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DIGITAL CONNECTIONS: STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN ONLINE LANGUAGE EXCHANGES

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ABSTRACT

Exciting advances in technology have provided foreign language teachers with opportunities to connect students to native speakers of target languages. Much of the research in this area focuses on changes in proficiency or cultural sensitivity. Although valuable, the research is lacking in understanding students' experiences online, including positive and negative feelings, challenges, as well as students' overall opinions of the exchanges' usefulness for learning. The present study used a mixed methods approach to examine the experiences of third-semester university students participating in online language exchanges with native speakers. A third-semester Spanish class at a large university consisting of 18 students was selected as a sample. Students were required to speak online with native Spanish speakers in the target language for 20 minutes each week. Students completed weekly surveys and a final survey, and three students were selected for semi-structured interviews. The data reveal common struggles that students face during online exchanges, methods students use for coping with these difficulties, areas of perceived growth, and social factors that affect students' experiences. The article concludes with recommendations for what foreign language educators can do to support students in similar online exchanges.

INTRODUCTION

While speaking with one's peers in the foreign language classroom can provide helpful practice, it is clearly no substitute for interaction with native speakers. Consequently, foreign language (FL) teachers and researchers are increasingly seeking out opportunities for their students to connect with native speakers of the target language (TL) through online technology. This contact

can be asynchronous, utilizing text-based communication, or synchronous, utilizing audio or video-based communication (Chen & Lee, 2011; Hampel & Stickler, 2012).

Despite a growing consensus on the benefits of online communication with native speakers, however, research often overlooks the possible linguistic, cultural and technical pitfalls for students. The goal of this study is to better understand student experiences in online exchanges so that FL teachers can optimize their use of these technologies to help students increase their linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding. It is hoped that this knowledge will assist educators in creating and maintaining online exchange programs in their own classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the research regarding online exchanges has been dedicated to understanding the pedagogical benefits to students and determining gains in cultural awareness and sensitivity (Belz, 2002; Lee & Markey, 2014). Research makes clear that this online contact can yield rich academic benefits in FL classrooms. Yamada (2009) explained that students who used computer-mediated communication often academically improve more than their peers. Synchronous communication has been shown to improve overall communication skills and strategy, while asynchronous communication has been shown to improve confidence, in particular with the language and grammar (Ware, 2005; Lee, 2009).

The potential benefits of online exchanges with native speakers are not only linguistic in nature. Contact with native speakers can increase students' cultural awareness and sensitivity (Lee, 2009; Lee & Markey, 2014; Ware, 2005). Intercultural exchanges provide students with opportunities to make authentic contact with the target culture and experience meaningful language use. Martinsen (2011) stated, "the idea that interaction with members of the target culture increases cultural sensitivity seems logical, inasmuch as students without any contact with people outside of their own culture would simply have no opportunity to experience cultural difference personally" (p. 125). Contact with the target culture is traditionally achieved through study abroad programs. However, as these programs are usually quite costly they are not as readily accessible as the technology to facilitate online exchanges. Online language exchanges may, as such, help to fill a gap in opportunities for student to engage with native speakers of the TL.

However, talking with a native speaker in one's L2 can be a challenging experience for many students. Perhaps the most obvious challenge faced by language learners in online exchanges is anxiety and feelings of nervousness or inadequacy; the social pressure of communicating with a previously unknown person can be tremendous, particularly in an L2. Relatively minor difficulties communicating with native speakers can, for example, inadvertently send a message to learners that they may be unable to learn the TL (Tallon, 2004). Additionally, when students are presented with difficult or frustrating learning experiences, however beneficial these experiences may be, they may experience a decline in motivation (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2016) and even decide to cease their study of the language altogether. In addition to affective factors that may influence the experience, technology and classroom procedures can have negative consequences in online exchanges.

While most students describe online exchanges as broadly beneficial to their learning and cultural understanding (Hampel & Stickler, 2012; Lee, 2009), this is not always the case. Belz (2002) conducted a study of German-American telecollaboration in a language class in which students in the United States completed projects in conjunction with their German peers. She found that although most of her students enjoyed the process, some wanted to end it altogether. Many of the American students were frustrated by the German students' perceived lack of interest in grades for the joint assignments, while the German students often perceived the Americans' frustration as rudeness.

Online exchanges present a unique challenge to language teachers because students are often communicating with L2 speakers in an environment that is uncontrolled and, in some cases, not monitored by the teacher. Matsuda and Gobel (2004) explained that although some anxiety can facilitate learning, it can also be detrimental to the development of language proficiency and to classroom performance. They further explained, "Teachers need to reduce anxiety and enhance self-confidence by encouraging students' involvement in classroom activities and creating a comfortable atmosphere" (p. 32).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do students describe the experience of communicating with native speakers of Spanish online?
2. What are the challenges that students experience during their online exchanges?
3. Do students view online exchange experiences as beneficial?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The eighteen participants in this study were enrolled in an intermediate-level Spanish class designed for students who have learned some Spanish in middle school or high school, or who have completed the 1st-year Spanish course at the university. The objective of the class is continued development of communicative competence, cultural understanding, reading, writing, and conversational skills introduced in foundational courses. Students who perform well in this course are expected to attain an Intermediate-Mid proficiency level on the American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages proficiency scale.

The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 25. All were native English speakers, with one exception: Isaiah, an international student from Sweden. Eight of the students had previously used online tools to talk with native Spanish speakers. Everyone was informed of the study at the beginning of the semester and agreed to participate. All students' names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Online Exchange Assignment

In order to meet native Spanish speakers, students were instructed to use an online language-learning platform called WeSpeke (wespeke.com). This service matches up language learners from around the world based on complementary language goals. For example, a native-English-speaking student attempting to learn Spanish is matched with a native Spanish speaker who is attempting to learn English. Many conversations on WeSpeke begin with an asynchronous or text-based chat, after which participants often choose to use the audio or video conferencing software available on the website.

Students in the study were to complete twelve online conversations with native speakers during the semester, with the first conversation taking place during the third week of class. They were required to speak with their conversation partners for at least twenty minutes in Spanish and were encouraged to also speak in English for twenty minutes in order to provide their speaking partners with opportunities to practice. All conversations were to be completed through audio or video chats. Students were allowed to use other software (e.g., Skype or WhatsApp, both of which facilitate synchronous online conversation) to conduct the conversation. The online exchange assignment counted for 10% of students' final grade with students required to report weekly on the completed conversation using an online survey; students were required to submit a screenshot of their conversation in order to prove it occurred.

Students were provided with a list of guiding questions for each conversation, in an effort to promote conversation and encourage discussion of the themes and practice of the skills being covered in the curriculum. The guiding questions were provided as a support to students, and active use of them was not a required part of the assignment.

Instruments

Weekly surveys. As part of the online exchange assignment, students completed a weekly survey designed to gather information about their experience speaking with a native speaker online. Students were asked to rate their experience with WeSpeke using a Likert scale and to answer open-ended questions about their experiences during their conversation that week.

Final survey. During the last week of the semester, students completed a final survey about their experiences with online exchanges throughout the semester. The survey, which was developed by using the students' responses to the open-ended questions in the weekly surveys, consisted of six sections: enjoyment, tasks, learning, speaking partners, communication strategies, and a final section on how best to approach the assignment.

Interviews. As the semester drew to a close, three students were selected for interviews based on their responses to the weekly and final surveys. One of these students greatly enjoyed the experience, one did not enjoy it, and one transitioned from having a negative opinion to having a positive opinion over the course of the semester. The three students' opinions provide important insights into university students' experiences communicating with native Spanish speakers in online exchanges. An interview protocol was created to address overall themes that emerged from

the entire data pool, as well as from experiences unique to each interviewee. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed for ease in analysis.

The weekly and final survey questions, as well as the questions used in the semi structured interviews, can be found in the appendices.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis. Quantitative data were gathered from the Likert-scale questions about enjoyment on the weekly survey, and from the Likert-scale questions about perceived learning and communication strategy usefulness on the final survey.

Qualitative data analysis. Qualitative analysis was used to interpret the students' responses to the open-ended questions, both in the weekly surveys and in the final survey as well as the responses to the three interviews. The students' responses to the open-ended survey questions, as well as the transcriptions from the interviews, were collated and analyzed using WeftQDA software. The constant comparative method was used throughout the study to adequately describe the qualitative data (Glaser, 1965).

Because of the sheer volume of data produced by the weekly surveys, this preliminary study limits its analysis to a representative sample of data taken from the odd-numbered weeks of the semester. Data labeled as Week 1 is from the survey taken after the first conversation, which took place during the third week of classes.

RESULTS

Students' Enjoyment of Online Exchanges

Enjoyment. Each week, students were asked, "How much do you enjoy using WeSpeke overall?" Students selected a value from 1 to 7, with 1 meaning "I don't enjoy it at all" and 7 meaning "I enjoy it very much." Table 1 illustrates students' responses to this question. Blank cells in the data indicate weeks in which a student did not complete the assignment. Students are listed in ascending order of reported enjoyment.

Table 1. Students' Reported Overall Enjoyment Values

Student	Week 1	Week 3	Week 5	Week 7	Week 9	Week 11	Mean
Isaiah	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Rachel	-	1	1	1	1	1	1
Maddie	2	1	1	1	1	1	1.2
Jessica	2	3	2	3	2	1	2.2
Zach	-	-	4	4	1	2	2.8
Abigail	3	3	-	-	-	-	3
Emily	3	2	4	4	4	-	3.4
Chloe	-	-	4	-	-	-	4
Samantha	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Skyler	4	-	5	5	5	5	4.8
Charlotte	4	5	5	5	6	5	5
Ellie	-	5	-	5	-	5	5
Grace	5	-	5	5	4	6	5
Melissa	-	2	6	5	6	5	5
Victoria	5	5	6	5	5	5	5.3
Heather	-	6	-	-	6	-	6
Ashlynn	5	6	7	7	7	7	6.5
Jacob	7	7	-	7	7	7	7
Mean	3.75	3.92	4.15	4.36	4.21	4.23	4
Median	4.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	4.50	5.00	4
Mode	5.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	6.00	5.00	
SD	1.66	1.93	1.86	1.78	2.19	2.24	1.7

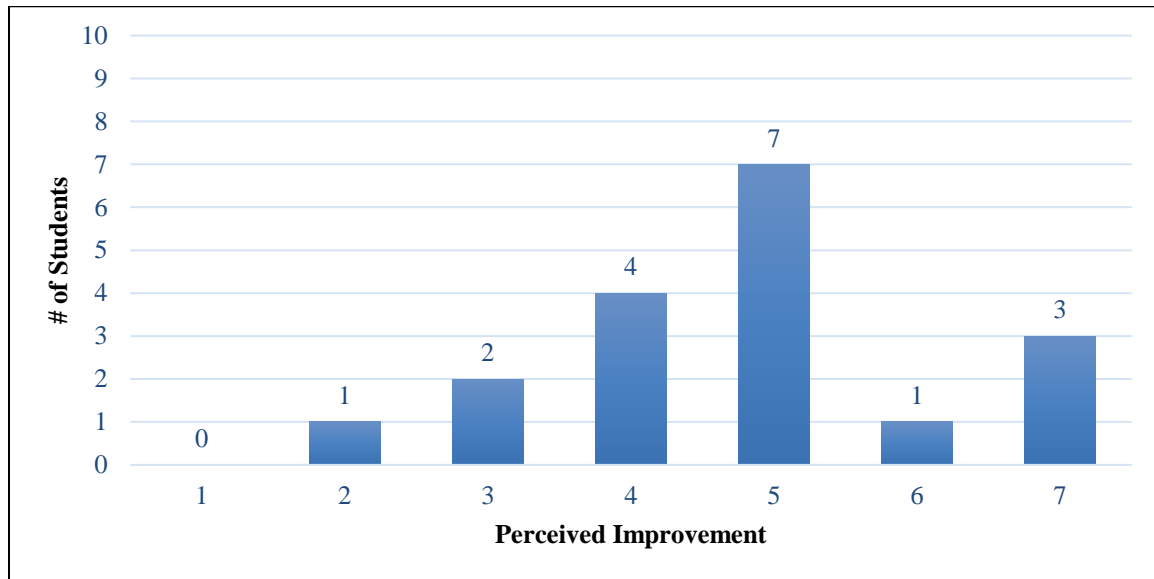
A *t*-test comparing values in Week 1 with values in Week 11 yielded a *p* value of 0.22. A *t*-test comparing students' responses from the first half of the semester with responses from the last half yielded a *p* value of 0.16. These values indicate there was not a statistically significant increase in overall enjoyment. The students were generally consistent regarding the values they assigned to their overall enjoyment each week. This finding suggests that when they experienced a particularly difficult or enjoyable week, their overall impression of the assignment did not change drastically.

In general, students' overall enjoyment rose steadily until Week 9, when enjoyment slightly declined. This may be due to the fact that the assignment load on students tends to increase as the semester progresses, or that performing the assignment each week introduced some fatigue.

Perceived Learning

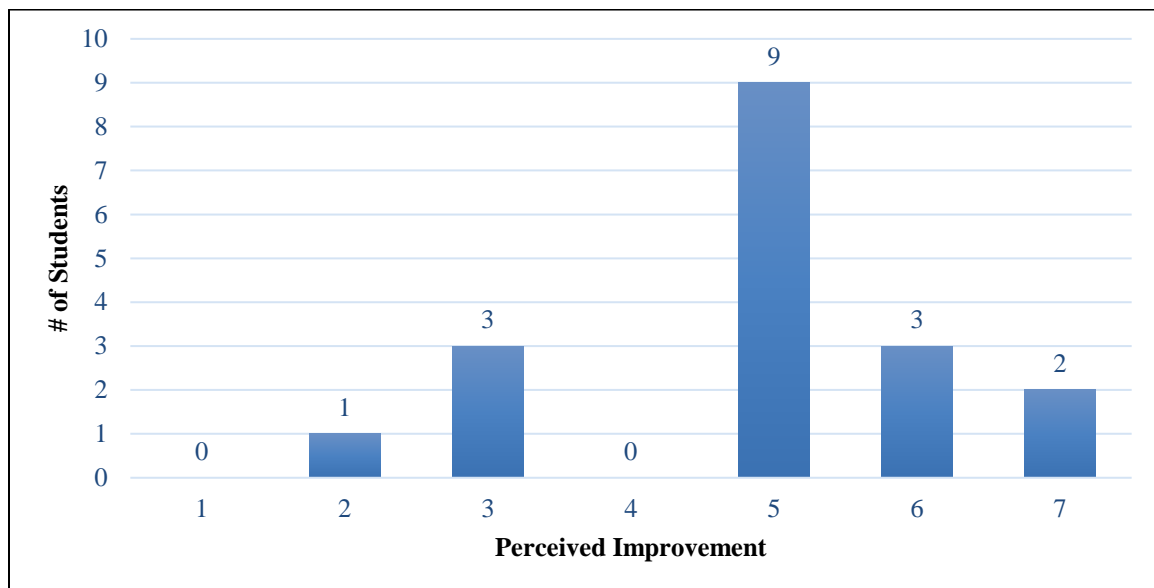
In the final survey, students were asked to indicate the extent to which they had improved in speaking, listening, and cultural understanding because of their experiences talking with native speakers online. Students indicated their perceived learning in each area by using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Figures 1–3 show the students' responses to these questions.

Figure 1. Students' perceived improvement in speaking.



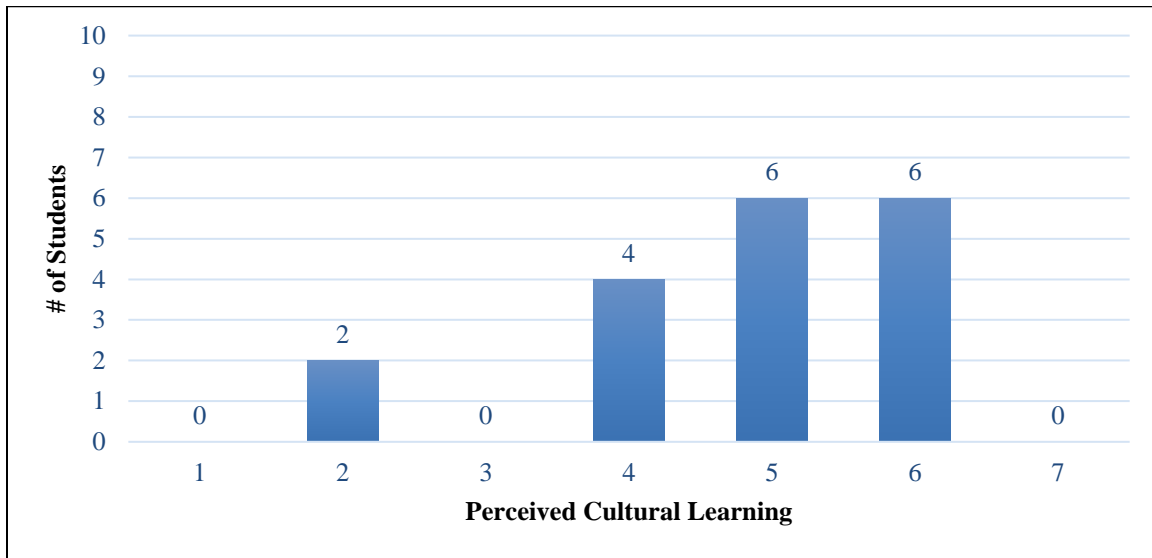
Speaking. The data show that the vast majority of students believed they had improved at least moderately with regard to speaking ability. Eleven students rated their perceived increase in speaking skills at 5 or above. In their survey responses, almost all students indicated that the online conversations were good practice and that they had been able to improve their speaking skill in some way.

Figure 2. Students' perceived improvement in listening.



Listening. Fourteen of the eighteen students indicated at least moderate improvement in listening skills, with only four indicating little to no growth.

Figure 3. Students' perceived improvement in cultural understanding.



Cultural understanding. Regarding improvement in cultural understanding, only two students chose a number below 4; the rest of the students indicated moderate to high levels of cultural learning.

Correlation of Enjoyment to Perceived Learning

The table below (Table 2) indicates each student's mean reported enjoyment together with their reported perceived learning. The students are again sorted in ascending level of enjoyment. As is evident in the table, many of the students that greatly enjoyed the exchanges (e.g., Jacob, Ashlynn, and Heather) also reported high perceived growth in each area. Additionally, there are students (e.g., Abigail and Maddie) who did not particularly enjoy the exchanges, but reported perceived learning nevertheless.

Table 2. Students' Overall Enjoyment and Perceived Learning

Student	Enjoyment	Speaking	Listening	Cultural Understanding
Isaiah	1	2	3	2
Rachel	1	4	5	2
Maddie	1.2	5	3	5
Jessica	2.2	3	5	5
Zach	2.8	4	5	6
Abigail	3	7	7	5
Emily	3.4	5	6	6
Chloe	4	3	3	6
Samantha	4	5	6	6
Skyler	4.8	6	5	5
Charlotte	5	4	2	4

Ellie	5	4	5	4
Grace	5	5	5	4
Melissa	5	5	5	4
Victoria	5.3	5	6	5
Heather	6	7	5	6
Ashlynn	6.5	7	7	6
Jacob	7	5	5	5
Mean	4.01	4.78	4.89	4.78
Median	4.40	5.00	5.00	5.00
Mode	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
SD	1.84	1.40	1.37	1.26

QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

The qualitative data in this study included students' responses to open-ended questions in each weekly survey, responses to the final survey, and the transcripts from the three interviews. As the data were analyzed, several important themes were identified. After the data were coded, it was organized into four comprehensive themes, each with a number of subthemes. The themes encompass students' struggles, how they coped with those struggles, perceived growth, and other social factors affecting the students' experience exchanges. The themes and subthemes are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Students' experiences speaking with native speakers online—qualitative themes

Theme	Subthemes
Struggles and challenges	Technological difficulties Difficulty finding speaking partners Nervousness/anxiety Language barrier issues
Methods for coping with struggles	Alternate technologies Emotional coping strategies
Perceived growth	Communicative competence Cultural understanding Enjoyment increase over time
Social factors affecting students' experiences	Speaking-partner attributes Development of relationships Sense of authentic contact

Struggles and Challenges

All students identified some challenges that created anxiety and frustration during their online exchanges. Included among these challenges were technological difficulties, difficulty finding speaking partners, selection of conversation topics, and overcoming an initial language barrier. Fortunately, for about half of the participants, these feelings of anxiety diminished as they continued having conversations with native speakers. Other researchers have identified these struggles as well (Ware, 2005). The challenges faced by students are summarized in the following sections.

Technological difficulties. The majority of students mentioned frequent problems with technology. For most, the technological issues were associated with WeSpeke connectivity; other problems related to Internet connection and the hardware their speaking partners used. The following quotes are representative of students' experiences:

- *Melissa:* "WeSpeke was kind of glitchy and was hard to use." (Week 3)
- *Charlotte:* "A lot of people don't have the right technology to video or audio chat so it becomes quite a challenge to actually communicate with them." (Final survey)

Difficulty finding speaking partners. With one exception, all students in the class mentioned having problems finding speaking partners. This task was the most frustrating part of the online exchange experience for at least ten students. The frustration seemed to stem from a variety of issues, as noted in student responses. Eight students were frustrated because many of the people they met online were unwilling to begin an audio or video-based conversation.

- *Ellie:* "It was really frustrating trying to find someone to talk to when they kept cancelling." (Final survey)
- *Maddie:* "I had a really hard time finding speaking partners. It was okay until I asked if the person I was talking to wanted to audio chat with me. After that, a lot of times, they would stop responding or just say no." (Final survey)

Because of the difficulty in identifying a speaking partner, many students spent much more time than expected completing the assignments. In some cases, what was supposed to be a 40-minute assignment actually took several hours.

- *Skyler:* "The first week, I was online for 2 hours or more before I found someone who was willing to have a discussion with audio. I think a lot of people that are on WeSpeke just want to chat/send IM's." (Final survey)

Nervousness and anxiety. At least eleven students experienced anxiety, nervousness, or self-doubt while learning. The data make clear that the affective filter was a significant factor in students' overall experience.

With two exceptions, all participants in this study indicated that upon learning about this course requirement, they felt nervous, intimidated, or fearful. Even Ashlynn, who loved the experience overall, did not feel good about it initially:

- *Ashlynn*: “I was terrified, honestly. All I did outwardly was groan, but I was a mess on the inside because I was so scared to speak to anyone in Spanish, let alone a native speaker. I even (however briefly) entertained the thought of dropping the class.” (Final survey)

Maddie had a particularly difficult experience. Her comments illustrate that some students felt unsafe speaking with native speakers online:

- *Maddie*: “I felt even more nervous and uneasy using WeSpeke because I did not feel like the website was a super safe place for me to practice my Spanish and a place for me to make mistakes as I went.” (Final survey)

Maddie actually spoke at length about the technical obstacles and the difficulties she had understanding her first speaking partner, suggesting that this initial experience shaped Maddie’s perception of the activity throughout the semester. Despite this, she still reported high perceived learning values for the semester overall.

Language-barrier issues. Surprisingly, when asked about what difficulties they faced during online exchanges, students mentioned the language barrier less often than the struggles previously discussed. However, some students did mention struggling to understand their native speaking partner. The students usually attributed this difficulty to their lack of Spanish proficiency or their speaking partner’s speech patterns:

- *Skyler*: “It was just hard. When I didn’t know any Spanish whatsoever, it just seemed like words ran together. I am sure other people feel the same way about English, but I wasn’t sure, like, where one word began and where one ended.” (Interview)
- *Jacob*: “I found myself nodding at what she was saying even though I couldn’t understand. It was [a negative experience] because even when she repeated what she was saying slower, I still have a hard time understanding.” (Final survey)

Methods for Coping with Struggles

All students experienced one or more of the preceding struggles and adapted in whatever way seemed best to them. The coping methods outlined in this section were not prescribed for students before or during the study; rather, the students adopted the methods instinctively.

Alternate technologies. As students encountered technological difficulties with the audio or video conferencing software in WeSpeke, most sought out alternate means of communication in order to complete the assignment. Some students used an audio-notes function, which allows users to create microrecordings that they can send to another user. Others moved their conversation over to Skype or WhatsApp, both of which allow users to make phone calls using an Internet connection.

Each of these tools seemed to alleviate the technological issues that students faced with WeSpeke software.

- *Maddie*: “This week, I had a lot of trouble using WeSpeke so my partner and I had to use audio notes to communicate.” (Week 5)
- *Jacob*: “Using Skype made hearing easier than using WeSpeke’s video interface (it had really bad feedback).” (Week 1)

Emotional coping strategies. As explained previously, approximately eleven students experienced some level of anxiety or apprehension while participating in online exchanges. In order to discover how they dealt with some of the challenges they faced, the final survey included the question “What advice would you give me if I were starting the class and was about to do this assignment for the first time?” Most students identified some kind of technique for dealing with the stress of online exchanges. Four students suggested “toughing it out” or persevering.

- *Ashlynn*: “I just think persistence is something that made the fears go away, because when I kept doing it, it wasn’t scary anymore.” (Interview)
- *Maddie*: “Don’t get discouraged; it’s ok to not understand everything.” (Interview)

Additionally, some students suggested being proactive in order to avoid the stress of a fast-approaching deadline:

- *Rachel*: “Just get it done earlier in the week instead of putting it off.” (Final survey)
- *Chloe*: “Don’t skip any weeks of WeSpeke because you’re too nervous.” (Final survey)

To avoid the emotional stress of online exchanges, some students simply elected to skip the assignment. In Abigail’s case, she completed the first two conversations and then decided not to complete any more. Isaiah only completed one conversation.

Perceived Growth

Despite the struggles the students experienced, fourteen of the eighteen students indicated that they believed the experience of speaking to native speakers online was beneficial. This section summarizes students’ comments that indicated perceived growth. It is important to note here that this growth is based on student perception, not on any quantitative measure taken.

Communicative competence. Among the more commonly mentioned types of growth that students noticed during this experience was communicative competence. Students began to believe that they could successfully use the Spanish language to communicate with their speaking partners. Before the online exchanges, many students had never had any significant opportunities to communicate with native speakers, and the students believed the experience was valuable in that regard:

- *Ashlynn*: “I had never really had much reason to speak Spanish aloud for any extended period of time, so I didn’t [. . .] But speaking Spanish for what turned out to be more like a couple of hours (because it was so fun) each week with Miguel and his family really helped me to think on my feet, to solidify things that I learned in class, and to develop my accent.” (Final survey)
- *Jacob*: “I feel that [online exchanges] were very helpful in being able to apply what I have learned in grammar and vocabulary in a real conversation.” (Final survey)

Students also indicated that they believed that the struggle to understand native speakers was beneficial to them.

- *Melissa*: “It helped my listening ability talking to a native because they talked with a pure accent and it was hard to understand sometimes so I really had to try.” (Final survey)

Cultural understanding. The majority of the students also mentioned an increase in cultural understanding at some point during the study. Often, students mentioned culture along with positive feelings about the experience. Approximately half of the cultural learning the students mentioned in their survey responses centered on cultural products and practices.

- *Grace*: “We just talked about . . . Halloween and *Día de Los Muertos* because he is from Mexico.” (Week 7)

Interestingly, Jessica’s early survey responses indicated that she learned mostly about products and practices, whereas her later comments focused on perspectives and comparisons:

- *Jessica*: “My partner [this week] was a university student from Peru. We talked about Peru, its climate and tourist attractions, its diversity and landmarks. We talked about food and hobbies.” (Week 3)
- *Jessica*: “[My speaking partner this week] was from Colombia and we had talked before. We talked about cultural identities and the Spanish language.” (Week 7)
- *Jessica*: “We talked about the difficulties of paying for school and having jobs.” (Week 9)

Students also mentioned discovering similarities between their speaking partners’ cultures and their own.

- *Samantha*: “I met a lot of people from different parts of the world that had a lot of similar interests with me. It was cool to make connections with people who initially seem so different.” (Final survey)

Increased enjoyment over time. As mentioned previously, many students experienced a variety of negative feelings that impeded their ability to enjoy the online exchanges and that possibly impeded their learning. Approximately half of the class expressed initial discomfort with online exchanges but later indicated higher levels of enjoyment. Each of the following students indicated

frustration or apprehension at the beginning of the semester, whereas their later comments reflect more enjoyment and learning:

- *Ashlynn*: “It’s been really fun in my experience. At first it was pretty scary because I wasn’t really confident in my abilities, and I was just scared to talk to anyone in Spanish because I was embarrassed, so I thought that native speakers would think I was especially dumb. But even the first time that I talked to the native speakers online, they were really nice, and it was just fun.” (Interview)
- *Skylar*: “It was frustrating at first, but looking back now I’m glad that we’ve done it.” (Interview)

Social Factors Affecting Students’ Experiences

Various comments indicate that several socially significant factors arose that directly affected the students’ experiences. These factors include speaking partners’ attributes, the development of relationships with speaking partners, and a sense of authentic conversations. To highlight the significance of these social factors, they are summarized below apart from students’ struggles and students’ perceived growth. Further, given the highly social nature of online exchanges, it seems appropriate to discuss these factors separately.

Partner attributes. Many students reported communicating with kind and helpful speaking partners. It is fairly intuitive that students would prefer partners with these characteristics, but it is valuable to see what students considered to be helpful. An important part of being helpful was correcting students’ mistakes kindly to avoid making the student feel inadequate:

- *Jessica*: “I was able to talk to a lady from Colombia who was very easy to talk with. She was very forgiving when I made mistakes but she helped to correct me.” (Final survey)
- *Ashlynn*: “I learned a lot from him because he wasn’t afraid to tell me when I made a mistake, but he was also nice about it and we would always laugh and have a good time.” (Final survey)

Six students indicated that they enjoyed the process more when their speaking partners possessed a relatively high level of English proficiency. This proficiency facilitated the learning experience and made things go more smoothly:

- *Victoria*: My partner, Hilda, was very helpful and also very good at English. (Week 5)
- *Heather*: Yeah it’s very helpful to talk to my partner David because he talks in both English and Spanish and helps me with words I don’t know. (Week 9)

Just as speaking partners possessed helpful attributes, speaking partners demonstrated several unhelpful ones. These negative characteristics often detracted from students’ enjoyment of the conversations. Some of the negative characteristics included speaking quickly and being unkind and impatient with the students:

- *Jacob*: “One speaker I talked with was from Peru. She talked so fast it was hard to understand. I found myself nodding at what she was saying even though I couldn’t understand. It was negative because even when she repeated what she was saying slower, I still have a hard time understanding.” (Final survey)
- *Jessica*: “I’ve been laughed at because I said something incorrectly and I don’t enjoy doing WeSpeke in the first place so it only made me feel worse about it.” (Final survey)

Development of relationships. The aspect that many students enjoyed the most about online exchanges was developing friendships with their speaking partners. Students talked with the same speaking partner several times, which sometimes led to conversations that were not required for the class:

- *Victoria*: “I made a friend named Elena, it was positive because I had the opportunity to talk to her a few times and actually get to know her well.” (Final survey)
- *Grace*: “I was able to meet new people and make new friends actually.” (Final survey)

Ashlynn and Skyler had particularly interesting experiences with making friends. Each of them was able to speak with a partner consistently and did so beyond the required time limits:

- *Ashlynn*: “A brand-new friendship actually formed from this, and after a 90-minute video call, we began messaging each other every day, which is really fun.” (Week 1)
- *Skyler*: “After I found a consistent speaking partner, I enjoyed the WeSpeke assignment. I would usually talk to my friend for an hour or more a week.” (Final survey)

Sense of authentic conversations. Ten students said that during weekly conversations, they were using Spanish in realistic, authentic, and valuable discussions:

- *Samantha*: “It was helpful to practice speaking naturally, without thinking too much or looking at a textbook for reference.” (Week 9)
- *Jacob*: “Yes, it was really great to be able to have practice applying the vocabulary we are learning in a real-world conversation.” (Week 3)

This sense of authenticity was very important to several students, as it gave them a great sense of accomplishment and learning.

- *Jacob*: “I was talking to somebody and I found I was able to communicate my ideas so they could understand. This happened many times, and it was positive because I felt like I was really starting to communicate using Spanish in a real way.” (Final survey)
- *Ashlynn*: “I understood a tiny bit of what [my partner’s] mom said this time! I will know I am fluent the day I can have a real conversation with her.” (Week 3)

In summary, students usually experienced at least one of the struggles outlined in this section. These struggles included technological difficulties, difficulty finding speaking partners, nervousness and anxiety, and the language barrier. In an effort to alleviate these struggles, students found several ways to cope, which allowed them to continue the experience. Students' responses indicate perceived growth with grammar and vocabulary, communicative competence, and cultural understanding. Several students also indicated an increase in enjoyment over the course of the study. Finally, many students discussed social factors that affected their overall experience. These factors included attributes of their speaking partner, developing friendships with speaking partners, and a sense of authenticity in their contact with the speaking partner.

DISCUSSION

Perceived growth in listening and speaking. The study data do not prove learning, but they do indicate that students believed the online exchanges helped them improve their L2 skills and participate in authentic conversations in the TL. Thirteen students believed they increased their language skills, including in grammar and vocabulary use, and at least five students mentioned practicing these skills specifically in preparation for an oral or written exam. Additionally, the majority of students believed they increased their communicative competence, or their ability to hold conversations with native speakers. Ten students made comments about their conversations feeling natural and realistic. According to the quantitative data, eleven students (61%) believed they had improved at least moderately with regard to speaking ability, and fourteen (78%) perceived they had improved at least moderately in listening.

The perception of learning also likely increases students' motivation to learn Spanish. Dörnyei and Csizér (2016) indicated that "increasing learners' linguistic self-confidence" and "personalizing the learning process" are two ways to increase language learners' motivation. Online exchanges seem to facilitate both. Students in the study often reported an increase in confidence as they engaged in authentic conversations.

Perceived growth in cultural understanding. Similar to the data regarding speaking and listening, students reported a perceived increase in cultural understanding. Twelve students (67%) reported at least moderate growth in cultural understanding as a result of online exchanges. Only two students (11%) reported low growth in cultural understanding. In the surveys, students often reported positive feelings when commenting on their speaking partners' cultures.

Although cultural learning is always valuable in the FL classroom, some cultural learning is often superficial, focusing on a culture's products and practices rather than on perspectives or identity. In the study, approximately half of the students' cultural learning, as indicated in the survey responses, seemed to be largely superficial. Students described learning about holidays, food, and tourist attractions. Several students, however, indicated learning more about their speaking partners' cultural perspectives and identities. It seems that over time and with a consistent speaking partner, the students are able to learn more significant things about the partner's culture. It is likely that after learning about the basics, the students began trying to truly understand their speaking partners, leading to more sophisticated cultural learning. The data are very promising, as they suggest a positive relationship between the amount of time students are exposed to other

cultures and speaking partners and the development of cultural understanding. As many students tended to make friends and speak with the same person several times, repeated interactions may be particularly conducive to this development.

Nervousness and anxiety. As mentioned previously, all but one student reported initially feeling nervous or unhappy about the online exchanges. The initial causes of anxiety mentioned by students included fear of using the TL with a native speaker and fear of speaking with someone they did not know. In order to avoid students abandoning the exchanges during the early stages, instructors should consider frank discussions about the kinds of obstacles that they might encounter. One might also consider opportunities for students to interact initially with sympathetic or trained native speakers (including those on campus) or for conducting asynchronous or text-based online exchanges before requiring students to communicate synchronously. It is important for students to know that this kind of activity is stressful for everyone, but that it gets easier with time.

Anxiety is uncomfortable, but it is not always debilitating. Often, anxiety can facilitate greater learning and progress; in other cases, it can be extremely limiting (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). Based on the data presented here, it seems that many students were able to overcome their anxiety and use online exchanges as an opportunity to learn the TL and better understand the target culture. This suggests that much of the anxiety the students felt was facilitative rather than debilitating. However, two students, Isaiah and Abigail, experienced anxiety that caused them to give up after a few weeks and not attempt to complete the assignment again. One way students were able to conquer their initial apprehension and anxiety in online exchanges was by developing friendships with their partners.

Development of relationships. When asked to describe how they felt about online exchanges at the end of the semester, six students (33%) mentioned specifically that making new friends made the experience more enjoyable. In the weekly survey, many students also mentioned cooperating with their speaking partner so that they could both learn their respective TL. This cooperation created a sense of community among students and their speaking partners. The students also believed that they were not having contrived or scripted conversations in the TL, but real conversations where they needed to negotiate meaning with their interlocutors and make themselves understood.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

An important limitation of this study is that it relies on student perceptions rather than quantitative pre- and post-test data on students' improvements in speaking and listening. This decision was justified for the purposes of this preliminary study, which focused primarily on understanding the students' experience and perception of online exchanges. Future studies, however, will want to employ research-based methods to validate the perceived gains that may be made during online exchanges.

During this investigation, several themes were identified that merit further investigation. Research could be conducted to investigate which kinds of students may thrive in online exchanges, and which do not. The data in this study certainly hint at this possibility; some students loved the

experience right away, while others struggled constantly. It might be helpful to identify the types of students who are likely to struggle, so that educators can better support them in online exchanges.

Two students who spent more than the required time speaking with their conversation partners, Jessica and Ashlynn, seemed to increase in their cultural understanding throughout the semester. Perhaps longer exposure to online exchanges trains students to inquire about the target culture in ways that are progressively more thoughtful. Further research may investigate an ideal length of exposure to the target culture or identify ways that educators can better prepare their students to increase in cultural sensitivity and understanding when communicating with native speakers.

Finally, researchers may want to investigate the use of online exchanges with other age groups or proficiency levels, possibly revealing different benefits for each.

CONCLUSION

Oral language proficiency is often one of many goals that language educators have when utilizing technology to connect their students to native Spanish speakers. The American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (2013) encourages educators to focus on the five Cs of language learning: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and community. Through online exchanges with native speakers, language learners can develop skills in all five goal areas. Given the opportunity to meet so many important language-learning standards, the potential value of online exchanges cannot be overestimated. At the same time, connecting with native speakers through technology can present logistical difficulties for educators and myriad challenges for learners.

It is, therefore, crucial for instructors contemplating online exchanges to teach students how to use the online tools and software necessary to communicate with native speakers. These resources may include audio and video communication, online dictionaries, and social media platforms. Students should have a variety of tools to use and be given the freedom to select the ones that work best for them. During the beginning of the semester, instructors should also be prepared to provide individualized help to students who are having technical issues in order to minimize the anxiety of the initial online conversations.

It is also essential that students find sympathetic speaking partners, with whom they feel safe making mistakes. Only after these baseline technical and linguistic needs are met, will students be able to move past their initial anxiety and enjoy the benefits of regular conversations with native speakers of the TL. With time, they will begin to perceive that their conversations are more authentic and natural, allowing them to move beyond the class assignment and onto making friends and establishing stronger cultural connections with their speaking partners.

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APPENDIX A – WEEKLY SURVEY

Q: How much did you enjoy your experience with WeSpeke this week?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I didn't enjoy it at all						I enjoyed it very much

Please explain your answer:

Q: How much do you enjoy using WeSpeke overall?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I don't enjoy it at all						I enjoy it very much.

Q: Did you find your task this week to be helpful practice for you? Why or why not?

Q: Tell me about your conversation on WeSpeke this week. (Tell me about your speaking partner, what you talked about, any positive or negative experiences, etc.)

Q: When you or your partner had trouble understanding each other, what did you do? What did your partner do? Be specific.

Q: Is there anything else (that you have not mentioned already) that helped you communicate better with each other?

Q: Is there anything else (that you have not mentioned already) that you want to say about your conversation this week?

APPENDIX B – FINAL SURVEY

Instructions

Please answer the questions in this survey honestly and thoughtfully. While completing the survey is required, your answers will have no effect on your grade or standing in the course. In any future publications regarding this research, your name will be changed in order to protect your identity.

This semester, you have spent lots of time communicating with native Spanish speakers online. This survey will investigate some of your perspectives on this experience as a student.

Q: What is your name?

Enjoyment

Q: How did you feel when you learned that you would be required to speak with native speakers online each week in this class?

Q: How do you feel about these online conversations NOW?

Q: Tell me about a positive/enjoyable experience you've had speaking with native speakers online. What made it positive?

Q: Tell me about a frustrating/difficult experience you've had speaking with native speakers online. What made it negative?

Q: How did you deal with these challenges/difficulties?

Tasks

Q: Each week you were provided with a list of guiding questions to use in your conversation. How helpful were these questions to you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not helpful at all						Extremely helpful

Q: In what ways did the guiding questions help (or not help) you during your conversations?

Q: How could the guiding questions be more helpful?

Learning

Q: How much do you feel you improved in the following areas because of your experience speaking with native speakers online?

Speaking

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all						Very much

Listening

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all						Very much

Explain your answer to the previous two questions:

Cultural Understanding

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all						Very much

Explain your answer to the previous question:

Speaking Partners

Q: Describe your experience finding speaking partners this semester. What challenges did you face?

Q: Did you speak with the same person more than once?

Q: How did that effect your experience?

Q: What attributes are helpful or not helpful in a speaking partner?

Communication Strategies

Instructions. When a language barrier exists between two people they use communication strategies in order to understand each other. The weekly survey you have been taking this semester has asked you to describe the strategies you used while talking online with native speakers. The following list of communication strategies has been generated based on you and your classmates' answers.

Q: Based on your own experience speaking with native Spanish speakers this semester, rank each strategy on the list on a scale of most useful to least useful. For example, you should give the strategy that seems the most useful a 1, and the strategy that seems the least useful should get a 10. You should use each number only ONCE.

Asking questions to clarify

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Slowing down, asking partner to slow down

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Typing out words or phrases

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Sending pictures or other media

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Switching languages temporarily

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Checking for understanding

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Rewording or simplifying sentences

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Repeating yourself or asking for repetition

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Correcting each other's mistakes

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Looking up words in a dictionary/Google

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Q: Which strategy did you assign a 1? Explain why you consider it to be the MOST useful strategy:

Q: Which strategy did you assign a 10? Explain why you consider it to be the LEAST useful strategy:

Other Questions

Q: What advice would you give me if I were starting the class and was about to do this assignment for the first time?

Q: If you could change something about the online conversation component of the course, what would it be and why?

APPENDIX C – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

These three interviews were semi-structured. These questions were asked to each interviewee along with several others that emerged in order to probe interviewees' other responses.

Q: What is it like talking to native speakers online?

Q: What was your experience like with your speaking partners this semester?

Q: What challenges did you face in these conversations?

Q: How did you adapt to those challenges?

Q: What communication strategies did you use? Which ones did you find most useful?

Q: What was the best part of your experience doing this assignment? Why?

Q: Do you think you learned more Spanish from this experience? Why?

Q: Do you think you understand Hispanic culture more because of your experience? Why?

Q: How likely are you to have these conversations online in the future?