Developing academic oral skills using the video pitch as a learning strategy

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Abstract: This research reports on the success of an online oral task developed for English for Academic Purposes learners in a Brazilian university context, which required recording and submitting a short video pitch about the students' own research. We discuss the contributions the task brought to improving oral academic skills, focusing on the videos and comments posted in the online forum, and the students' self-evaluations. Our results indicate that issues such as identity, agency, and autonomy play an important role in the teaching and learning of EAP and deserve attention when designing materials for students in this specific context.

Keywords: Academic Oral Skills. Video Pitch. Online Task.

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Lívia Terra

228

1. Introduction

With the growing role of internationalization in academia (cf. ALTBACH; KNIGHT, 2007; DE WIT, 1995; QIANG, 2003), scholars and novice academics have been increasingly required to communicate in English, the academic lingua franca. In this context, oral communication is a key skill, since a significant number of academic interactions relies on spoken genres such as lectures, presentations, seminars, and debates. However, research in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has traditionally shown a preference for written genres, suggesting that oral skills are still under-researched (ALWI; SIDHU, 2013; BARRETT; LIU, 2016; CARTER-THOMAS; ROWLEY-JOLIVET, 2003; YANG, 2014).

Among recent research on spoken communication in academic settings, Kim (2006) reports on learners' difficulties, outlining the importance of practicing speaking and listening skills in this context, Bankowski (2010) discusses students' linguistic gains from an academic presentation training program, while Yang (2010) describes Chinese students' experiences in planning and delivering an international academic presentation; Tuomaite and Zajankauskaite (2017) analyze teachers' perception of the role oral skills have in academic communication in their learners' oral skills. Overall, these studies focus on academic presentations, revealing students' challenges with formal second/foreign language (L2) speech.

As Kim (2006) remarks, the most common way of developing oral skills in EAP is by face-to-face interaction (e.g.: group discussions, Q&As, etc.). Interestingly, however, digital technology affords teachers and students access to a range of applications that can be used in speaking practice. Recent investigations have shown that, in addition to fostering interaction, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been well received by language learners, with positive effects in oral communication skills (CASTAÑEDA, 2013; DEHAAN et al., 2012; HAFNER; MILLER, 2011; KIM, 2014; LEE, 2014; LYS, 2013; MCNEIL, 2014; POP; TOMULETIU; DAVID, 2011; POZA, 2011; SUN, 2012; SUN; YANG, 2013).

Among studies about CMC in the academic context, Garcia's (2018) reports on the online adaptation of a face-to-face workshop, highlighting the many benefits of embracing technology in academic literacy. Jarvis (2004) and Roche (2018) argue that EAP programs should move beyond language content and take digital literacy as one of the six literacies to be developed academically. Procter, Williams, and Stuart (2010) outline

the distinct role Web 2.0[1] tools have in the daily life of students and researchers, asserting that digital tools have the potential to improve academic practices as a more effective way of communicating research findings. Parmaxi and Zaphiris (2016) stress the many affordances of Web 2.0, collaborative learning being one of them.

Often seen as a cause of significant stress for language learners (SABRI; QIN, 2014; VITASARI ET AL., 2010), academic speaking practice can benefit from CMC. In an attempt to fill the gap in EAP literature on CMC oral communication skills, this paper discusses the benefits of a computer-mediated task centered around Brazilian university students' oral skills, based on their self-reports and online comments, more specifically on perceived contributions of the task. Our discussion is mainly guided by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and shows that CMC may be helpful in developing academic oral skills in several ways.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Sociocultural theory

With the main premise that human cognition is developed through social interaction and mediated by cultural artifacts, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory (SCT) has been widely adopted in language education. In ESL, Lantolf and Thorne (2006) have incorporated Vygotsky's principles by emphasizing the key role of social interaction and L2 learning. More recently, research in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has drawn upon SCT to analyze CMC, since SCT implies that technology[2] is a means of transforming human activity (WARSCHAUER, 2005). For instance, Levy and Hubbard (2016) argue that two key SCT aspects are heightened in CALL: mediation, seeing that online interaction is shaped by the digital tool adopted, and situated learning, since these tools create new, different ways of interaction, requiring more active participation. This idea is defended in Sun and Yang (2013), to whom the affordances of digital learning help learners to engage in collaborative creation and knowledge transformation.

Another important SCT element is the concept of learning as a social process, which is also stressed in CALL. For Donato (2000, p. 45), all learning, including L2, "is a semiotic process attributable to

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1   The term refers to a set of innovative online applications collectively termed 'Web 2.0', which has transformed people from mere consumers to producers of information (O'REILLY, 2007).

2   Technology hereby comprises artifacts such as the pencil, among others, not just digital tools.

Bárbara
Malveira
Orfanò

Elisa Mattos

Lívia Terra

230

participation in socially-mediated activities", many of which are now carried out via Web 2.0 applications, in and outside the classroom. This is one reason why it is important to examine CMC in L2 learning in light of SCT, in order to gain insight into how technology can help students to tackle the challenge of improving their communication skills.

2.2 Autonomy, identity, agency, and motivation

Autonomy has been a recurrent topic in language education. What it has come to mean in the last three decades, however, has changed considerably, in particular with the emergence of learner-centered theories (LITTLE, 2007). Once exclusively regarded as the skill of self-study (BENSON; VOLLER, 1997; LITTLE, 2007), since the mid-90's this concept has been reimagined as *the ability of employing critical thinking in education-related decision-making processes* (BENSON; VOLLER, 1997; LITTLE, 2007), leading to a more fluid definition of autonomy, one that can range from *taking up responsibility for the learning process* (BENSON, 2001) to having more freedom to decide on aspects of the learning experience (e.g.: test criteria and curricula), as discussed in Benson and Voller (1997).

As with any change, reconceptualizing autonomy requires striking a balance between what it is and what it is not, as well as to what it is related to. In English Language Teaching (ELT), a connection between *language learning* and *autonomy* should be fostered, since the main goal in ELT is the development of language skills (LITTLE, 2007). In this sense, autonomy neither means having the freedom to do whatever one wishes, nor can it be separate from the learning experience, as some have posited (e.g. HOLEC, 1981). Autonomy is therefore seen as *taking up responsibility towards one's learning process*, be it in the classroom or elsewhere, collectively or by oneself. It also means delving into one's previous learning experiences and gaining insight into learning preferences and strategies.

This notion of learner autonomy seems to be in agreement with Vygotsky's SCT, since it entails some guidance (or mediation) by a more capable adult – the teacher, in this case[3] – so that learners can unlock

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3   Learning is extremely complex and more often than not takes place outside the classroom, where a number of variables play a role. This means that learners may have other capable adults helping them in the mediation of L2 language learning. Such persons may indeed be more senior, but not necessarily so. However, seeing that our study pertains to the development of oral skills in an EAP course, the more capable adult initially, though not exclusively, refers to the language teacher in this context.

their full potential. As argued in Sá (2012), it is by reflecting upon their language learning experience that learners can be equipped to act more independently outside the classroom, to choose artifacts from which they can learn, thus regulating their own learning.

This socioculturally-based perspective of autonomy places autonomy not purely as a set of skills/abilities, but as a social process involving the interactions between teacher-student and student-student, as well as any other engagement learners might have in their learning trajectories. Moreover, looking at autonomy as a process means understanding that autonomy is not acquired; on the contrary, it is developed, which requires self-reflection and adjustments along the way (THANASOULAS, 2000; SÁ, 2012).

Norton (2000, p. 5) defines identity as "how a person understands his/her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future". Along the same lines, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) note that identity is "a relational and sociocultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse contexts of interaction rather than as a stable structure located primarily in the individual psyche or in fixed social categories". In agreement, we see identity as a social and historical process mediated by and realized through language.

For Wenger (2000, p. 239), "a strong identity involves deep connections with others through shared histories and experiences, reciprocity, affection, and mutual commitments", which is precisely what learning a new language ultimately entails. Contact with an L2 is by no means a mere interaction with a linguistic system detached from its speakers. Rather, it is about interacting with new social and cultural worlds, from which L2-related experiences can be built and integrated to one's already multitudinous identity.

This means that the so-called "new" identity is not simply created; it draws and builds upon several previous experiences. Hence, the realization of one's identity takes place in the interaction between the social and the individual domains, in the intermeshness between outer and inner worlds.

Recent studies have associated the concept of agency with identity (cf. DUFF, 2012), asserting learners' active role in language learning. For Duff (2012, p. 413), learners "are not simply passive or complicit participants in language learning and use, but can also make informed

Bárbara
Malveira
Orfanò

Elisa Mattos

Lívia Terra

choices, exert influence, resist (e.g. remain silent, quit courses), or comply". Agency is therefore understood as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (AHEARN, 2001, p.112, as cited in DUFF, 2012, p. 417), or the capacity of individuals to be in charge of their lives and make their own decisions, in which the interplay between identity and agency may yield positive changes in one's learning process.

Duff (2012, p. 417) further claims that "those who typically feel the most control over their lives, choices, and circumstances also have the power - the human, social, or cultural capital and ability - they need to succeed". Along these lines, and based on the view of motivation as a dynamic process, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011, p. 400) argue that:

> processes of motivation, cognition, and emotion and their constituent components continuously interact with one another [...], thereby changing and causing change, as the system as a whole restructures, adapts, and evolves.

Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) argue for three types of motivation: intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation. Intrinsic motivation is about behaviours performed in the search of personal satisfaction. Extrinsic motivation involves performing behaviours to obtain some kind of reward (studying to get better grades). Amotivation refers to a lack of motivation of any kind. In this view, extrinsic motivation can be placed in a continuum, representing different degrees of external control or internal regulation. This theory also puts forward four different types of *extrinsic motivation*: external regulation (teacher's praise), introjected motivation (externally imposed rules), identified motivation (engaging with a task and realizing its usefulness), and integrated motivation (personal behaviour integrated to one's values, needs, and identity).

3. Methodological considerations

This study explores students' perceived gains from an online task aimed at developing oral communicative competence mainly through a video pitch produced in English. As one of the assessment tools for the EAP course at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), the task integrated oral ability to the other language skills (reading, listening, and writing) in a three-step online-based process carried out entirely in English. In this section, we present some methodological considerations

that permeated our examination as reported in this paper, as well as key information about the learners who took part in the course and the main layout of the task.

3.1 The participants

Either UFMG undergraduate or graduate students from a variety of academic areas, the 37 learners who took part in the task have Brazilian Portuguese as their first language and are B1 English speakers[4], as this is the minimum language requirement for enrollment. The credit-bearing EAP course meets twice a week for 18 weeks per semester, for classes of 1 hour and 40 minutes, in which authentic materials and spoken and written genres relevant to academic training are the basis of the teaching practices. The video pitch is one such genre, as it is either mandatory or highly recommended for application in the majority of academic mobility programmes sponsored by UFMG.

It should be noted that the online peer feedback and learner self-reports discussed in this study were collected throughout the year of 2018, spanning two academic semesters. Our study is therefore based on a total of 29 self-reports and numerous online comments made by the students enrolled in the course, all of whom signed a form wavering image and text rights to the university, for research purposes.

3.2 The online task

The video pitch task was designed in three interconnected stages. First, the students produced a short video pitch (Figure 1), as if applying for academic mobility programs. Some learners were indeed applying for admission and used the task as an opportunity to practice the necessary skills. The video was then shared on Moodle, which is the academic platform of communication between teachers and students. The second step consisted of posting feedback in a Moodle forum, in which the students had to comment on their colleagues' pitches (Figure 2). The third and final step had the learners write a short self-reflective report (Figure 3) about the task of producing the pitch and receiving peer feedback.

For the EAP teachers, the purpose of this report was to gain insight into the students' perceived benefits. For the learners, it was

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4   As based on the CEFR - Common European Framework of Reference: *https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions.*

to provide them with a moment for reflection upon the experience. The video pitch averaged two minutes, as learners were advised to not exceed the 3-minute mark.

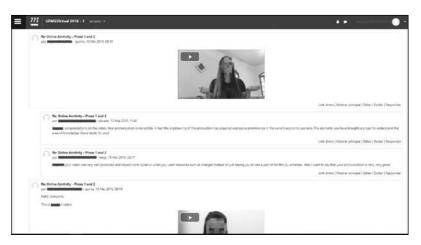*Bárbara Malveira Orfanò*

Elisa Mattos

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Figure 1. Video pitch

Source: Authors' private collection

Figure 2. Online forum

Source: Authors' private collection

Figure 3. Self-reflective report

> **UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE MINAS GERAIS – UFMG**
> **Inglês para Fins Acadêmicos I – 2018/1**
> **Online activity – Self-evaluation**
> Professora: ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮
> Aluna: ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮
>
> This activity was extremely challenging and rewarding. The first adjective refers to my difficulty in summarize the subject of the discipline I have talked about. I often prefer to describe things with a lot of details, because in this way everything gets clear to everybody.
>
> The second adjective refers to the good feeling of "work done". I felt very happy with my video, so I shared it with my family and they were truly proud of me. They didn't understand anything, but I'm the second relative to speak English and I represent an exception.
>
> Last, watch other videos was tremendously positive, because I was able to know better my colleagues and their fields of interest. I also liked to give feedback because to talk about their videos into the context of my life, made me feel closer to them.

Source: Authors' private collection

3.3 Procedures

Collected and analyzed in 2018, the online comments and reflective reports served as our source of analysis. The data were explored according to Bardin's (2011) content analysis procedures, namely: i) pre-analysis aimed at organizing the data and choosing the documents to be analyzed; ii) material exploration for the transformation of raw data into representative information through clipping, grouping, enumerating, encoding, and/or categorizing; and iii) results treatment, the stage in which "the raw results are treated in order to be meaningful and valid" (BARDIN, 2011, p. 131).

With these methodological guidelines in mind, we chose the learners' comments and self-reports as our main platform of investigation. This means that while we did watch all the video pitches, these productions were not included in our exploration. Our interest was in the learners' perceived gains, which could only be measured/observed through their comments in the forum and in the self-reports.

To this end, we carefully inspected the forum posts and the reports, then categorized and grouped overarching themes that emerged from their perceptions about the task. This was followed by an examination of the themes expressed by the learners, based on the theoretical principles adopted in this study: sociocultural theory, identity, agency, motivation, autonomy. Content-wise, our analysis showed the forum comments and the reports as belonging to three general domains: linguistic, academic, and interpersonal, which will be discussed in the next section.

4. Discussion

Although the focus of this study was not to measure the occurrences of each category, it is still worth understanding the role they may have had in students' oral skills development. The linguistic domain refers to statements about learning and/or improving a language-related skill. Language-wise, speaking and pronunciation were the most cited aspects, expectedly. Vocabulary, writing, and grammar were also mentioned, to a lesser extent. Academic domain refers to academic-centered skills; for example, organizing ideas and sharing information. The interpersonal domain is about difficulties faced/perceived by the students (e.g.: insecurity and shyness) and gains they may have had on a more psycho-social level, (e.g.: self-awareness).

Interpersonal aspects of this task had a significant impact on the students' experience while producing the pitch and when receiving peer feedback in the online forum. Table 1 is a summary of the items mentioned by the learners in the self-reports and in the online forum, by frequency of occurrence, followed by a discussion of 37 selected extracts illustrating most of the topics identified in the data.

Table 1. Domains and categories identified

Domains	Categories	Mentions
Linguistic	Pronunciation	45%
	Speaking	38%
	Vocabulary	21%
	Writing	21%
	Grammar	3%
Academic	Organizing ideas	28%
	Sharing information	17%
	Summarizing ideas	17%
	Meaningful activity	14%
	Clarity	7%
Interpersonal	Self-evaluation	45%
	Self-awareness	34%
	Positive reinforcement	31%
	Autonomy	27%
	Constructive criticism	17%
	Insecurity	10%
	Sense of community	7%
	Low anxiety filter	3%

Source: Elaborated by the authors

Bárbara Malveira Orfanò

Elisa Mattos

Lívia Terra

236

4.1 Linguistic domain

In the linguistic domain, the most prevalent characteristic corresponds to speaking, as most students found the task effective for practicing or improving this skill. Not surprisingly, pronunciation follows speaking and is largely mentioned in the self-reports. However, in this regard, learners showed concerns. Many reports indicate that students submitted their videos only after re-watching themselves on screen several times, making adjustments they believed necessary, which we see as meaningful for the learners. The repetition and the changes made prior to uploading the videos made the students more aware of what needed to be practiced. The following extracts are examples of this.

Extracts 1-7

Speaking and pronunciation

1. *This activity was very important to improve not only my **speaking** but also how organize my ideas.*

2. *Making the video pitch helped me to improve my **speaking skills***

3. *This task helped me to improve my **ability to speak** and think in english, because I needed to speak a large text and train the pronunciation of the words I used in the video.*

4. *I will work hard to get the **pronunciation** better. Thank you all!*

5. *Making the video pitch help me to speak with cleary pronunciation and be **more cautious with my pronunciation**, having to re-record the video more than 20 times until achieving the satisfactory result.*

6. *Making the video pitch helped me to **improve my pronunciation** through practice*

7. *I had to **train my pronunciation** and my resourcefulness in front of the camera to correctly pronounce all the words*

Posted in response to a comment in the online forum, Extract 4 acknowledges the help of other students, while Extracts 5-7 depict self-reflections. More specifically in Extract 5, the learner shot the video numerous times. While these repetitions may be language-related, their driving force may have to do with more interpersonal aspects such as motivation and how the learner projects his/her L2 self (cf. DÖRNYEI, 2009; USHIODA; DÖRNYEI, 2012). Additionally, whether through peer feedback or as a result of individual contemplation, learners seem to

have become aware of their gains with the task, as well as points for future improvement. This self-awareness is important in helping them achieve their goals in language learning.

Bárbara	**Extracts 8-9**
Malveira	***Writing***
Orfanò	***8.*** *I believe that making the video Pitch helped me learn to **prepare a script** and then run it*
Elisa Mattos	***9.*** *My experience with online activity was very cool and important to developing some skills such **writing** (because I always write before to*
Lívia Terra	*organize my ideas) and to improve my pronunciation.*

In 2018, learners produced a statement of purpose (SoP) prior to working on the pitch, as if applying for academic mobility programs, and were advised to script their ideas for the video pitch using selected information from the SoP. As will be shown in other extracts, this task's writing benefits are strongly linked to the practice of other skills. Based on the structure and communicative purpose of the pitch, it seems unlikely that a good pitch could be made without a written plan from which to decide on what kind of information should be included. Furthermore, the forum provided a space for CMC interaction among the learners, who had to communicate in writing. This was also the case with the self-reports.

4.2 Academic domain

The academic domain corresponds to skills that permeate the academic environment. Seeing that the main purpose of the English for Academic Purpose courses (IFA) is to prepare undergraduate and graduate students for academic mobility, research-related tasks (e.g.: paper presentations, participation in seminars, and workshops) based on the students' own work has been the cornerstone of IFA. These interests were expressed in the students' self-evaluations. In addition, recording a video about their research interests and history had a positive impact on their motivation.

Extracts 10-12
Meaningful activity
10. *everything that you are teaching us will **help us to deal with situations that will happen when we apply to go abroad.***

*11. I intend to do the doctorate sandwich at the end of my doctorate. The **activity stimulated me enough to move on with this idea**, as well as helping me to realize my vocabulary and grammar difficulties that I need to focus on.*

*12. I am [...] **very happy to know that this English subject can help me with not only about English language, but I can learn about how can I talk about my research...***

In examples 10-12 we can notice that learners recognize the usefulness of the task and demonstrate enjoyment. Accordingly, they state that the task helped them to deal with typical situations in the academic environment.

Extracts 13-16

Organizing and summarizing ideas

*13. The most difficult part of making the video pitch was **organize the script, selecting what was important to say and what was not**, and choosing the best words.*

*14. I need to **improve the text** that I prepared to make the video pitch, **with more important information***

*15. I believe that the easiest thing was to list the subjects that would be covered in the video, but at the same time, the most difficult thing was to **deal with these subjects succinctly***

*16. it helped me to **learn to be succinct**, as we had little time to talk about various subjects*

Retrieved from the self-reports, the above extracts illustrate the need and the difficulty students may have had when organizing ideas and selecting information. As a metacognitive strategy (PRESSLEY, 2002) widely employed in academia, summarizing is more than a means to check understanding and build knowledge. As previously stated, learners were advised to plan the pitch in written form. This recommendation involved selecting key content from the SoP to create an academically adequate pitch. Organizing and summarizing information was thus highly necessary, since the standard academic video pitch tends to last up to 3 minutes only.

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Elisa Mattos

Lívia Terra

240

4.3 Interpersonal domain

This category comprises characteristics related to the learners' individual interests and their perception of success regarding the task. This domain is closely associated with identity and autonomy. The task triggers a process of self-reflection, since learners rely on their own experience to complete it, which may lead them to realise that they are capable of overcoming difficulties and playing to their strengths. As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) observe, people in general tend to be more determined when the social environment supports fundamental needs such as autonomy. By noticing that they are reaching their goals, learners may become more motivated to create new possibilities for academic development.

Extracts 17-18

Identity

17. *I fell so grateful for your answers. I tried to do a video more attractive* **showing the laboratory and the equipment** *because I think that is what they see* **about my course.**

18. *I felt happy with my video, so I shared it with my family and* **they were truly proud of me.** *They didn't understand anything, but* **I'm the second relative to speak English and I represent an exception.**

In Extracts 17 and 18 specks of the learners' identities as researchers can be seen: one learner wanted to show sides of his/her academic life as someone whose L2 skills are viewed as an accomplishment and a reason for pride among his/her relatives. As Paiva (2011) argues, being L2 learners is not the only identity in play in the learning process. As shown here, the students' many social roles intertwine with their L2 selves, outstripping the classroom, in a dynamic process, as described by Bucholtz and Hall (2005).

Extract 19-21

Low anxiety filter, shyness, and insecurity

19. *The online activity of recording the video was a good experience for me, I was able to train my speaking in English in* **a less exposed way.** *Even though I knew my friends would see the video,* **I did not need to be ashamed.**

20. *I would* **try to be more calm and confident** *about what I'm saying.*

21. *Making a video record is unusual and* **speak in front if a camera is not easy.**

In Extract 19, the learner is concerned about feeling exposed when speaking English. This can be linked to Communication Apprehension, a type of anxiety L2 learners experience when they fear not being able to communicate properly (HORWITZ; HORWITZ; COPE, 1986). Communication Apprehension can have a significant impact on learners' performance and can produce undesirable consequences, such as unwillingness to communicate (LIU; JACKSON, 2008) and low oral proficiency (YOUNG, 1986). Several studies have shown that CMC tasks have a positive effect on lowering anxiety (ABRAMS, 2003; BEAVOIS, 1994; PAYNE; WHITNEY, 2002; POZA, 2011).

In this extract, the learner outlines a positive aspect of the online task, which provided a low-anxiety means to interact with peers in the target language, thus confirming the benefits of computer mediation as a filter for anxiety, as seen in this particular case, in which students could assess their speech and make any adjustments necessary before sharing the video, giving them more control over the communication process and lowering the feeling of being exposed.

Extracts 20 and 21 are examples of how emotions are intimately connected to the language learning process. In extract 20, the student reveals lacking certain feelings that are perceived to be important. Extract 19 does not express a particular emotion, although it seems to be related to insecurity or shyness. MacIntyre (2002) claims that emotions play a key role in motivation, and feelings such as inhibition might lead to unwillingness to communicate.

Aragão (2011) argues that negative feelings, such as fear of making mistakes and/or being judged, are frequently related to beliefs about so-called ideal L2 speakers, which can intimidate learners and limit their willingness to communicate. As students acknowledge the effect of feelings in the learning process, different strategies can be applied to help them to overcome their negative influence.

> **Extracts 22-25**
> ***Self-awareness and autonomy***
> *22. I believe that the best of the activity was to be able to hear me after recording;* ***I had idea of where I need to improve my speech to be more understanding.***
> *23. Making the video pitch helped me [...] to* ***think about myself, my qualities*** *and think about how I can convince someone that I am the right person to get the job, or the study program.*

Bárbara
Malveira
Orfanò

Elisa Mattos

Lívia Terra

*24. The activity development has a huge meaning of individual effort because **I challenged myself to draw up a text, study the pronunciations and expose all this in an academic way**.*

*25. I recorded the video several times and **in each new video my pronunciation was improving. I was able to go back and fix my mistakes**, this was good because I had not seen some of them at the first time.*

It can be noticed here that autonomy played a significant part in this task. Indeed, as illustrated in table 1, the students often refer to autonomy, self-evaluation, and self-awareness as the task's main benefits in the interpersonal domain. With autonomy seen as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (BENSON, 2001, p. 48), the learners seem to be aware of what they need to do to improve their oral skills and achieve their goals.

In Weyden's (1991) terms, this refers to *learning how to learn*: when one is aware of the areas that need improvement, one can then manage his/her own learning by choosing the more suitable strategies for those needs, which is what Extracts 22-25 indicate. This means that being successful in an L2 can therefore trigger confidence and increase motivation.

Extract 26-34

Positive reinforcement and constructive criticism

*26. Loved your pitch! **Congratulations!** Your pronunciation is great and very fast! **Harvard waits for you***

*27. **Really interesting** all the things you want to do outside as well as the things you already done and still do here. **Congrats :)***

*28. You have done a lot of things, **I'm really impressed! You will go far! Congrats!***

*29. **Congratulations!** Your pronunciation is clear and you said some different things about you, **it's interesting.** I didn't know you had started tourism. **Cool!***

*30. **Very cool!!** I've never been in an orchestra, it must be wonderful! **Congratulations!***

*31. **Wow**, I'm not even sure if you are a natural brazilian, you have a very good pronunciation. Nice video and **good luck at Harvard :)***

*32. **I would suggest that** you choose a neutral background to minimize distractions and make your video pitch **even better**. Good Luck.*

*33. I really liked your video. The pronunciation is clear and well developed. **Why don't you think about** recording straight without cuts? **I think you are able to do that!***

*34. I just think **the audio could be a little better. But that did not ruin the quality of the video** and yours pronunciation. Congratulations!*

The above extracts are examples of positive reinforcement and constructive criticism identified in the forum exchanges, in which the students commented on their performances, offering suggestions for improvement. In a highly competitive world as academia (CARSON; BARTNECK; VOGES, 2013), it is quite refreshing to see cooperation and healthy peer-to-peer feedback. Not only do the suggestions sound genuinely positive, but they also entail some sort of compliment. As Holmes (1988) explains, *praise* involves giving someone credit for an achievement. In *make your video pitch even better*, for instance, it is already implied that the pitch was good. The same applies to *the audio could be a little better*.

As for *criticism*, Hyland's (2000) definition refers to faulty aspects of one's language production and is different from *suggestion*, which Hyland and Hyland (2001, p. 186) define as "an explicit recommendation for remediation, [...] sometimes referred to as *constructive criticism*." In the extracts, the learners phrase their observations in a positive light, adequately employing the language of suggestions, either more directly (*I would suggest that*), or more indirectly (*Why don't you* and the modal auxiliary *could* in *the audio could be better*). With these hedged comments, we see the learners' pragmatic competence in play as they employ these politeness strategies to save face (cf. BROWN; LEVINSON, 1987). Finally, it is also worth noting that the constructive criticism is strongly associated with positive reinforcement.

Extracts 35-37

Sense of community

*35. I really enjoyed your video and knowing that, **just like me**, you're in a city that is not your hometown.*

*36. Watch other videos was tremendously positive, because **I was able to know better my colleagues and their fields of interest**. I also liked to give feedback because to talk about their videos into the context of my life **made me feel closer to them**.*

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*37. I lost some of my shyness about talking in english doing the activity, especially watching of videos of my colleagues and reading their comments, because it helped me realize **it's not just me trying to speak in English** and make some mistakes it's normal.*

These extracts show that the task seems to have fostered a sense of community among the students, creating a supportive space As learners discussed concerns and struggles with the online task, they learned more about each other, perhaps more than they would have in the classroom, by sharing academic interests and commenting on the videos. As a result, personal relationships may have flourished or strengthened. As seen in Sun and Yang (2013), the social dimension of learning is often strengthened in the digital environment. This, in turn, can lead to collaborative knowledge construction. The sense of community observed in the extracts helped to increase communication and cooperation among learners, as well as their academic motivation, in agreement with the findings of Rovai (2002) and Royal and Rossi (1996).

5. Concluding remarks

This paper has reported on the experience of Brazilians learners from an EAP course, focusing on online academic short presentations (i.e.: video pitch). Having as data students' comments in an online forum and their self-reflection reports, we observed the ways in which this task contributed to fostering oral academic skills. First, the comments were categorized in three domains: linguistic, academic, and interpersonal. Recurrent topics in each category were investigated, supported by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory premises and the concepts of autonomy, identity, agency, and motivation.

In the context of EAP, our analysis suggests that learners were able to identify their strengths and weaknesses, to develop strategies aligned with their specific language needs and to take charge of their own learning processes. By engaging in L2 practices, reflecting on their learning, and using effective learning strategies, learners can take advantage of the linguistic affordances in their environment to become (more) autonomous. Being aware of what needs improvement and taking action according to one's own needs paves the way for long-lasting learning. From a teacher's perspective, it was interesting to observe students' main difficulties and how they found solutions to minimize or overcome these difficulties.

As we have shown in this paper, video pitches require several skills, of which oral competence plays a central role, since it is mainly through speech that the message is largely conveyed in this genre. Our study acknowledges the potential of using computer-mediated communication in EAP classes, suggesting that other teachers can replicate and/or adapt this experience to different teaching scenarios, producing interesting insights in EAP learning.

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250

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