and audio) and a traditional face-to-face (FTF) group by analyzing meaning negotiation during task-based interaction, which requires learners to interact with one another while carrying out a meaning-focused communicative task. He contrasted his findings with earlier studies on written SCMC (text-chat) to determine which are more beneficial for L2 learning. His findings confirmed that both video and audio SCMC yield similar results to FTF in terms of turn-taking patterns and meaning negotiations when misunderstandings occur, rendering video and audio SCMC closer to FTF modes than written SCMC (text-chat). His results indicate the existence of certain peculiarities of the audio SCMC modality, which showed an increased number of elaboration responses due to the lack of visual cues in this communication mode. However, this higher number of responses did not necessarily lead to more success in the negotiation outcome, and the author therefore concluded that the two oral SCMC modalities showed equal opportunities for comprehensible input, feedback, and modified output in learner-to-learner task interactions. In a later study, Yanguas (2012) examined possible differences between two modes of oral SCMC (audio and video) and FTF interaction in vocabulary development by analyzing 29 conversational dyads. He did not find significant differences between the groups' regarding oral production or written recognition of vocabulary, but the audio SCMC group outperformed the other two groups in oral comprehension measures.

Learner-to-learner Interactions During Collaborative Tasks

The types of exchanges in which learners interact with a native speaker of the language they are learning, while also providing practice and authentic input for their partners, who are learning their first language (L1), are referred to as peer-expert or peer-tutor exchanges, or sometimes just e-tandem. Previous research has shown that there are differences in learners' production depending on interlocutor type. Even though some studies have noticed that exchanges with non-native speakers lead to more modified output than exchanges with native speakers (Sato & Lyster, 2007) and more time on task and amount of L2 use (Bueno-Alastuey, 2011), native speakers are said to provide higher amounts of feedback (Mackey et al., 2003; Oliver, 2002). The learners in this study signed up for the VE because they felt motivated to engage in authentic social interaction (Jauregi et al., 2012) with another person in the target language and conduct a collaborative task. Although these exchanges might lead to more anxiety (Lee, 2004; Satar & Ozdener, 2008) and to being exposed to less comprehensible input than exchanges between non-native speakers, research examining native speaker–non-native speaker dyads and their moderating effect on learners' production and performance is still inconclusive (Ziegler, 2016). In the present study, motivation to communicate and learner engagement in an authentic task might help overcome the shortcomings of these types of pairings. After examining several studies comparing SCMC and FTF regarding the effects of the mode of interaction (native-speaker versus non-native speaker), Ziegler (2016) found a small relative effect size in favor of SCMC for interactions with a native speaker interlocutor.

Loewen and Isbell (2017) examined the role of L1 background, modality (FTF, online), and three types of tasks (picture differences, consensus, and conversation) in fostering pronunciation-focused interactions and learning-related episodes (LREs) in a VE with 30 English learners. Neither same nor different L1 dyads nor modality had an impact on pronunciation LREs, and neither did any type of task produce greater focus on pronunciation. However, out of the three tasks, the consensus activity yielded the greatest pronunciation focus. Loewen and Isbell (2017) add to the body of evidence (Hampel & Hauk, 2004; Yanguas, 2012; Bueno-Alastuey, 2013), which indicates that interlocutors with similar or different L1s have only a relative effect on task performance during learner-to-learner interactions and points to the moderating effect of type of task to elicit pronunciation focus.

The Benefits of Virtual Exchanges

Communicative interaction in different settings has been the subject of several investigations and its benefits in aiding L2 development are well documented (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Mackey, 1999; Mackey et al., 2003). Participating in communicative interaction, and specifically in several forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC), can provide increased saliency in noticing target language features (Smith, 2004). This gives learners the chance to obtain negative feedback (if only implicit) in response to their non-target-like utterances and provides more opportunities to produce modified output than in traditional classroom interactions with teachers (Mackey et al., 2003). The ability to modify output is believed to foster fluency, automatization of retrieval processes, and syntactic processing (DeKeyser, 1998). Recent research on interaction in online settings and VEs has highlighted their ability to provide room for meaning negotiation by enabling comprehensible input, negative feedback, and the production of modified output (Yanguas, 2010; Yanguas, 2012; Ziegler, 2016). Additionally, in her meta-analysis of SCMC and interaction, Ziegler (2016) pointed out that interaction in CMC contexts can help learners notice gaps between their interlanguage and the target language features. Mackey et al. (2003) claimed that task-based interaction enables feedback to be provided in optimal amounts. However, the authors indicated that the value of participating in such interactions was subject to variation according to the learner's age and type of interlocutor. Even though Ziegler (2016) argued that the connection between interaction in CMC contexts and learner outcomes has not been robustly established, she examined several studies comparing interactions in SCMC and FTF contexts and concluded that interaction in SCMC benefits overall L2 learning outcomes more than FTF contexts, especially for the development of productive skills.

For advanced learners, such as those in the present study, learning a language requires their involvement and active participation in the learning process (Lee, 2007) by using or being exposed to the language outside the classroom in order to see a real improvement. Learning a language becomes a daily endeavor that plays more of a central role in their lives. Learners need to watch movies, listen to podcasts, read or watch the news in the target language, but they also need to be exposed to authentic communication (Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2016) with other learners or native speakers. Some research has highlighted the self-reported benefits of VEs (Darhower, 2009; Tian & Wang, 2010; Walker, 2018), which point to improvements in learners' linguistic and intercultural competences. Other research has indicated discrepancies between the self-reported benefits among two groups. Less proficient learners reported the exchange as less beneficial to them (Tian & Wang, 2010) as opposed to more proficient learners who deemed the exchange as satisfactory. Additionally, Bueno-Alastuey (2011) reports on a VE between two groups with different aims—learners of English and pre-service teachers, developing linguistic skills and techno-pedagogical ones respectively—and concludes that although participants in the two groups expressed satisfaction with the VE, the group seeking to develop their linguistic skills reported more benefits than the other group. Lee (2007) also notes that learners with less sophisticated listening skills experienced difficulties understanding native speakers due to linguistic variations, use of regionalisms, and accents, which ultimately affected the degree of interactivity.

Oral Skills and Academic Progress

Regardless of their linguistic background or type of pairing, learner-to-learner interactions allow meaning

negotiation and enable the interplay of several crucial aspects that determine the development of the L2, namely input, learner abilities, communicative intent, attention to form, and linguistic output (Wang, 2004). These interactions in audio or video SCMC have a specific effect on improving learners' oral proficiency (Hampel, 2003; Bueno-Alastuey, 2011). Recent enhancements to the features and capabilities of videoconferencing tools make these resources especially suitable for SCMC. These tools provide more affordances than audio-only communication to display non-verbal communication such as paralinguistic cues (gestures and facial expressions), and thus help diminish ambiguity and improve understanding (Wang, 2004).

According to Lee (2007), since video SCMC relies on listening and speaking, this offers unprecedented opportunities to practice and improve these skills, which are among the most difficult areas to practice in general foreign language contexts (Bueno-Alastuey, 2011), and specifically in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) settings. In her desktop videoconferencing project, Lee (2007) reports on 18 English-language learners working collaboratively with expert speakers to complete task-based activities. The author gathered data from video-recording samples, reflections, and oral interviews to report the participants' experiences and examine the potential of desktop videoconferencing to support speaking skills. She concluded that videoconferences were effective in supporting collaborative learning and fostering L2 oral communication.

Later studies have continued to provide evidence of the role learner-to-learner interactions (including SCMC, VEs, and other types of interactions in FTF settings) play in supporting the development of speaking skills. These interactions not only help increase the amount of pronunciation-focused discourse, but also allow learners to display and use more repair moves (Bueno-Alastuey, 2013) and thus more possibilities of modified output to occur.

Motivation, Willingness, and Need to Communicate and Collaborate

Affective variables and sociocultural factors are believed to influence L2 learning in specific contexts (Dörnyei, 2000) alongside attitudes and motivation, which are more closely related to individual differences (Yanguas, 2012; Freiermuth & Huang, 2012). However, there have been very few studies which examine motivation in oral CMC, according to Yanguas (2012, p.510).

Although not the focus of her research, in her study partly aimed at identifying the benefits of audio-graphic CMC, Hampel (2003) pointed out its motivational nature. Darhower (2009) investigated a chat (SCMC) exchange between 80 Spanish and English learners. Even though the study was not focused on video SCMC, the motivational nature of the study stems from factors that can be applied in other SCMC settings. The possibility of obtaining feedback and a self-perceived increase in their linguistic abilities motivated learners to continue to learn the language and communicate with native speakers.

Jauregi et al. (2012) pointed out that motivation is an umbrella term which covers several aspects of language learning, among them the willingness to communicate (WTC). The WTC construct claims that linguistic and psychological variables can influence communication (MacIntyre, 2007). Jauregi et al. (2012) reports on a VE project between Czech learners of Dutch and native pre-service Dutch-as-a-foreign-language teachers aimed at enhancing learners' motivation. They measured the effect of videoconferencing sessions on motivation by administering pre-, mid-, and post-questionnaires and concluded that these sessions showed a significant effect on beginner-level learners' willingness to interact with native speakers.

Jung et al. (2017) examined learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of video SCMC interactions to foster intercultural and linguistic competence in 55 English learners in Korea, Japan, and Taiwan by conducting interviews, analyzing the interactions, and administering a questionnaire to track changes in learner perception over time. Two variables were found to be significant predictors of positive attitudes toward SCMC: attention to language and cultural episodes during online discussion. Learners reported strong, positive attitudes toward the use of VEs for both L2 learning and intercultural communicative competence development and WTC, and the need to use English.

The reviewed research on video and audio SCMC contributes to framing VEs as one instance of learner-to-learner interaction, which can contribute to the development of the learners' L2 due to its interactive nature. These situations allow for input, communication intent, comprehensible feedback, and modified output which play an intricate role in helping learners improve language comprehension and production. However, several aspects remain to be studied, specifically the effects of VEs on learners' oral proficiency and motivational factors. This study attempts to examine the effects of a VE on a group of learners, analyzing their motivational level, their willingness to communicate and collaborate, and also compares their oral grades with those of a control group of learners not taking part in the VE.

Statement of the Problem, Motivation for the Study, and Research Questions

The primary motivation for the present study is to provide evidence of the benefits of establishing a VE in an advanced English language course in order to make foreign language learning more relevant for the learners. VEs not only provide a purpose to communicate in authentic social interactions with expert peers in order to complete collaborative tasks, but they are also generally beneficial in increasing the learners' motivation to communicate in the target language with someone who does not share their linguistic or cultural background. However, there is a need to determine to what extent improvements in motivation to communicate and oral skills can be related to the participation in a VE. This will, in turn, contribute to assessing the feasibility of these types of exchanges of becoming part of the regular curriculum of online courses offered at an exclusively online university.

Regarding the pedagogical design of the VE, the present study adopts a social constructivism theoretical view of language learning (Thorne, 2003), according to which language learning happens as a result of active collaboration between learners in order to construct knowledge (Lee, 2007). The exchange between learners (in this case expert speakers) is facilitated through participation in collaborative scaffolding, as learners take turns swapping roles and acting both as learners and teachers/native speakers. Rather than examining what happens in these tasks, however, and as a preliminary step before engaging in the task of analyzing the VE itself, this study seeks to determine the effect participating in these tasks has on learners' oral skills (fluency, oral interaction, speaking), motivation, and willingness to communicate and collaborate with other learners. In order to do so, the present study compares two groups of Spanish learners; the first group took part in a VE with Canadian learners and the control group did not, although both groups of learners carried out the same tasks following the same procedures. If participation in VE provided any additional benefits for learners in terms of oral skills and motivation, we would expect the VE group to show differences in oral grades compared with the learners in the control group. Similarly, we would be able to observe an increased motivation and willingness to communicate and collaborate in Spanish learners of English at the end of the VE compared with the beginning. For the purpose of this paper, the data on the VE partners (Canadian learners) will not be examined.²

Therefore, the present study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Does participation in the SCMC VE have a positive impact on the learners' oral skills compared with the control group?
2. Did the exchange have a positive impact on learners' motivation and willingness to communicate (WTC) and collaborate in English?
3. What was the learners' evaluation of the exchange?

Methodology

Context

The VE was set up between two groups of university students taking their mandatory foreign language courses: Spanish learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) and Canadian learners of Spanish. The collaboration started in mid-January 2018 and lasted until April (coinciding with the end of term in the

Canadian institution). During this period, learners interacted in a Google+ (G+) community that served as the entire group communication space and met online three times in pairs to take part in oral interaction tasks which were video recorded. The present study was based on the voluntary participation of advanced-level English learners who took part in the VE and conducted the required spoken tasks of the regular course with their VE partners.

Tasks and Procedures

The oral tasks were adapted from the Spanish university's regular semester-long syllabus. This fully online university offers task-based language instruction for their EFL courses. The VE took place outside the virtual classroom space. Nonetheless, both groups of learners participated in the same number of tasks—five oral and five written productive tasks—therefore, learners in both groups carried out the tasks under similar conditions. The VE group took part in three out of the five oral tasks as part of the VE with Canadian learners, whereas the control group carried out all oral tasks with their Spanish classmates.

The first task served as a warm-up/ice-breaker activity in which the learners got to know their Canadian counterparts in the G+ community and familiarized themselves with the online communication space, as Guth and Helm (2011) suggest. All learners were invited to create a digital profile with basic information about themselves. Besides their profile, the learners were also encouraged to upload a one-minute personal video introduction to make themselves comfortable talking in front of the camera in the target language.

For the learners to be able to meet online for the following synchronous tasks, they looked for a partner who matched their time availability. Each pair was asked to meet online for a trial session to test and become familiar with the videoconferencing tool and the recording procedures. Each one of the collaborative interactive videoconferencing sessions was video-recorded for assessment and research purposes after having informed the participants about data-privacy procedures and having collected consent forms for the students in the experimental group and for those in the control group. During the first videoconferencing session learners were asked to share their university life experience and to each speak in their target language for at least 10-15 minutes. Given that the university systems in Canada and Spain work quite differently, and that the Spanish university is fully online, this elicited a good amount of conversation and provided room to solve any technical issues before the assessed set of tasks started. Besides being encouraged to ask their own questions, the learners had been provided with a set of possible additional questions that they could ask.

The Canadian learners' level of Spanish was intermediate to higher intermediate (between B1 and B2 according to the [CEFR](#)), whereas the Spanish learners were half-way through an advanced English course (C1), so they were slightly above the B2 level.³ The difference in proficiency levels was not deemed problematic, given that earlier studies (such as Watanabe & Swain, 2007) had concluded that different proficiency levels do not interfere with the ability to provide expert-peer feedback in interaction. From the beginning of the VE, all learners were warned that their partner's level might be somewhat different to their own and that they should be accommodating and provide their partners help when they faced linguistic difficulties.

O'Dowd and Ware (2009) propose three main categories of tasks that can be used in VEs: information exchange, comparison and analysis, and collaboration and product creation. Ziegler (2016) lists open or closed interactive tasks (one-way or two-way information gap, information exchange, problem-solving, and decision-making tasks), while Loewen and Isbell (2017) mention picture differences, consensus, and communication tasks. The present research included three two-way open-ended communicative tasks which involved information exchange, decision-making, comparison and analysis, and collaborative product creation (a written text). These tasks required the learners to meet online in pairs using a videoconferencing tool once every three weeks. All tasks included an element of intercultural exchange where learners had to share information about their own culture or gain an understanding of the other's worldview to carry out a collaborative written task. Although the intercultural aspect of the exchange was not the focus of the present research, the VE included this component, which will be addressed in upcoming papers.

The second and third tasks were mandatory and assessed (see [Appendix A](#) for more details). Learners obtained a grade for participating in them and were marked down if they failed to complete them. The teachers of the course graded their oral interactions with a rubric to assess oral interaction which was also used in the regular course (see [Appendix B](#)). As the course coordinator, the researcher was not involved in the grading process and was only in charge of providing the rubric and marking criteria. The last non-mandatory activity served as a wrap-up task where learners had a chance to say goodbye to their VE partners and the entire group by posting a farewell video in the G+ community.

Participants

Nine advanced learners of English as a foreign language who were registered in a fully online language course at a Spanish university volunteered to participate in the VE with a group of Canadian college learners who were studying Spanish as foreign language at their institution. Nine additional learners who were registered in the same C1 English course at the Spanish institution were randomly selected to serve as a control group. These learners did not participate in the VE, but completed the course requirements by taking part in the same mandatory tasks as the participants in the VE.

The participants included 10 males and eight females in three age ranges: over 25 years old (one-third of the students), between 21 and 25 (another third), and 18 to 21 (one-third of the students). Half of them were taking English at the university and the other half were also enrolled in either Humanities or Engineering degrees, although the English course did not count toward their degrees. Most of them (70%) reported having studied English for more than six years, while the rest reported having studied English for between four and six years. None of them had participated in a VE project before.

Instruments, Data Collection, Treatment, and Analyses

The following sections are divided into two parts, which correspond to the two sets of data used for this study. The first examines the development of oral skills and compares the two groups of learners: those who participated in the VE and the control group of learners who followed the regular course. The oral grades of all learners in the study prior to and after the VE took place were gathered from the virtual learning environment. These grades came from the learners' performances in two interactive tasks, one taking place before and the other one after the VE, and were given by the teachers based on the same rubric (see [Appendix B](#)) which assessed task achievement, fluency, intonation, pronunciation, and range and accuracy of grammar and vocabulary. The researcher was not involved in the process of grading learners' work. Due to the nature of the data readily available (oral grades) at the stage the article was written and given the fact that this was an initial pilot partly designed as an experiment (the treatment group following the VE and the control group the regular course curriculum), statistical tests were deemed appropriate to be run with the first part of the data.

The second set of data comes from the entry and exit questionnaires (see [Appendix C](#) and [Appendix D](#)) answered by the learners who participated in the VE. The entry or initial questionnaire asked learners about their expectations, previous experience using videoconferencing tools, and overall motivation to do collaborative work. The exit questionnaire asked about their degree of satisfaction with the VE and their overall motivation to learn the language and engage in collaboration with other learners. Since the questionnaires were anonymous, there was no way of knowing whether the ones who answered the entry questionnaire were exactly the same ones who answered the second one. The questionnaires were set up in English but students could respond in the language in which they felt most comfortable. Some of the excerpts quoted in the following sections were originally written in Spanish and were translated by the researcher.

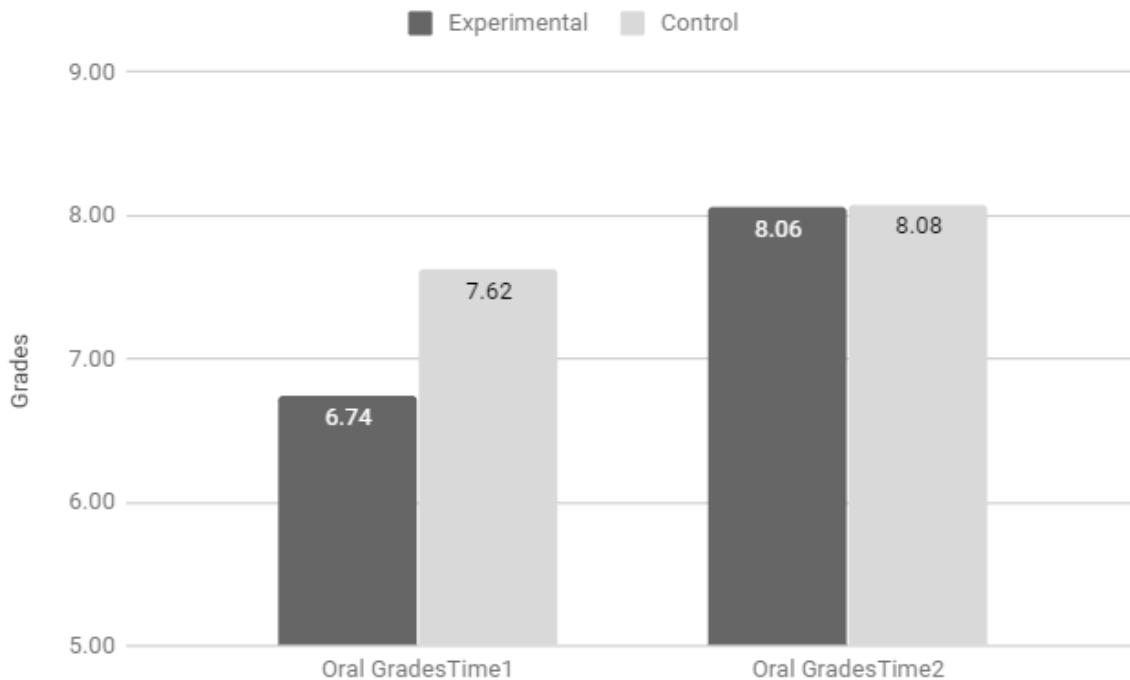
The first set of data was anonymized, coded, and added to SPSS to run descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. The questionnaires provided some quantitative and qualitative data on the students who participated in the VE which will be reported in the following sections.

Findings

This section will be split into two parts according to the two types of data analyzed. The first part will deal with the development of learners' oral skills as a result of the VE and the second part will examine the self-reported benefits learners voiced in the questionnaires along with an evaluation of their level of satisfaction after participating in this type of language exchange.

Development of Oral Skills

[Figure 1](#) shows the pre- and post-test oral grade scores and oral gain scores⁴ for the experimental and control conditions calculated as averages (1-10) for oral grades at Time 1 (immediately before the VE) and Time 2 (immediately after the VE). Scores conformed to normality for all dependent variables and groups (experimental and control) according to Kolmogorov-Smirnov (*K-S*) tests ($p > .05$). The VE group was not created randomly, but rather on a voluntary basis, and it showed a wider distribution of the data than the control group. The oral grades at Time 1 for the control group showed a slight skew according to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (*K-S*) test ($p > .05$), with a .03 significance level that would allow the null hypothesis to be rejected. However, this group showed no such differences in normality according to the Shapiro-Wilk test (*K-S*) test ($p > .05$) and, thus, the null hypothesis (that the dependent variables are not different than the normal distribution) was maintained and parametric tests including this variable were run.⁵ Both the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and The Shapiro-Wilk tests are considered because the former contains tabulated values for small samples and the latter is recommended for samples sizes smaller than 50.



[Figure 1](#). Mean oral grades for Time 1 and Time 2 for experimental and control groups.

[Table 1](#) below details the standard deviations and means for each time and group. There seems to be a difference between the experimental and control groups regarding the oral grades at Time 1 (prior to the VE) and between the oral grades of the experimental group at Time 1 and Time 2. If this last difference was significant, it would indicate the positive benefit of participating in a VE for the learners in the experimental condition.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for Time 1 and Time 2 oral grade scores in the experimental and control condition

	Time 1			Time 2			Change	
	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Experimental	9	6.74	1.46	8.06	1.12	1.31	1.09	
Control	9	7.62	0.81	8.08	1.10	0.46	0.89	

A correlation was run in order to see if there was a relationship between oral grades at Time 1 and Time 2 in the experimental group. The positive correlation between the two variables ($r = 0.675, p = 0.04$) in the experimental group indicates that there is a fairly strong and positive relationship between scores at Time 1 and Time 2 for this group. On the other hand, the correlation between the two variables for the control group ($r = 0.601, p = 0.08$) did not reach significance. Therefore, the relationship between the two time variables and oral grades is stronger for the experimental group than for the control group.

Two one-way ANCOVAs were conducted to compare the effect of the VE on grades and examined the between-group differences using Time 1 as a covariate.

The first ANCOVA was a Time 2 x Group comparison, which used Time 2 oral grades as a dependent variable while controlling for oral grades at Time 1. The results indicate that there was a significant Group effect on oral grades at Time 2 [$F_{1,15} = 9.62, p = .007$]. From this we can see that Time 1 influenced oral grades at Time 2. The second ANCOVA examined oral grade Gains x Group after controlling for Time 1. The results also show a significant Group effect in oral grade Gains [$F_{1,15} = 4.76, p = .045$]. From these two ANCOVAs, it can be concluded that both groups (experimental and control) performed differently at Time 2 and they also differed in the degree of Gains made over the course of the semester. This indicates that both dependent variables play a moderate role in explaining differences due to the treatment (the VE) and shows that Time 1 acts as a covariate.

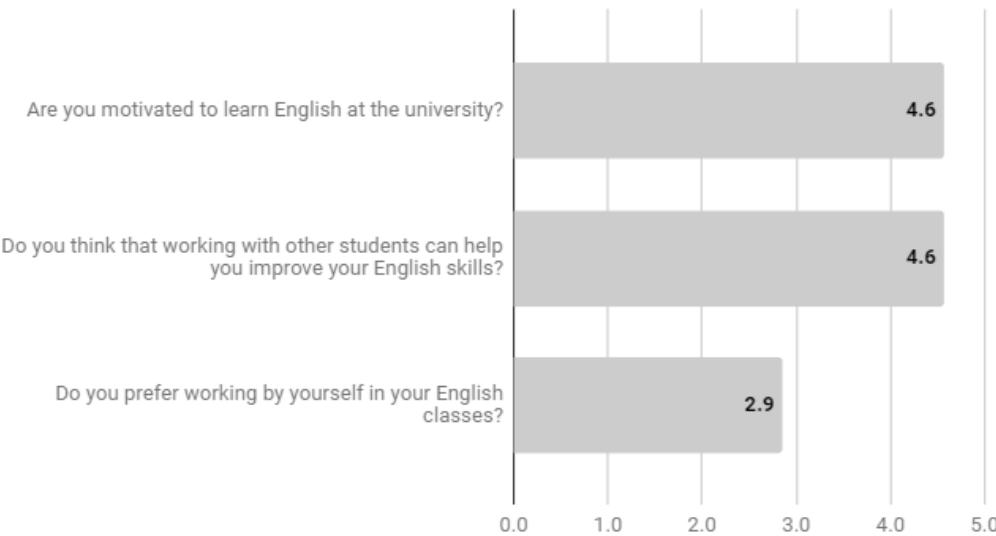
A Group x Time repeated measures ANOVA was run to examine change over time in oral grades and thus whether there was a difference between Time 1 and Time 2 with an interaction between Time and Group. There was a significant main effect of Time on oral grades [$F_{1,15} = 14.21, p = .002, \eta^2 = .47$], which shows pre-to-post gains for all participants. The Group effect [$F_{1,15} = .854, p = .369, \eta^2 = .05$] and Time by Group interaction [$F_{1,15} = 3.33, p = .087, \eta^2 = .17$] were not significant, but the latter approached significance.

Taken together, significant findings of the ANCOVAs and repeated measures results that approach significance indicate that learners' progress was affected by their participation in the VE. Specifically, the ANCOVAs show that there is a significant increase in the experimental group's oral grades and oral grade gains after participating in the VE, whereas in the control group, the increase in oral grades is not as noticeable. This is observable in the adjusted means provided by the ANCOVA estimates, which indicate the original means adjusted for the covariate, and show that the experimental group obtained higher oral grades ($M = 8.28, SD = .32$) than the control group ($M = 7.71, SD = .35$) at Time 2. Similarly, the experimental group showed higher pre-to-post gains ($M = 1.13, SD = .31$) than the control one ($M = .64, SD = .31$) which indicates again that the learners who participated in the VE performed better. Additionally, the repeated measures ANOVA indicates that the oral grade scores of participants before the treatment (VE or regular instruction), at Time 1 were significantly different than those of the control group, but the interaction between groups and time was only approaching significance, rendering these last results inconclusive.

Evaluation of the Exchange and Motivational Aspects

Before starting the VE, an anonymous entry questionnaire gathered personal data (age, years studying the target language, self-reported language level, etc.) and revealed learners' expectations about the exchange, their perceptions of collaborative work and their motivation to learn the target language. The questionnaire was answered by seven out of the nine participants in the Spanish institution. The responses summarized

in [Figure 2](#) indicate that the learners were initially quite motivated to learn the language and had positive thoughts about working with other learners (4.6 on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 indicated absolute disagreement with the statement and 5 indicated absolute agreement, while 3 indicated indifference), despite reporting that they felt almost indifferent about working on their own (2.9). None of them had participated in a VE before, but all of them were familiar with the use of the videoconferencing tool to record oral interaction tasks.



[Figure 2](#). Responses from the entry questionnaire.

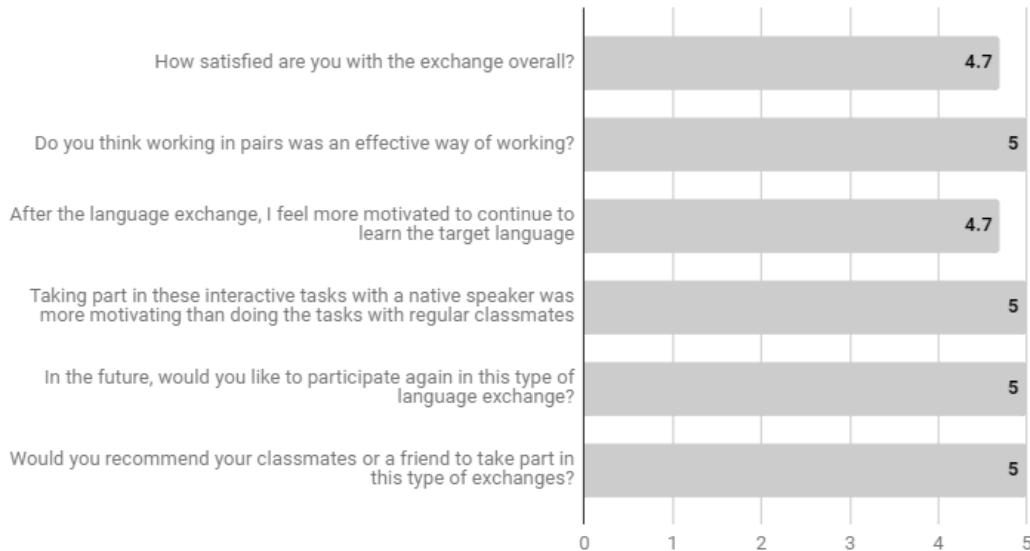
When asked about their opinions on the best way to improve their oral skills by selecting all relevant items on the list (see [Figure 3](#)), talking to a native speaker was the most selected item, and listening to native speakers, watching TV, movies or series, and living abroad all tied for the second position. Other ways of improving oral skills, such as talking to other English learners, traveling, practicing pronunciation, and working in an international environment, ranked significantly lower, indicating that the learners were well-disposed toward participating in the exchange and had very high expectations about the benefits.



[Figure 3](#). Learners' opinions about the best ways to improve oral skills.

The anonymous exit questionnaire, partly based on Lee's (2007) and on Tian and Wang's (2010)

questionnaires, was also completed by seven out of the nine participants in the VE, who reported being very satisfied overall with the exchange (an average of 4.7 points in a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 indicated absolute disagreement with the statement and 5 indicated absolute agreement). Regarding collaborative pair work, the participants' initial indifference to collaborating with others was overcome and they overwhelmingly reported the highest degree of satisfaction with the pair-work aspect of the exchange, see [Figure 4](#). In terms of motivation, they reported feeling more motivated to learn English after the exchange (4.7, one-point increase from the beginning of the exchange) and they all agreed that taking part in the VE and doing the course tasks with a native speaker added to their motivation. All participants indicated that they would like to take part in such exchanges in the future and they would recommend other classmates or friends to take part in VEs.



[Figure 4](#). Responses from the exit questionnaire.

When asked about the benefits of participating in the VE, the learners indicate that they “understand what they say in their native language” (Student 1), which is related to developing better comprehension of native speakers’ English. Secondly, they indicate that participating in an authentic conversation helps them “speak English with a native partner that is essential to improve your communication skills” (Student 3), and feel more comfortable using the target language. See the following comment where a learner indicates that the exchange provided opportunities “to practice outside of the classroom and become more comfortable speaking the foreign language, having a real conversation.” (Student 8). This in turn contributes to increase their self-confidence and improves their fluency, as the following quote indicates: “I’ve got more fluency and I lost my shyness, I have more self-confidence while speaking and I’ve made a new friend” (Student 1), besides helping them learn vocabulary and getting to know new people.

The penultimate question asked the participants to identify the most challenging feature of the VE, yielding responses concerning trouble “understanding her [partner’s] American accent” (Student 3), making themselves understood, and overcoming their “shyness and insecurity in English when talking to a native speaker” (Student 1).

Finally, the last question asked them to reflect on what they had learned about themselves as language learners or about language learning after helping others improve their foreign language skills. Regarding their role as native speakers of Spanish, they reported having learned about being patient when talking to other learners (“Correcting each other with kindness was an important part of this language exchange for sure” Student 4) and realizing that native speakers are often unaware of the grammatical or phonological rules of their own language. They often had trouble explaining these rules: “I am not a very good teacher,

I am afraid... We speak our mother tongue, but too many times we have no answer to many explanations about it" (Student 3) and they understood that speaking a language and learning or teaching one are very different processes. As learners of English, they realized they had to relax, "Not to be afraid of make[ing] mistakes" (Student 6), and stop worrying about making mistakes. They understood that despite the mistakes they made, they could still get their message across, which empowered them and made them feel like more confident learners.

Discussion

Regarding the benefits learners obtained from the VE, we see that, although progress in terms of grades over time can be observed in both groups (the ones who participated in the VE and the control group), this progress is not comparable between the two groups. The differences between pre- and post-measurements (oral grades at Time 2 and oral grades Gains when controlling for Time 1) are significantly different for learners, as indicated by the ANCOVAs. The repeated measures ANOVA, however, which could show how differences between groups in the pre-measurements could help explain the effect the VE had on the oral skills of the learners who took part in it, showed only a tendency towards significance and therefore failed to back up the explanation. Gains in oral proficiency in general have been demonstrated to be facilitated by oral or video SCMC (Hampel, 2003; Bueno-Altasuey, 2013) and the present study provides additional evidence for this.

In terms of other benefits of the VE, the results of the present study indicate that learners express higher motivation to learn and find collaborating as part of the VE much more motivating than collaborating with their classmates. Earlier studies, such as Jauregi et al. (2012), also found that these types of exchanges influenced motivation, especially for beginner-level students, and willingness to interact with native speakers. Therefore, the additional motivation that comes from interacting with native speakers seems to have the effect of making learners more willing and motivated to communicate and do collaborative work despite possible difficulties to understand their English (Lee, 2007). Willingness or need to communicate can be related to the fact that learners see a real purpose to communicate and thus find the tasks they are asked to carry out more relevant (Barr et al., 2005). Another factor which could influence positively the willingness to communicate was the double roles taken up by the participants: Each participant is both a learner and an expert. Lee (2007) also noted that besides increasing the purposefulness and relevance of collaborative tasks themselves, video SCMC "supports collaborative learning by engaging participants in taking an active role in their own learning process" (Lee, 2007, p.645). Added to this, the pedagogical approach, task-based language teaching (TBLT)—adopted both for the regular courses and during the VE—is known to enable a focus on meaning and authentic communication in foreign language classrooms, something which is of paramount importance in online language learning settings, as Zwaard and Bannink (2016) point out. The fact that motivation to interact with native speakers may increase the purpose and relevance of already engaging and well-thought-out collaborative tasks with a TBLT approach adds to the rationale for including these types of exchanges in the curriculum.

Conclusions

The present study contributes to the growing body of research that supports the use of VE to facilitate and enhance meaningful interactions among expert speakers (native speakers) and learners, citing the positive effects on the development of learners' oral proficiency and increased motivation and willingness to communicate and collaborate with other learners to complete a task. In this sense, VEs provide a unique space for one-on-one intensive language practice with native speakers, which neatly complements the activities conducted in regular (online) courses, where access to native speakers is usually restricted to the teacher and other language input, such as course materials. Designing tasks which cater to learners' needs and increase their motivation to communicate, such as VEs, and leveraging the use of videoconferencing tools can provide learners more opportunities to develop conversational skills which are unique to these settings. Guth and Helm (2011) already noted that "these new modes of online communication, rather than

serve as ‘practice’ for real-life communication or poor substitutes for study abroad, are ‘high-stakes contexts’ [...]” which “offer affordances and constraints for language learning that are different from face-to-face classroom contexts” (p. 43). Providing additional evidence of the benefits of implementing VEs can contribute to paving the way toward building stronger structured virtual mobilities between institutions, which can in turn benefit an increasing number of learners.

However, the present study has several shortcomings that will be presented next and considered in future investigations. First and foremost, the small sample of participants became a limitation on conducting more reliable and robust statistical tests. In further studies, a large sample with randomly selected participants in both the experimental and control groups should be included. This could supposedly help test whether any of the existing measurements increase their explanatory power.

Future studies could include other fluency and disfluency measures (pauses, hesitations, repairs, repetitions) alongside additional measures, such as oral comprehension and overall grades. These changes would increase the measurements which can help relate participation in the VE to linguistic improvements. Additionally, motivational factors will continue to be analyzed with a different research design to allow a comparison on how the motivational element, among other factors, differs in the two groups of participants which can help explain the importance and value of these type of exchanges.

Additionally, future studies will explore the interactional nature of the tasks carried out during the VE, the opportunities they offer for meaning negotiation, obtaining comprehensive input, providing and obtaining corrective feedback, and producing modified output all linked to L2 development (Gass & Mackey, 2006; Mackey, 2012; Yanguas, 2010 & 2012; Ziegler, 2016). This will be enhanced by adopting a mixed-methods study design and examining translanguaging patterns in interactions between learners and their role as additional resources to co-construct meaning in light of the work conducted by Walker (2018) on translingual practices in a VE. Future studies should also address areas which remain understudied, specifically interactional feedback applied to VEs—not just computer-supported context such as the ones examined by Gass and Mackey (2006) and Mackey (2012)—from the interactionist perspective related to the development of oral skills. More work needs to be conducted on VEs to leverage the interplay between socio-constructivist approaches to teaching and learning and research on task-based interaction.

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Notes

1. O'Dowd (2018) offers a historical overview of virtual exchange modalities and takes a clear stance on terminological aspects in favor of the umbrella term ‘virtual exchange’, which is the one adopted in the present paper.
2. Out of the scope of this paper, the data from the interactions during collaborative tasks and additional background information about the Canadian partners will be analyzed in detail in future articles that report the experience of this VE.
3. To be able to enroll in the C1-level course, learners had to have successfully completed a B2-level course, taken an official exam accrediting at least a B2 level, or taken the university’s own placement test which determines their level of proficiency.
4. At earlier stages of the design of this study, several other factors that could indicate the effects of participation in the virtual exchange on the development of the participants’ language skills were included

in the analyses, as suggested by Jung et al. (2017). Variables such as fluency (speech rate measured by pruned speech syllables per minute), overall grades for each unit (combining oral and written, comprehension, and production scores), oral and written comprehension test scores, and final grades had been examined before (Skehan, 2009; Ellis, 2009; Housen & Kuiken, 2009), also in immersive environments and as a result of study abroad programs (Freed et al., 2004). However, all of them failed to show any significant difference between groups and at different times, probably due to the insufficient number of participants. Therefore, none of these measures were included in the results.

5. Initially, regular grades (combining both oral and written marks) were included as another dependent variable which was excluded from the analysis because the scores for the control group were not normally distributed according to Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) tests ($p > .05$). Instead of choosing to run non-parametric tests with this dependent variable, and given that the skills where one would expect to observe an improvement as a result of an audio-visual virtual exchange are mainly oral, the author opted to include only oral grades as a dependent variable.

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Appendix A. Description of the Mandatory Tasks and Links to the Task Instructions

Task 2

The second task had two parts: The first required the students to upload a one-minute video to the G+ community suggesting a life-hack of their choice that was making their day-to-day activities more efficient. In the second part, during the videoconference, the students had to comment in pairs on other life-hack videos and discuss the most fun or interesting ones while talking about other life-hacks or interesting subjects that were typical or related to their local culture.

[Link to instructions for task 2](#)

Task 3

The third task required the students to do some background reading about different regeneration projects in their cities that have led to the creation of useful community spaces. During the videoconferencing session, each student had to present the regeneration project in their city, neighborhood or community and explain why it was interesting and how it had benefitted the town and the local community. After this, the learners

were asked to imagine that they had been given an award by the city council and had unlimited resources to spend on a regeneration project. Both partners had to collaborate to come up with a new regeneration project in a city that one or both of them knew. During the videoconference they were asked to come up with ideas and assess their feasibility according to the benefits and drawbacks they could generate and decide which one they would write about in a follow up task. Each partner then had to write about their chosen regeneration idea following a similar structure and word limit. That first draft was sent to the native speaker partner who corrected the text using track changes and sent it back to the first learner. The learners had to present both first and second drafts to their teachers to obtain a grade.

[Link to instructions for task 3](#)

Appendix B. Marking Criteria for Oral Interaction

Accessible through this link:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XoGlMirDDqtFCsSgSIVkuG6zB6aTVkmW/view>

Appendix C. Entry Questionnaire

Questionnaire accessible through this link:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Q9HMF64w8W_3dV4-hKUmudhgmNCqW682/view?usp=sharing

Appendix D. Exit Questionnaire

Questionnaire accessible through this link:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1za41AKfyVH5DVFmZGYmP0j3TzrJi5CNh>

About the Author

Laia Canals holds a PhD in Linguistics from the CUNY's Graduate Center and is currently a Lecturer at the Centre for Modern Languages at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC). Her research addresses technology-enhanced task-based language teaching and learning, second language acquisition, telecollaboration, and intercultural communication.

E-mail: ecanalsf@uoc.edu