THE USE OF SKYPE AS A SYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION TOOL BETWEEN FOREIGN LANGUAGE COLLEGE STUDENTS AND NATIVE SPEAKERS: A CASE STUDY.¹

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth and interest of college students in Computer Mediated Communication and social media has impacted the second language learning and teaching process. This study analyzes the use of Skype as a Synchronous Communication tool in regards to the motivation of foreign language students and native speakers to engage in conversation. The participants are Spanish foreign language students at Fordham University in New York City and English foreign language speakers at Pontifical Javeriana University in Bogota, Colombia. Students were paired up and were required to set up online conversation meetings.

The results of this pilot project suggest that students felt more motivated to engage in conversation with native speakers and exchange personal and academic information as well as other aspects of their culture using the target language rather than completing language laboratory activities or writing compositions.

Key Words: Synchronous Communication, Computer Mediated Communication, Socio-cultural competence, Skype.

RESUMEN

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Mario Guerrero holds B.A. in Language Teaching from the University of Nariño in Pasto, Colombia and a Masters of Science in Education from Fordham University in New York City. He has wide experience working with immigrants and refugees at the Mayor’s Office of Adult Education in the City of New York serving as a Senior Administrative Intern of an English Program. Additionally, he has taught several English as a Second Language courses at the New Americans Initiative Department at the YMCA of Greater New York and English as Foreign Language in Colombia. At a college level, he has performed as a Spanish Instructor in different American universities where he has started different technology based projects with his students. His research interests include technology-based learning processes, acculturation, and diversity.
El continuo interés y rápida evolución de la comunicación a través de la tecnología y las redes sociales en estudiantes universitarios han transformado el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje de los idiomas extranjeros. Este estudio de caso analiza el uso de Skype como una herramienta de comunicación sincrónica en cuanto a la motivación entre estudiantes de idiomas extranjeros con estudiantes que son hablantes nativos para participar en conversaciones. Los participantes de este proyecto son estudiantes de español como idioma extranjero en Fordham University en la Ciudad de Nueva York y estudiantes de inglés como idioma extranjero en la Universidad Javeriana de Bogotá en Colombia. Los estudiantes fueron emparejados con el propósito de organizar sesiones en línea y hablar usando el idioma que están aprendiendo.

Los resultados de este proyecto piloto indican que los estudiantes se sintieron mucho más motivados a conversar con hablantes nativos para intercambiar información personal, académica y cultural haciendo uso del idioma que están aprendiendo en lugar de hacer ejercicios y escribir composiciones en el laboratorio de idiomas.

**Palabras Claves**

Comunicación a través de la tecnología, Comunicación Sincrónica, Competencias Socio Culturales, Skype.

**RESUMÉ**

L'intérêt marqué et l'évolution rapide de la communication grâce à la technologie et aux réseaux sociaux chez les étudiants ont transformé le processus d'enseignement-apprentissage des langues étrangères. Cette étude analyse l'utilisation de Skype comme un outil de communication synchrone en termes de motivation chez les apprenants de langues étrangères avec des étudiants qui sont des locuteurs natifs afin de participer dans des conversations de la vie courante. Les participants à ce projet sont des étudiants d'Espagnol Langue Étrangère de l'Université de Fordham à New York et des étudiants d'Anglais Langue Étrangère de l'Université Javeriana en Colombie. Ces étudiants ont été mis ensemble dont l'objectif était d'organiser des sessions en ligne et parler en utilisant la langue cible.

Les résultats de ce projet nous indiquent que les étudiants se sentaient beaucoup plus motivés pour dialoguer avec des locuteurs natifs et ainsi partager sur les informations personnelles, sur des aspects
This case study attempts to determine if there is any relationship between the implementation of Internet-based Synchronous Communication and the motivation of foreign language students and native speakers to engage in conversation and learn about their culture.

As a young college language instructor, I find myself always trying to provide my students with opportunities in which they can see a real purpose of using L2 (foreign language) outside the conventional classroom where interaction is often reduced to their peers and instructor. The idea of this project was to encourage my students to speak via Skype with other college Spanish native speakers with like-minded interests – lifestyle, culture, education, and food – through the use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). CMC is defined as the process of creating, exchanging, and perceiving information via networked telecommunications systems facilitating the encoding, transmitting, and decoding of messages (Romiszowski & Mason, 1996.) CMC was the result of linking different computers and having people interact by sharing messages and data. CMC spread rapidly and it allowed people from geographically dispersed locations to communicate replacing traveling and Face-to-Face (FtF) meetings with more efficient ways to instantly communicate. Different studies have shown that FtF gatherings give speakers – with higher positions or power in any organization – a larger portion of speech time while CMC meetings offer an equal share of the meeting participation (Walther, 1996.) Other study, on the contrary, suggests that CMC does not contribute to active participation because it is assumed that in many CMC discussions a few members dominate the floor and the rest of the members become lurkers or
passive recipients. Both offline and online discussions have passive recipients; this implies that CMC does not discourage active participation and learning (Romiszowski & Mason, 1996.)

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

I am aware of the rapid growth of Internet-based communication and my students’ interest in social media and networking. These types of communication can be Synchronous or Asynchronous. Synchronous Communication or real-time communication refers to face-to-face discussions among people, whereas Asynchronous Communication (delayed communication) suggests a significant time delay between receiving and sending messages (Romiszowski & Mason, 1996.) Hence, the inclusion of a computer-based activity and synchronous communication in my instruction was necessary in order to encourage and engage my students in the L2 learning process. I believe that real time communication would allow learners to provide instant feedback to each other, to emotionally bond, and to be spontaneous. According to Celce-Murcia (2001), the use of media in language classes only brings the outside world to the classroom and makes the learning process more exciting and meaningful. Nevertheless, the only purpose of this project was not the improvement of L2 speaking proficiency but it
also aimed to raise awareness in students about other cultures. In other words, I wanted to promote and instill values of inclusion, tolerance, and diversity as a life principle in this globalized world. Teaching culture in a language class results in better communicators of L2. Culture is understood as body language, gestures, concepts of time, traditions, and expressions of friendliness. Consequently, linguistic proficiency is not enough for a second language learner—social cultural competence is fundamental for a more proficient and effective L2 speaker. Hymes (1996) also stresses the importance of socio cultural competence by saying that an individual who is not aware of the appropriateness norms accepted in a determined community is likely to be placed in a position of inequality (Celce-Murcia, 2001)

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

Project Objectives

There were four major objectives identified at the beginning of this pilot project which will serve as an assessment of the achieved goals:
• Improve speaking and listening skills by means of interactive and contextualized conversation online.
• Encourage students to learn from their partners’ culture, country, and traditions.
• Offer students from both universities the opportunity to practice the language they are learning with native English and Spanish speakers.
• Give the students the opportunity to interact in real life situations using the target language.

Organizations

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

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

Pontifical Javeriana University (PUJ) in Bogota is a Jesuit University offering its community with quality catholic education. The Department of Languages offers an undergraduate program qualifying its students to become language teachers.

Participants

A total of 50 students participated in this project. The participants are students from Fordham University (25 students) and from Pontifical Javeriana University (25 students.)

Fordham University students are English native speakers learning Spanish in high beginner level courses. Pontifical Javeriana University students are Spanish native speakers in intermediate English courses. It is important to clarify that Fordham students are studying Spanish (or any foreign language offered at the Department) as a mandatory language course during 5 academic semesters. Some of them might want to minor in this language. Javeriana students are future language teachers who are majoring in English. Fordham students’ age in average is 19 years old; whereas Javeriana students’ age from raged between 20 to 45 years old.
**Research Design and Methods**

In order to start this project, a written proposal was submitted to Dr. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, Chair of the Fordham’s Department of Languages and Literatures and Mr. Henry Borrero, Spanish Language Coordinator. In this document, objectives, description, proposed activities, projected timeline, proposed partners, and their responsibilities of the whole project were specified. Dr. Cruz-Malavé had two important concerns about this initiative: 1. safety of students and 2. feasibility of the project. With the support of the Faculty Technology Center at Fordham University, I was able to persuade Dr. Cruz-Malavé that there were no risks associated with the use of Skype for educational purposes and that its viability was directly related to the collaboration of the other university and the participation of the students. I should note that at Fordham University, foreign language students are required to attend the language laboratory two hours every week. For that reason, I decided to merge this project within the laboratory activities grade. Roger Goodson (2005) states that some faculty members and administrators are normally resistant to include technology in their instruction because of time constraints, their demanding academic workload, lack of training, and insufficient research proving the effectiveness of E-learning. It is common to see some institutions still reluctant to explore technological changes in instruction, as it was the example of San Jose State University (SJSU.) The Associate Vice-President of San Jose State University proposed to ban Skype at the University implying that Skype might infect the institution’s computers with viruses and that Skype might distract students and professors in the classrooms. One faculty member expressed his concern and called the institution “luddite” about this issue and explained the reasons why Skype should not be banned: 1. Skype allows communicating at no cost with other colleagues around the world, 2. There are many international students who might use Skype to communicate with other students, and 3. Foreign Language instructors have started to use Skype to have their students communicate with other students who are native speakers of the language they are learning Shaw (2006.)
When Dr. Cruz-Malavé approved this pilot project, I immediately contacted different universities in Colombia. Pontifical Javeriana University (Bogota) responded with great interest and eagerness in starting the project as soon as possible. Professor Javier Redondo, Chair of the Department of Modern Languages, designated his English Speaking Advanced class to take part in this linguistic experiment. I clarified that this was intended to be a pilot project, which – if it were to result with positive outcomes – could be institutionalized by the Department, or at least it would motivate other instructors interested in creating a similar online community with their students. Community Development in general refers to the notion of people living close by to each other, face-to-face interactions, companionship, and support at different levels (Wellman, 1999.) However, in online communities the lack of physical location, verbal, and nonverbal cues implies impersonal relationships not able to build a community. However, other studies suggest that online communities can be built if participants have similar interests regardless their physical location they might find as an obstacle to communicate Face-to-Face (Romiszowski & Mason, 1996.)

Setting up a chronogram of four conversation sessions (alternating Spanish and English) was the next step. It was the responsibility of each professor to decide the topics students would be discussing in every session. Each session was expected to last approximately 15 to 20 minutes and it was expected to be conducted by students as follows: use of the target language previously determined (English or Spanish), personal introductions (as every session they were paired up with different partners), discussion of a previously determined topic. The topics – varying from academic structure, personal interests, gastronomy, etc. – were carefully selected so that students have a wide exposure to new vocabulary, expressions, and especially culture. Students were required to prepare questions and organize their ideas in order to have a meaningful conversation during the following week. Furthermore, each Fordham University student was required to snap a screenshot of their Skype conversation records as a proof that they did Skype with their assigned partners. Professor Redondo paired up his students with mine and provided them with their partners’ names and e-mail addresses. All the conversations were set up by each student at different times and days (within a week period)—this with the purpose of giving students the
opportunity to organize their busy time and also to give students a sense of belonging to the project.

**Findings**

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

Starting the project was somehow challenging. As it was previously mentioned, each student was randomly paired up with another one from the other university. In order to set up their online meetings they emailed each other. Students reported that their partner did not respond their emails in a timely fashion or kept postponing the meeting, and some others never got an answer from their partner. This frustrated a big part of the students because it did not allow them to ever experience a conversation. Sometimes there were problems related to technological issues and Internet connection, which prevented students to have voice conversations. Nonetheless, students opted to chat instead. A great part of participants described their *Skyping* experienced as interesting and fun. Each session was supposed to last between 15 to 20 minutes. However, most of the sessions ended up exceeding this time limit because they truly enjoyed conversing with their peers. Other students thought it was rude to conclude a conversation in only 15 minutes and they allowed more time to this activity even if they were only text chatting. Only one student requested to be given a different Skype partner. One of them was more than 20 years older than the other participant creating an uncomfortable environment in the younger student. Throughout the development of the project some students, who were able to set up their online meetings, expressed during class that they were bonding while many others felt discouraged because they never had the opportunity to speak.

*Opinions of the Participants*
A number of 18 participants in this project completed an online survey on www.surveymonkey.com about three different aspects regarding the development of the project as shown in Table 1 and Table 2. The third aspect was an open-ended question in order to understand the opinions of the students and their likelihood to participate again in a future similar project.

**Table 1 – Cultural Appreciation**

1. Which of the following aspects do you think Skype sessions helped you learn about your partner's culture?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Completely disagree</th>
<th>Somehow disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Somehow agree</th>
<th>Completely agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Structure</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Information</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar Interests</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Life</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the answers from Table 1, it can be inferred that after different Skype sessions, students mostly learned about their partners’ culture regarding personal information, similar interests, and education. The results suggest that students in general were not able to exchange as much information as expected about their region’s food, their schools’ academic structure, and quality of life in their countries.

**Table 2 – Degree of Difficulty in Communication**

2. Considering that your Skype partners were college students with similar interests but they were people you did not know, to what degree was it easy or difficult to interact with them using the language you are learning?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very easy</th>
<th>Easy</th>
<th>Difficult</th>
<th>Very Difficult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


According to Table 2, students seemed to have a greater difficulty trying to set up a Skype session with their partners than expressing their ideas and carrying out spontaneous conversations. Additionally, participants also believed that understanding their partners’ ideas was challenging.

Finally, based on the surveyed student responses, it can be inferred that most of the participants thought that the Skype Project with a foreign country did allow them to learn something new about another culture. Many students were surprised that, different from the US, the majority of Colombian college students live with their parents when they attend college. Also, students at Javeriana University do not use their institutional email account as frequently as many American college students do. In general, participants felt that the project was much more fun than going to the language laboratory and writing compositions. Although, they expressed that communication was somehow difficult due to technological inconveniences (e.g. Internet connection, time flexibility, lack of web cam), participants acknowledged the importance of getting to know people from other countries who are native speakers. Most of the participants agreed that setting up meetings was by far the most tedious part of the project because of their busy schedule, their lack of interest of some participants, and the fact that they were talking to, in literal words, “a complete stranger.” In addition, the idea to participate in a similar project seems to be a viable one for many of them because they think these types of experiences “forced them out of their comfort zone.” Unfortunately, some other students were
not able to provide any feedback because they were never able to speak with their Skype partner because they never got a response to set up a meeting.

Conclusions and Future Study Recommendations

The idea of this pilot project between Fordham University and Pontifical Javeriana University was to understand if Internet-based Synchronous Communication would motivate Foreign Language students to engage in conversations with native speakers and learn about their culture. Despite the difficulties found in setting up meetings and technological issues in some sessions, it can be stated that Internet-based Synchronous Communication made the learning process more meaningful and engaging. It is not possible to determine the level of motivation that each student had in this project in order to engage in conversation because as an instructor I did not monitor any of the conversations; but in general, most of the participants who were able to talk via Skype, had a good experience and they are likely to do it again in another language course in the future. Besides, some students still talk to their Skype partners through the use of other social media networks such as Facebook or Twitter.

If other language instructor would like to start a similar project, it is important to allow at least a whole academic semester time period to be able to have more than 50% of the students participate in the project if students are responsible to set up their own meetings. Otherwise, setting up a group meeting can be an alternative to give everyone an opportunity to speak and monitor the participation and engagement in their conversations. It is also important to guide students who might not know much about technology. Creating an account and learning how to make calls on Skype seems easy but, as instructors, we cannot assume that all of our students know how to work with them. Finally, pairing up students appears to be a simple matching task. However, it is fundamental to ask your students in advance what their preferences (age, gender) are when being paired up because these aspects might affect your students confidence to fully engage in conversation.
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References


