

Telecollaboration, to what extent is this a valuable addition to a Spanish Language Program?

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Abstract

This case study was motivated to formally assess the value of the UBC-UNAM telecollaboration for Spanish language practice. Drawing on the notion that in-tandem learning is an effective complement to traditional Spanish language instruction (Navarro, 2013), volunteer students at a university on the West Coast of Canada exchange English for Spanish with Mexican counterparts since 2013.

The observation of a single Anglophone Canadian student over the course of five sixty-minute sessions revealed some systematic patterns of interaction during the online language exchange sessions with Mexican partners. More precisely, we observed whether participants functioned in monolingual mode (Grosjean, 2000); how they negotiated meaning (Gass & Mackey, 2006); and the extent to which a computer-to-computer interface constrained participants' embodiment of the language learning process (Taylor, 2012).

Findings showed that while conversing in English, participants produced 605 interactions from which only 7.44% were cases of language mixing, whereas from a total of 611 interactions in Spanish, 6.71% were switches into English. These findings suggested that overall, participants managed to activate and process both languages successfully, functioning primarily in

monolingual mode during the time allocated for each language. Participants also used few examples of constructions to negotiate meaning suggesting high degrees of comprehensibility in both languages. Equally revealing were the instances in which the Anglophone participant and his conversation partners resorted to nonlinguistic actions (e.g., gesturing, body movement). The latter findings suggested that interlocutors overcame the physical constraints of videoconferencing and perform compensatory strategies to enhance intelligibility.

Keywords: telecollaboration, additional language learning, Spanish, meaning negotiation, embodiment, videoconferencing

On the Canadian West Coast, the teaching and learning of Spanish at the postsecondary level happens primarily in a classroom context. Following the trend in English language instruction, we refer to *Spanish as an additional language* (SAL) in place of the traditional and likely more controversial foreign language label. Students who study Spanish often manifest interest in the Hispanic community, its culture, and people. Others study the language to read the vast literary production of Spain and Latin America. Irrespective of what triggers a decision to study Spanish, students end up learning the language from an instructor and instructional materials graded by program objectives. Same as in instructed learning of English as an additional language (Long, 1983), there is perhaps consensus that the effect of instruction also holds for Spanish. The classroom is a safe context where students gradually develop the linguistic skills to comprehend and produce Spanish especially in the early stages. But beyond the classroom, students have limited opportunities to hear or read Spanish let alone communicate with Hispanophones unless

they do it as part of a community outreach project (Navarro, 2012, 2013, 2015). This means that students have few opportunities to either process or produce authentic Spanish.

The linguistic context of the Spanish classroom is in fact an important aspect to consider. The idea that in Canada and the United States, the student population is primarily Anglophone still remains (Wiley Senior Marketing Manager, personal communication, March 04, 2016). Thus, textbooks and ancillary materials combine the presentation of Spanish language and cultural contents with English translations. What this entails is that students tend to maintain activated both languages and language processing mechanisms, resulting in frequent code switches and borrowings. This language state is what Grosjean (2000) calls the bilingual mode.

Psycholinguistically, this situation may become even more complex in the case of a trilingual student who may extend the processing of third-language Spanish from second-language English to first-language Mandarin Chinese.

By constraining the Spanish learning experience to the classroom, students have limited opportunities to engage in spontaneous and unplanned oral discourse. For the most part, task objectives determine beforehand what students are expected to accomplish (e.g., discuss a topic, practice questions and answers, etc.). Students have limited freedom to deviate from those objectives especially if formal assessment is involved. Teachers who organize activities such as communicative crosswords, spot the difference, jigsaw readings, or group story building enrich the level of communication in important ways. Among others, the students exercise strategies (e.g., clarification, comprehension checks, confirmation check, rephrasing) to achieve understanding of what an interlocutor may want to communicate during task completion (i.e.,

meaning negotiation). This is a key communicative function to prepare students to react when facing moments of unintelligibility in conversation (Gass & Mackey, 2006).

One last aspect worth of consideration is that in the language classroom, practice activities unfold with minimum physical displacement. Reading, listening, writing, screening a movie clip, or even speaking in Spanish keep students primarily seated and with little body movement. Likewise, practice activities seldom allow students to have sensory experiences such as hugging someone while speaking congratulatory words, or replacing an oral message for a hand gesture as in the case of the command ¡Ven! ‘come here’. Not surprisingly, the classroom expects that students “speak” the words rather than gesticulate them (albeit the latter is an integral component of human communication). Students in the end run the risk of developing an atomistic view of the target language and only minimally embody it within the full range of human communication (Taylor, 2012).

The question is whether the current Spanish instruction context could be enriched. And if so, what could be done? In what follows we introduce a collaborative project through which new opportunities for students learning Spanish and English are available at two geographically distant universities.

The UNC-UNAM telecollaboration: Enriching the learning of an additional language beyond the classroom

This telecollaboration is motivated to enrich exposure to English and Spanish for students interested in learning them as an additional language. Following the principles of in-tandem learning (Telles & Vasallos, 2006; Vasallos & Telles, 2006), students in Canada offer English in exchange of Spanish practice while students in Mexico offer Spanish in exchange of English practice. The exchange sessions happen via videoconferencing in language laboratories at the University of British Columbia in Canada and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Videoconferencing (or computer-to-computer communication) is one of the few effective ways for integrating computers to hold native/nonnative conversations as well as facilitating learner exposure to the target language culture (Chapelle, 2001; Pim, 2013). This extramural program has been in progress since 2013. Evidence from a telecollaboration between a Spanish undergraduate class in Canada and an English undergraduate class in Chile suggested positive effect of using online language exchanges. Learners acknowledged the value of meeting native speakers to practice the language and learn cultural information too (Navarro, 2013).

Participation in the telecollaboration is completely free. Students contact the coordinator of the program to enrol at the beginning of a term. Afterward, electronic communication maintains coordination namely to secure equal number of participants in each weekly session. Participants also receive a guide that provides simple tips and suggestions for an effective participation (e.g., be tortious and respectful at all times, offer suggestions for improvement, say please and thank you, etc.). In what follows we list a number of features that characterize this program.

1. Synchronous language exchanges. Participants in the telecollaboration speak with conversation partners in real time. Thanks to videoconferencing, students can see each other while conversing or completing a task.

2. Flexible structure. Students may begin a session speaking either Spanish or English provided that equal time is allocated for both languages. Supporting materials distributed at the beginning of each session are optional. Students are welcome to discuss the topics of their own interest. There is no formal assessment or direct teacher supervision!
3. Naturalness of the conversations. The flexibility of the program greatly contributes to lower students' anxiety. Students relative to their proficiency levels engage in fluid and spontaneous dialogues that resemble language performance in immersion. This kind of language practice overlaps Higgins (1991, p. 5) idea authentic language practice defined as 'anything not created by a teacher for the purpose of demonstrating language at work'.
4. Target language use. One of the most important "rules" governing the telecollaboration is adherence to the target language. Students have 30 minutes to practice each language and they are expected to respect it. The aim is to deter students from speaking only one language, use a language other than those being exchanged (i.e., English and Spanish), or avoid language mixing (Telles & Vasallos, 2006). By sticking to the target language, the participants manage to perform in monolingual mode i.e., they deactivate (not entirely) the language that is not being practiced (Grosjean, 2000).
5. Autonomy. The language exchange sessions depend primarily on what both participants decide to do (Schwienhorst, 2008). In the absence of direct teacher supervision, students are responsible for choosing which language they want to speak first, complete (or not) the supporting material receive, contribute with conversation topics, provide suggestions for correcting mistakes, and so forth. In the telecollaboration, students become fully autonomous Spanish and English language users to decide on what and how to complete their conversations (Aoki, 1999; Holec, 1987; Little, 1991; Scharle & Szabó, 2000).

6. Reciprocity. In accordance with the in-tandem learning principles, there is no hierarchy in the telecollaboration. Both conversation partners fulfil the roles of language *experts* and *learners* in every session (Navarro, 2013). Canadian students are the experts when English is the language the Mexican learners want to practice. But then, the Mexicans are the experts when Spanish is the language the Canadian learners want to practice. These duality of roles grant the participants an opportunity to help and support each other engaging in moments of collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2013).

Intuitively, these many features present the UBC-UNAM telecollaboration as a valuable addition to the teaching and learning of Spanish. But can we confidently say so? Below we report our first attempt to observe learner performance in this extramural activity.

The study

This case study was motivated to assess the UBC-UNAM telecollaboration for Spanish language practice. Up until now and despite its popularity, there has been no assessment of its value as a learning resource. Namely it was assumed that it would be effective because students practice the target language in addition to regular classes, it happens in the safety and comfort of a university space, and previous research involving Spanish-English language exchanges yielded positive evidence. Bearing these ideas in mind, the study aimed to address the following questions:

- (1) To what extent did the Canadian student and his partners conversed in monolingual mode (Grosjean, 2000) during the online exchanges? That is, students respect the time allocated for the practice of each language and they in fact produced discourse in both languages.
- (2) How did the Canadian student and his conversation partners negotiate meaning (Gass & Mackey, 2006) during the online exchanges? In other words, when encountering

moments of unintelligibility, the students reacted by attempting to restore communication.

- (3) To what extent did the computer-to-computer conversations limit the Canadian student and his conversation partners' embodiment of the target language (Taylor, 2012)? In other words, the participants managed to incorporate nonlinguistic actions while conversing.

Methodology

Participants

A 23-year old male Canadian Anglophone undergraduate was observed interacting with Mexican counterparts for a month. At the time of the observations, the student was enrolled in an upper intermediate Spanish class at The University of British Columbia where the study took place. In addition to Spanish, he had different levels of mastery of Italian and Croatian. He learned both Spanish and Italian in an academic environment whereas Croatian was his parents' native tongue.

There were also three Mexican students at UNAM: an 18-year old female and two 25-year old male students. One of the male students reported some knowledge of German in addition to English while the other participants only had English as an additional language. All participants were attending different study programs at Universidad Nacional de México.

At both institutions, there were female coordinators who provided logistic support. For example, they distributed handouts the researcher prepared for each conversation session, set up the computers and verified that all units had proper access to Internet connection, and timed the beginning and end of the sessions. The Mexican coordinator was the Directed of El *Centro de Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras*. In Canada, the coordinator was a graduate student in Hispanic Studies. All participants in this project were volunteers.

Materials

For the Spanish exchanges, the participants received handouts that contained different topics of a cultural interest. The aim was to facilitate the interaction between both conversation partners and so lower anxiety levels. Students learned that they could complete the handouts collaboratively unless another they decided to speak about something else. It was up to them since no marking was assigned to their participation. The design of the material was colorful, highly interactive and written entirely in Spanish.

Since the telecollaboration sessions happened in language laboratories at both universities, students had at the disposal desktop computers equipped with webcams, microphones, headsets, keyboards, Internet access, and SKYPE connection. Moreover, students had access to their personal mobile phones that they employed for searching information pertaining to the topic they were discussing (e.g., songs or pictures).

Procedure

As mentioned above, the telecollaboration sessions extend for an entire term with a weekly meeting that lasts 60 minutes. Participants in the online exchanges receive instructions on how to work in this program, thus they learn that each session should be equally divided so that both conversation partners can equal practice time.

The Anglophone Canadian student was observed over the course of five exchanges with different Mexican counterparts. All sessions were recorded, transcribed, and coded for the Spanish and English interactions. Worth mentioning is that the first author and the two coordinators scheduled the online sessions early on in the term. Likewise, they remained in contact to monitor the number of participants in attendance, circulated the conversation handouts, and timed the beginning and end of each session.

Coding system

All files containing the conversations in Spanish and English were coded for the following:

1. The total number of turns that occurred in each language. Immediate self-repetitions or unintelligible chunks of dialogue were excluded from the total count.
2. Instances in which the participants deviated from target language use and either code switched or code mixed.
3. Instances in which the participants resolved interruption of the communication flow and produced comprehension checks, confirmation checks, clarification, or conversation help.
4. Instances in which the participants conveyed meaning using a non-linguistic action such as hand gestures, facial gestures, typed words, pointed to the computer screen, etc.

Results

From the five sessions in which the Canadian student was observed, findings reported here correspond to only four of them. A technical failure ruined the recording of the Spanish interactions in the fifth session; thus, this session was excluded from analysis. Findings then come from four files in Spanish and four files in English. First we report results for the language mode in which the Canadian student interacted with his Mexican counterparts. Next, we report results of the proportion of times when the Canadian student and his conversation partners failed to understand each other, hence they needed to negotiate meaning. Finally, we report results of nonlinguistic actions during communication.

From the eight files analyzed, we coded a total of 1,216 interactions that were divided into 605 in English and 611 in Spanish. When analyzing the files to answer the question of whether the Canadian student and his counterparts interacted in monolingual mode or rather they reverted to another language, our results showed the following. Figure 1 shows that when the Canadian student spoke offered his first-language so that the Mexican students practiced English, 92% (N = 560) of the interactions happened in monolingual mode. Participants reverted into Spanish just 7.44% (N = 45) of the time from which 28 (5%) were cases of code mixing and 17 (3%) were examples of code switching.

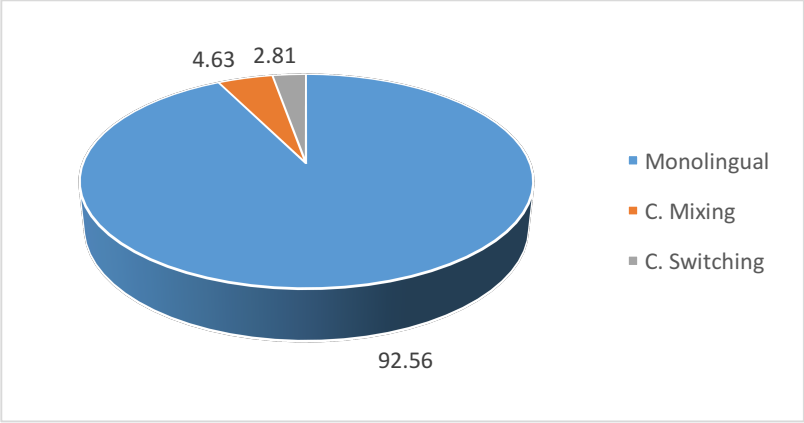


Figure 1. Percentage of interactions in monolingual English and code mixing and switching into Spanish.

As to the interactions in Spanish, Figure 2 shows that when the Mexican students spoken their first language so that the Canadian student practiced Spanish, 93% (N = 570) of the interactions were produced in monolingual mode. Results also showed that 6.71% (N = 41) were cases of English-language use. The latter were subdivided into 30 cases of code mixing (4.91%) and 11 examples of code switching (1.80%) respectively.

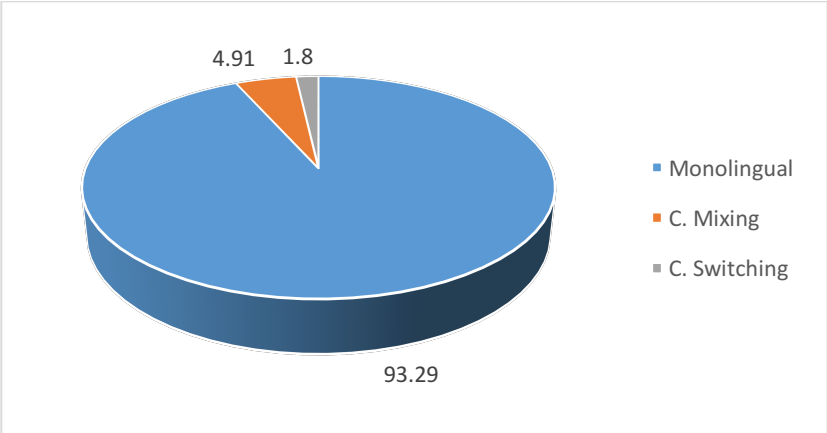


Figure 2. Percentage of interactions in monolingual Spanish and code mixing and switching into English.

Our next set of results show how the Canadian student and his conversation partners negotiated meaning. That is, the strategies the participants implemented when the flow of communication was either completely or partly interrupted. Figure 3 shows that from the total of 605 interventions across the four files in English, the participants needed to negotiate meaning 7.27% (N = 44). This means that they could successfully understand each other 92.73% of the time. Our analysis of the instances when the participants negotiated meaning revealed that 31.82% (N = 14) corresponded to confirmation checks, 29.55% (N = 13) clarification requests, 22.73% (N = 10), and 15.91% (N = 7) examples of conversation help.

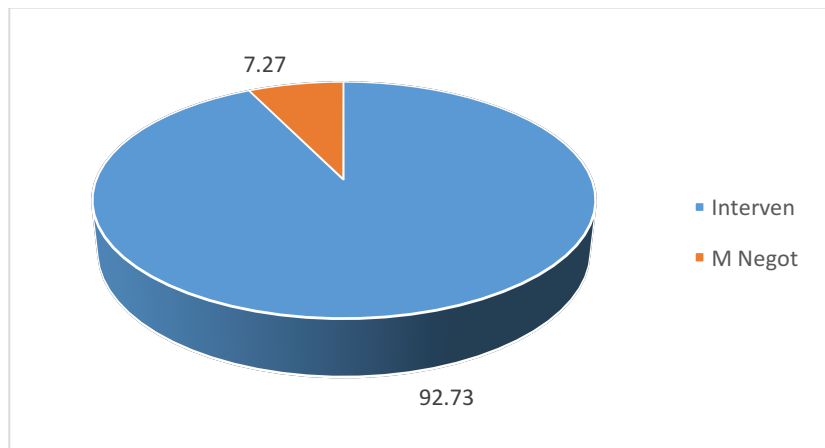


Figure 3. Proportion of times when the Canadian participant and his conversation partners negotiated meaning to restore comprehension in English.

Figure 4 below shows that from a total of 611 interventions across the four files in Spanish, the Canadian student and his Mexican counterparts needed to negotiate meaning 9% (N=55) of the time. This means that the participants successfully understood each other 91% (N = 556). Our evidence also revealed that the participants mostly produced clarification requests (34.69% N =

17) followed by comprehension checks (32.65% N = 16), and confirmation checks (30.61% N= 15).

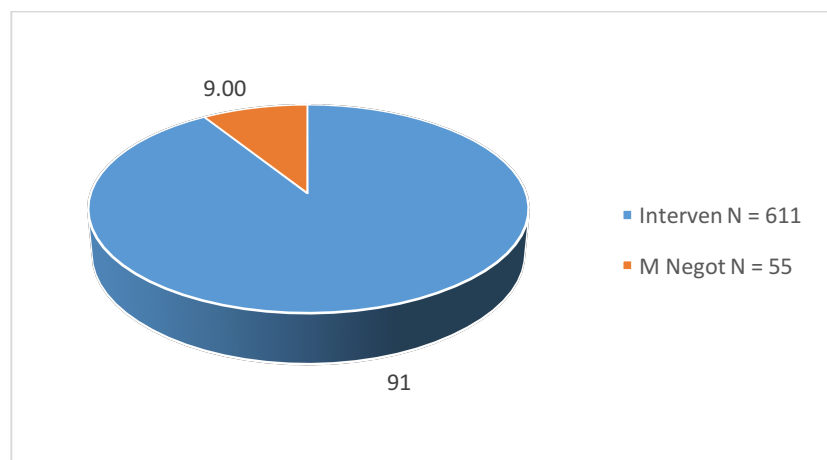


Figure 4. Proportion of times when the Canadian participant and his conversation partners negotiated meaning to restore comprehension in Spanish.

Our third and last set of results shows the proportion of nonlinguistic actions that the participants performed at the time of the conversations. We explored this evidence to determine the extent to which the participants defied the rigid constraint of the computer-to-computer setting and embodied the language more fully. From the total of interventions in English, 0.33% (N = 2) were nonlinguistic actions. For example, the Canadian student typed a word to help his Mexican counterpart to make sense of what he was saying.

From a total of 611 interventions in Spanish, 3.93% (N = 24) were nonlinguistic actions. For instance, a Mexican student moved his upper torso, arms and hands to demonstrate to his Canadian counterpart how Mexicans danced a traditional corrido. The students were engaged talking about their favorite music and past time activities.

Discussion

This case study assessed the pedagogical value of the UBC-UNAM telecollaboration for the practice of English and Spanish. From the three aspects analyzed, our evidence suggests positive gains. Across the 1,216 interactions analyzed, the Canadian student and his conversation partners largely communicated in the language assigned for each turn. That is, when the Canadian student offered his first-language, the Mexican students used this opportunity to practice English. Conversely, when the Mexican students offered Spanish, the Canadian student did not waste the opportunity to practice the language of his interest.

The low frequency of code mixing and code switching in the data appeared as isolated instances of vocabulary gap. This is important because it suggests that—whenever it was needed—the participants reverted and remained conversing in the nonnative language. Recall that 30 minutes was the time allocated for practicing each language; this was longer than what students often practice in class. We can infer that the telecollaboration likely “pushed” students to produce output (Swain, 1985, 1993, 2005) in a language they were still in the process of learning and minimally deviating from it. This evidence should not be considered trivial. By contrast and despite non-direct teacher supervision, the students respected the times allocated for practicing English and Spanish and performed primarily in monolingual mode (Grosjean, 2000).

Worth mentioning is the negligible difference of meaning negotiation observed in the English (7.27%) and Spanish (9%) online tandems. This evidence suggests that at the time of the study, the participants elaborated messages that were largely comprehensible in both languages.

Whether this comprehensibility resulted from the participants' proficiency in the languages they wanted to practice was certainly a possibility. As known, low proficiency learners produce oral discourse containing numerous examples of constructions to clarify, confirm or check comprehension of a message (Gass & Mackey, 2006). The low percentage of those constructions in our data suggested that the Canadian and Mexican learners managed to convey information minimally interrupting the flow of information.

Another possibility is that in the context of computer-to-computer conversations, the participants realized that creativity was needed if meaning was to be conveyed successfully. Namely, they had to go beyond the linguistic code for communicating. Our findings showed that participants managed to introduce for example movement, gestures, and used electronic devices (e.g., mobile phones) at specific moments during a conversation. They resorted to these nonlinguistic actions to enhance the intelligibility of the communication.

Consistent with the collaborative nature of in-tandem learning, participants helped each other explaining, repeating, and even wrote words down. The latter was the case of the Canadian student who helped his Mexican counterpart understand what he meant by grabbing the keyboard and typing a word. In this sense, the students overrode the rigidity of a computer-to-computer setting and incorporated movement, gestures that were not random. Instead they targeted these compensatory strategies to reinforce comprehensibility.

In short, our evidence showed that one-on-one exchanges seem a good fit to connect language learners triggering moments of true immersion. This study supports the UBC-UNAM

telecollaboration as a curriculum innovation for Spanish language programs at the postsecondary level

Conclusion

In today's cyber reality, computers are continuously offering new and more extensive support to language instruction (Chapelle, 2001; Motteram, 2013). Videoconferencing enables teachers in a foreign language environment to bridge geographical gaps and engage students in authentic linguistic and cultural exchanges (Pin, 2013).

The present study provided evidence that supports the pedagogical benefits of the UBC-UNAM telecollaboration. Findings showed that students achieved the goal for which they participated in the program. They practiced the language of their interest and in return helped the conversation partner practice the language they offered. The evidence also showed that the medium allows students to embody the language beyond the linguistic code as they also integrated body movement to aid comprehension. The latter was possible because in this learning context the participants can see each other on the computer screen. Thus, the array of nonlinguistic actions through which humans fully embody a language are compatible with online conversations like the UBC-UNAM telecollaboration.

We acknowledge that our observations came from a single student in interaction with different conversation partners. This design however was triggered by practical considerations. Namely, the UBC-UNAM telecollaboration sessions engage up to ten computer-to-computer interactions

simultaneously. This number makes it challenging to conduct systematic observations of what participants may say or do. By recording and analyzing a single student across different conversations, we managed to have a first approach how the program functions and its potential impact on students' learning. Indeed, corroborating our findings is in order to build more robust evidence of this extramural language program at the post-secondary level.

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