Fostering Engagement with VoiceThread in Online Intermediate Spanish Language Classes

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Introduction

It is estimated that more than 1.5 billion students have been affected during the course of the global coronavirus pandemic by school and university closures (UNESCO). This historic disruption and the subsequent processes of transition and recovery, which are still ongoing, have significantly altered the education landscape. Although most schools and universities have reopened, educators are faced with numerous challenges, among them adapting to a new normal where online instruction is increasingly and perhaps permanently a part of our instructional environment.

In the authors' own instructional context, a majority of foreign language majors are now attending classes fully online. In their institution's Spanish program, 82% of majors are fully online students, and this number rises to 87% when it comes to majors in the French program[1]. Thus, finding ways to build a strong online class learning experience becomes a crucial endeavor.

Further, student retention is a major concern for universities, and a lack of one-on-one interaction with their peers and instructors is often a reason for dropping online courses (Delmas), so fostering interaction and student engagement become major factors for the retention of students in online courses.

How do we build and foster communication, interaction, and a sense of community when we do not see each other in person? One of the challenges for the authors was to explore ways and tools to keep interacting in these online classrooms as physical virtual spaces to feel connected. Specifically, the present study aims to assess what is the best tool to develop and practice communicative language skills (speaking, reading, writing, and listening) in asynchronous online Spanish courses at the intermediate level of language proficiency.

The findings of this study show that a majority of students had a positive experience using VoiceThread in their intermediate level online Spanish courses. Most students reported an increased level of comfort with their use of communicative skills in Spanish after using the tool in their classes, and a majority of participants considered that using it helped their Spanish proficiency. In addition, a majority of participants considered that interacting with their peers in Spanish through the VoiceThread assignments made the online class experience better.

The research findings may be helpful to researchers, educators, and program directors in other disciplines, as the tool that the authors used, VoiceThread, and the activities that they designed may be compatible with other content and class formats.

Tool Selection: Why VoiceThread?

During COVID-19 and before the pandemic the need to engage students with other classmates to practice conversation and to participate in discussion in the target language allowed instructors to seek for interactive applications in learning communicative outcomes in the languages. The authors reviewed several options and apps such as Rosetta Stone, Duolingo, Babel, Transparent Language, and Rocket Spanish. Whereas these apps supported learning vocabulary and pronunciation, they did not allow interactions between students.

Among the apps that offered useful collaboration tools were Padlet, Zoom, Bongo, and VoiceThread. The free version of Zoom allowed for discussions of up to 40 minutes,

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[1] Internal departmental data as of Fall 2022.

but it only supported synchronous interactions. Bongo, Padlet, and VoiceThread facilitated asynchronous participation, which fit the format of the courses. Further, Padlet is free to use, but the layout makes engagement and interaction challenging, and it is perhaps better suited for text discussions. For these reasons, the final selection was between Bongo and VoiceThread to design engaging language content courses. However, students had only basic access to Bongo within the learning management system (LMS) and to upgrade it required an extra cost for them. On the other hand, VoiceThread was included as an external learning tool. It was free for up to five discussions, and facilitated the access to transient students from other universities just by creating a group link in the VoiceThread portal, and links were shared or embedded in the courses with the purpose to foster communication, interaction and a sense of community. For the purpose of this study, the authors chose VoiceThread.

Empirical research constitutes the largest part of the secondary literature in VoiceThread, and the focus is its application in higher education language classrooms, where VoiceThread was used in various fields. It is a multimodal web tool with video recording, voice recording, and text (https://voicethread.com). The VoiceThread platform includes video-tutorials not only in English but also in the Spanish language. It can be embedded into various learning management systems (LMS). Its accessibility allows students and instructors to upload videos, PowerPoint slides, and documents and interact synchronously or asynchronously (Shuch et al.).

Learners can access VoiceThread from the cloud server through a smartphone, tablet, desktop or laptop (Bickle and Ryan). Research indicates that as a multimodal computer mediated communication tool, VoiceThread is adaptable to various learning settings, content topics, and academic levels, as well as in different Spanish speaking countries (Arellano). Even though it was not originally designed as an educational application, "VoiceThread presents pedagogical affordances that have ensured increasing use in educational settings, especially, in language teaching and learning" (Bodis et al. 3; Brunyard and Byrd qtd. in Kirby and Hulan 90). Furthermore, in 2022 VoiceThread offered an Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) certification in response to the United States Law (2015) and to the needs of the pandemic, to facilitate tools that help educators identify the needs and strategies for students' success in reaching outcomes across the board (https://voicethread.com).

VoiceThread: Strengths and Challenges

One of the affordances of VoiceThread is that it is an asynchronous and multimodal web based tool to enhance teaching and learning language communicative skills. Studies prior to the pandemic discussed how the evolution of social media permits to go beyond just reading static to engaging more interactively (Deters, Cuthrell and Stapleton; Rojas). They also recognized that college students today are more technologically familiar with social software such as MySpace, Facebook, Wikipedia, blogs, or collaborative tools such as Padlet.

Studies at different learning settings addressed the importance of engagement. For example, in a study at Open Universities Australia, Chen and Bogachenko focused their investigation on enhancing online students' social interactions. According to their study, online learning should facilitate personalized, meaningful, and stimulating engagement, collaboration and critical thinking. Other findings demonstrated that

multimodal communication created an inclusive discourse that brought participants closer by following up discussions. In another study, Erickson pointed out that communication happens while students can begin to "see" and "hear" each other in their conversations by augmenting the student's presence, collaboration, and community. Further, Brunvand and Byrd's research focuses on the pedagogical engagement while activating learning (28) in different fields, such as Languages Arts, Science, Mathematics, or Social Sciences (31-33). Similarly, Ching and Hsu discussed the importance of engagement, as "collaborative learning designed to increase student interaction enhances social presence among participants and helps motivate and sustain learning" (299).

Due to the asynchronous participation, VoiceThread facilitated an online collaborative learning, engagement, social presence, and positive interactions with and between students to create a community (Chen and Bogachenko; Ching and Hsu; Deters; Kumi-Yeboah; Mejia; Brunvand and Byrd; Glick; and Mango). Flexibility was an important factor in the asynchronous learning environment, in particular during the pandemic "when many students may not have enough time, mental or physical energy, or capabilities to adhere to strict deadlines" (Erickson). Overall, flexibility allowed students space and autonomy to prepare and reflect on meaningful and engaged discussions.

VoiceThread was also applied to language classrooms since it provided an asynchronous space to practice communicative skills. In the online classes, VoiceThread allowed for the creation of a more "realistic environment that encourages participation and affords spontaneity that ensures originality of ideas" (Ching and Hsu 302; Brunvand and Byrd 32; Mango 37). Further, Shuch, Esposito and Gross claimed that it encouraged "engagement and transition to independent student learning" (83). In the Spanish language classrooms, Castañeda examined the improvement in conversational settings in second language acquisition. Bringing VoiceThread to the classroom as a collaborative, cloud-based tool, allowed users to share content and promoted a collaborative and engaging environment that helped "students to feel safe to speak the language" (Delmas). The online learning community became a safe space to express and discuss their thoughts in the Spanish language. VoiceThread also met the needs of the pandemic times to improve communicative engagement and learning outcomes in the Spanish language classrooms. Thus, to foster communication, interactions in small groups allowed them to have a sense of friendship and community.

However, research on VoiceThread identified two important constraints. The first had to do with how to design students' interactions. One of the challenges of asynchronous online learning is that students disconnect and may not always produce the same level of dynamics as a synchronous interaction. Erickson discussed how implementing effective teaching strategies promotes student engagement and motivation. This requires the instructor to design clear guided learning practices that align with the use of a multimodal technology. Glick and Mango proposed a rubric to evaluate the use of language, i.e., when learning subjunctive as one of the difficult grammar subjects or when assessing pre and post listening comprehension. The communicative rubric enhanced intrinsic motivation (communication success, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency). Their results demonstrated achieving language outcomes when practicing in VoiceThread (Glick 105; Mango 43). This was taken into consideration by the authors during the design phase of the class discussion assignments that participants were asked to complete for the study. In order to address the first challenge, the authors designed a

set of clear guided activities for each class that promoted engagement and interaction among peers, but that did not require synchronous communication. Students reacted to the same prompts initially in their own time, and responded to their classmates' posts over a set number of days so that they were still part of the same discussion.

The second challenge that came up in the research was technical problems. VoiceThread lacks any editing features for audio and video recording as Vidgrid or Camtasia. Instead, the only option for correcting errors or refining recordings is deleting the audio or re-doing the video-recording of the material. Thus, on one hand, technology frustrated students due to being too time-consuming. On the other hand, students practiced the language skills as a drill while redoing the videos. Although technical problems can be difficult to predict or prevent because they sometimes depend on students' computer access or their Internet connection, the authors addressed this challenge by simplifying the discussion tasks so that they did not require video or audio editing on the part of the participants, but that focused instead on spontaneous recording and posting. This also helped with engagement and peer interaction in the target language.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The authors' initial motivation was to find the most suitable and affordable tool that would allow students to develop and practice communicative language skills (speaking, reading, writing, and listening) in asynchronous online Spanish classes. After a review of available options, the VoiceThread platform was selected for this purpose and a series of class discussions were incorporated using this tool.

The purpose of the current study was to have students use the VoiceThread tool to practice their communicative language skills in Spanish and to reflect on their experience after having used the tool over the course of a semester. Specifically, the research questions were:

1. How do students describe their experience using VoiceThread in their online Spanish classes?

2. How do students consider that using VoiceThread helps their language proficiency in the Spanish language?

3. How do students perceive that interacting with their classmates in Spanish using VoiceThread impacts the online class experience?

Methods
Context

The participants in this research study were college students taking intermediate Spanish language courses at a public comprehensive regional university in the United States' Southeast. For this study, two fully asynchronous online courses were selected whose instructors incorporated the use of VoiceThread in their online Spanish courses.

One of the courses was an intermediate level Spanish grammar class, where students were asked to respond to prompts and interact with each other over a series of four VoiceThread class discussions targeting different grammatical structures, designed as open-ended prompts that would allow students to incorporate their personal opinions and experiences. The other course was an intermediate level content class that was an Introduction to Hispanic Literature, in which students engaged in discussions five times

per semester – in text and audio formats – to discuss ideas, themes, and arguments on VoiceThread. The purpose of using VoiceThread responded to students' interest for engagement in an asynchronous reading based class.

After having engaged in class discussions using the VoiceThread platform throughout the course of the term, students in each class were invited to complete the survey.

Participants

Twenty students enrolled in two fully online intermediate Spanish courses volunteered to participate in the study, out of 36 enrolled, a response rate of 55%. Eighteen surveys were retained for analysis, grouped in one sample, after removing surveys that were incomplete or from dual enrollment students younger than 18 years of age.

Among the participants, eight listed Spanish as their major and five listed a double major in Spanish and French; the other participants listed various other majors, such as psychology, criminal justice, health sciences, political sciences, and business, with two of them declaring a minor in Spanish.

Thirty-nine percent of the participants identified as male and 61% identified as female. For 61% of the participants English was their first language, for 22% Spanish was their first language, and the remaining 17% reported other first languages, including Hebrew and Lao. With regards to age, 23.5% of participants were in the 18 – 24 range, 29% were between 25 – 34 years old, 23.5% between 35 – 44, 12% between 45 – 54, and 12% were between 55 – 64 years of age.

All participants reported using different applications to practice their Spanish language skills prior to the study, among them Rosetta Stone, Duolingo, and Babel, with the frequency of use ranging from once a semester to several times a week. Half of the participants reported using other tools to improve their communicative skills, with the focus mainly being listening skills. Among the resources they listed were Memrise, Babel, YouTube Podcasts, and Spanish learning podcasts such as Españolistos, Learn Spanish and Go, No Hay Tos, and more. Some participants also reported using Google Translate and Discord in the target language.

Data Collection and Analysis

The participants completed the survey online during the last two weeks of the course. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics and included ten demographic questions about the students' background, four questions about their previous experience using VoiceThread or other apps to practice their Spanish language skills, and ten specific questions about their experience using VoiceThread during the current semester, either in their language class, Intermediate Spanish Grammar, or their content class, Introduction to Hispanic Literature.

For this mixed methods study, the authors used the data transformation approach (Creswell) to analyze the survey data, which allowed for the comparison of the quantitative data from the close-ended survey questions with the qualitative data from the open-ended survey questions.

Results

A majority of the participants in the study described their experience using VoiceThread in their online Spanish classes as a positive experience. Participants considered their comfort level using communicative skills in Spanish before and after using VoiceThread, as well as whether they perceived that using the platform in their classes helped their language proficiency in the target language, and whether interacting with their peers in Spanish through VoiceThread made the online class experience better. In addition, participants discussed their challenges with VoiceThread and offered suggestions for improvement.

The following section presents the findings and answers to each of the research questions. At times, some participants chose not to answer one or more of the survey questions and the number of respondents to each of the questions is stated in each section and table.

1. Students' Overall Experience Using VoiceThread

In order to answer the first research question, 'How do students describe their experience using VoiceThread in their online Spanish classes?', two survey questions specifically asked participants to share their overall experience with VoiceThread and to identify any challenges they faced while using the platform in their online Spanish courses. In addition, a survey question asked participants whether they would recommend VoiceThread to other students to practice communicative skills in Spanish based on their experience, and gave them an option to elaborate through written comments. Table 1 shows results from the 16 participants who answered this survey question.

Table 1. Students' Overall Experience Using VoiceThread (n = 16)

Overall Experience Using VoiceThread	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	12	75
Neutral	3	18.75
Negative	1	6.25

Table 1 shows that 12 (75%) participants reported having an overall positive experience using VoiceThread in their online Spanish courses. Only one participant (6.25%) reported having a negative experience, and three participants (18.75%) were neutral about their experience with the tool. The participant who reported having an overall negative experience encountered technical problems posting to the discussion board and did not have a good experience with the VoiceThread support center.

Among the participants who reported having an overall positive experience, the most frequent comments discussed advantages of being able to see and hear their classmates, how helpful it was for peer interaction, and the tool's ease of use. In addition, some comments focused on how practicing often made the experience less intimidating. Some sample comments from some of the participants are shared below.

Positive

"It was great! Voice Thread was easy to use, and I enjoyed being able to see my classmates and hear their voices."

"It was great. It was good to be able to hear my Spanish improve and be able to hear other students' responses to discussion posts instead of reading them. I feel it was a better way to interact with my peers versus the traditional discussion posts."
Neutral
"It was okay."
Negative
"i had a lot of trouble posting a discussion board on VoiceThread, the support center wasn't very helpful."

Another survey question asked participants about any technical problems experienced while using VoiceThread in their online Spanish classes. A majority of the participants reported experiencing none. Out of 17 respondents to the question, 12 (70.59%) did not experience any problems with the platform, whereas 5 (29.41%) did report experiencing technical issues at times. Out of the five students who reported encountering technical problems, two did not offer comments elaborating on the issue, but the other three mentioned (1) the need for a more direct line of technical support in the platform, (2) better technical instructions on how to participate in the discussion from a different school's account, and (3) the desire for VoiceThread to be more user-friendly.

Finally, a survey question asked participants whether they would recommend the use of VoiceThread to other Spanish learners to practice communicative skills. Table 2 summarizes the responses from the 17 respondents to this survey question.

Table 2. Students' Recommendation of VoiceThread for Practice of Communicative Skills in Spanish (n = 17)

Would / Would not recommend VoiceThread to practice communicative skills in Spanish	Frequency	Percentage
Would recommend	15	88.23
Wouldn't recommend	2	11.77

Out of the 17 students who answered this survey question, 15 (88.23%) of them said that they would recommend VoiceThread to other students for practicing communicative skills in Spanish, while 2 (11.77%) students said that they would not recommend its use to other students.

The reasons given by the two students who said that they would not recommend the tool to other students were similar. One of them regretted that VoiceThread "does not have live chats" and the other said that their recommendation would be instead "to use a live, in-person or online partner". In contrast, that same reason was mentioned by another student who said that they would recommend the tool: "I prefer to use VoiceThread instead of TalkAbroad and Linguameeting. Having to meet with a stranger and have live conversations does not help with my anxiety. With VoiceThread, I feel I have more control since it is free and it is not live."

2. Students' Self-Perception of Improvement
In order to answer the second research question, 'How do students consider that using VoiceThread helped their language proficiency in the Spanish language?', two survey

questions asked participants to consider and rate their comfort level using communicative skills in Spanish before and after using VoiceThread in their online Spanish courses. In addition, another survey question asked participants whether they perceived that using the platform in their classes helped their language proficiency in Spanish, and gave them an option to elaborate on their response through written comments.

Table 3 shows how all 18 participants reported their comfort level with using their communicative skills in Spanish before and after using VoiceThread in their online Spanish courses.

Table 3. Students' Comfort Level Using Communicative Skills in Spanish (n = 18)

Comfort level using communicative skills in Spanish	Frequency		Percentage	
	Before Using VoiceThread	After Using VoiceThread	Before Using Voice Thread	After Using VoiceThread
Comfortable	9	14	50	77.78
Neutral	3	1	16.67	5.55
Uncomfortable	6	3	33.33	16.67

As can be seen in Table 3, 9 (50%) students reported feeling comfortable with their use of communicative skills in Spanish before using VoiceThread in their online Spanish classes. After using VoiceThread, the level of comfort increased to 14 (77.78%) students. In addition, out of the 3 (16.67%) participants who felt neither comfortable nor uncomfortable with their language skills, only 1 (5.55%) remained neutral after using VoiceThread in class discussions, while the other two reported feeling comfortable with their language skills after using the tool. Further, out of the 6 (33.33%) students who felt uncomfortable with their communicative skills before using the tool, half of them reported an increased level of comfort after using VoiceThread.

Participants were also specifically asked whether they considered that using VoiceThread in their online Spanish classes had helped them gain language proficiency in the target language, and asked them to explain their responses through written comments. Table 4 summarizes the responses of the 15 students who answered this survey question.

Table 4. Students' Perception of VoiceThread as Helpful to Spanish Proficiency (n = 15)

VoiceThread as Helpful / Unhelpful to Gaining Proficiency in Spanish	Frequency	Percentage
Helpful	13	86.67
Neutral	0	0
Unhelpful	2	13.33

As Table 4 shows, most students considered that using VoiceThread in their online Spanish class helped them gain language proficiency in the Spanish language. Out of 15 students who responded to this survey question, 13 (86.67%) of them reported that VoiceThread had helped their Spanish proficiency, while 2 (13.33%) students considered that it had not. No students were neutral on the matter.

Regarding how VoiceThread was helpful to their Spanish proficiency, most frequently mentioned among the responses were listening skills and listening comprehension -whether listening to different speakers or listening to themselves and being able to self-correct-, getting practice presenting solely in Spanish, planning out what to say, introducing new vocabulary, learning from different perspectives, and practice asking and answering questions. Some samples are shared below.

"Using in this class VoiceThread helped me gain more language proficiency because I was able to practice what I was learning by responding to prompts and also responding to others."

"I was able to listen to myself and perfect any mishaps in my fluency. Whether I needed to slow down or simply change something in my post or response because it did not make sense grammatically."

"Using Voice Thread meant that I listened critically to each recording and rerecorded my discussion multiple times, trying for better pronunciation and smoother flow of speech. Voice Thread allowed me to listen to a variety of Spanish accents and dialects from my classmates. I learned new phrases and sounds from my classmates, and it reinforced some of my previous pronunciation lessons. It also was beneficial, because I became better at understanding spoken Spanish in a range of different voices--before, I had some difficulty understanding Spanish spoken by a low-pitched voice."

Of the two students who considered VoiceThread to be unhelpful to their Spanish proficiency, only one provided comments as to why. The participant did not consider that the tool was challenging enough for their purposes, which were to improve their speaking skills:

"VT did not do much to improve my language proficiency because it does not involve live and direct conversation. Having the ability to write and record a video/audio before posting it makes it less challenging."

3. Students' Perception of VoiceThread's Impact on the Online Class Experience

In order to answer the third research question, 'How do students perceive that interacting with their classmates in Spanish using VoiceThread impacts the online class experience?', a survey question specifically asked students whether they considered that interacting with their classmates in Spanish through VoiceThread made the online class experience better, and asked them to expand on why or why not through written comments. Table 5 summarizes the responses of the 17 participants who answered this survey question.

Table 5. Students' Perception of VoiceThread's Impact on Online Class Experience (n = 17)

Impact of Peer Interaction through VoiceThread on Online Class Experience	Frequency	Percentage
Made the online class experience better	16	94.12
Neutral	0	0
Made the online class experience worse	1	5.88

Out of 17 respondents, 16 (94.12%) students considered that interacting with their classmates in Spanish through their VoiceThread assignments made the online class experience better, while 1 (5.88%) student considered that it did not. No respondents were neutral on the matter. Students were also asked to explain their answer through written comments. Some of the recurring themes were the advantages of student interaction, greater engagement in the class and with the subject, exposure to different kinds of Spanish, being able to practice different communicative skills in the same assignment, and building a sense of community. Some sample comments are shared below.

"I enjoyed seeing my classmates' faces as they spoke, and it gave a greater sense of connection in this class."

"I get to see videos, listen to audios, and also read."

"I do think it helped the class seem more connected and you got to know the students a little better based on opinions and comments added."

"I like being able to hear different people speak Spanish because everyone does not speak the same. for example Some speak faster some slower so it helps."

"It made it better because I have anxiety. Since the interaction is asynchronous, it was comfortable for me. Since I did not have a lot of anxiety, I was able to focus on learning the subject."

Additional Findings
Students' Preferred Format for Class Discussions
In response to an open-ended survey question that asked participants about their preferred format for class discussions based on their experience in these and other classes, 16 students wrote comments expressing their preference for the use of audio and video recording in class discussions, their preference for text-only discussions, or both. Table 6 summarizes the responses to this survey question.

Table 6. Students' Preferred Format for Class Discussions (n = 16)

Preferred Format for Class Discussions	Frequency	Percentage
Voice and audio	12	75
Text-only	2	12.5

Both	2	12.5

As can be seen in Table 6, most participants who answered this question expressed a preference for voice and audio class discussions. Out of 16 respondents to this question, 12 (75%) of them said that they preferred class discussions that incorporated voice and audio recordings, while 2 (12.5%) said they preferred text-only discussions, and 2 (12.5%) said that they liked discussions that incorporate both options.

The main reasons given by the participants who expressed a preference for voice and audio class discussions were the ability to interact and practice their communicative skills with classmates, an exposure to different paces, accents, and fluency in the target language, and a more personal interaction with their peers. Below are some sample comments from the participants.

"I prefer voice and audio. It feels more personable and interactive. I feel like I get to know my classmates better when I can see and hear them."

"I do prefer using voice and audio recording to text-only for class discussions. It was a high point in the class to prepare my recordings, and I enjoyed the practice speaking."

"Yes, because with language, it is communicated in various forms, and in a real setting, relying only on text is not realistic. Voice and audio is what makes up the majority of conversation."

"Yes, people speak at different paces and with differing accents, so just reading is not sufficient to become fluent in Spanish."

The two students who expressed preference for text-only discussions offered the following comments to explain their preference, related to technology and language concerns.

"The homework was easy to do but how to use it was the harder part."

"To be honest, I prefer text-only for class discussions but at the same time I recognize that the voice/audio recording allows a more well-rounded experience especially for students who are not as proficient in the target language."

Finally, the two students who preferred class discussions that incorporate options for both audio and video recording as well as text mentioned targeting different skills through different kinds of posts, and a preference for recording over synchronous meetings. Their comments are shared below.

"I like both. Texting helps me with reading comprehension in the target language and audio helps with listening comprehension."

"I like voice, audio, and text. I do not like recording videos too much but I'd rather do video recordings than live virtual meetings."

Students' Suggestions for Improvement

In response to an open-ended survey question that asked participants what would have made their experience with VoiceThread better, 12 students wrote comments offering suggestions for improvement. Some of the main recurring themes that emerged from the written comments were related to technology issues, such as platform access, integration of the external tool into the LMS, technical problems with recording and uploading posts, and difficulties with using some discussion features. In addition, some participants

discussed costs and others made suggestions about the content and focus of the class discussions. Some of the suggestions that participants made are shared below.

"I think giving students a heads-up on the technical aspect of how to work with someone else's (like a school) account would be helpful."

"a more direct line of support for technical difficulties."

"I wish VT was a little more user friendly. Also, when I wanted to use certain features, it required payment. As a cheapskate, I did not like that."

"A weekly discussion over a specific topic (rather than just commenting on the week's lecture) will create much more depth and interest in the participation."

Discussion

The results show that a majority of participants (75%) had a positive experience using VoiceThread in their intermediate level online Spanish courses. Overall, students appreciated seeing and hearing their classmates, enjoyed interacting with their peers, and they found using the tool easy. Although at times some participants (29.41%) experienced technical problems, most participants (88.23%) said that they would recommend the tool to other students to practice communicative skills in Spanish. Although the two students (11.77%) who said they would not recommend VoiceThread to others mentioned their preference for live chats, in-person or online conversation partners, other students said that the asynchronous nature of the VoiceThread discussions helped their learning, whether because it helped them manage their anxiety or because it allowed them "time to think before responding". This seems to echo Erickson's research, which found that flexibility in the asynchronous classroom affords learners space and freedom to prepare and reflect on meaningful and engaged discussions.

Most students (77.78%) reported an increased level of comfort with their use of communicative skills in Spanish after using VoiceThread in their classes, and a majority of participants (86.67%) considered that using VoiceThread helped their Spanish proficiency. Overall, students found that VoiceThread was helpful to their listening skills, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and speaking practice. They mentioned that the multimodal discussions helped them visualize the content, added new vocabulary to their conversational repertoire, and helped them practice to ask and answer questions. This coincides with Castañeda's research, where an improvement in conversational settings was observed with the use of VoiceThread in the Spanish classroom.

In addition, a majority of participants (94.12%) considered that interacting with their peers in Spanish through the VoiceThread assignments made the online class experience better. Overall, students appreciated the student-to-student interaction, felt a greater engagement in the class and with the content, experienced different Spanish accents, and practiced different communicative skills in the same assignment. Students also mentioned feeling a sense of connection or community through the multimodal assignments, where "being able to see (...) classmates and hear their voices" and "seeing (...) classmates' faces as they spoke (...) gave a greater sense of connection". Erickson also found that when students begin to see and hear each other in their conversations, learners' presence, collaboration, and community increases. This supports other research which found that VoiceThread helps facilitate an online environment where

collaborative learning, engagement, social presence, and positive interactions between students is possible and builds community (Chen & Bogachenko; Ching and Hsu; Deters; Kumi-Yeboah; Mejia).

Study Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this study was the small sample size. The study findings reflect the results from two intermediate level online Spanish classes over the course of a single semester in the same university. Future efforts could expand the research to more classes, other language proficiency levels, additional target languages, and different institutions. Another advantage of this expansion would be the ability to conduct a more thorough data analysis that could consider factors such as participants' gender, age, experience with technology and different applications, among others.

In addition, because this research study used self-reported data from student surveys, it is admittedly limited in the perspective it provides and the scope of its claims about the use of the technology. Because students' perception of improvement can be subjective, future research may include interviews or another type of assessment of the participants' levels of language proficiency before and after using VoiceThread.

Further, a collaboration with other colleagues could provide insight into how different instructors use the same tool to frame similar or different kinds of assignments and to what outcomes.

Implications and Suggestions for Instructors

Possible suggestions for peer instructors who are considering the use of VoiceThread may be to focus on preparing a course orientation on VoiceThread features and how students will be using the app during the course. Also, for the first week, students could introduce themselves to practice on audio and voice features and clear instructions. After these attempts, future prompts and instructions could be improved before students engage in content and become more confident using the technology.

Regarding technical issues, this study's participants recommended clear instructions, a direct line of technical support, and clear information about the features included in the free version of the VoiceThread platform. To this respect, instructors should investigate before the semester begins whether their institution gives access to the external learning tool, since there are extra costs for the tool if some LMS do not include VoiceThread. Currently, the free version of VoiceThread supports up to five class discussions. If the university LMS external learning tools does not include VoiceThread, an option would be to create a course link in VoiceThread, add participants, and share the course link with students.

The results of this study further support the significance of student engagement to create an inclusive and communicative asynchronous classroom. Participants engaged in discussions in the Spanish language at different levels of interaction and language use. They had social presence in small groups to interact in the target language. Thus, participants created a flexible learning community to promote effective and open conversations (Chen & Bogachenko; Ching and Hsu; Deters; Kumi-Yeboah; Mejia).

To conclude, as in the realm of empirical research and the pandemic context, foreign language communicative interactions were achieved through the video and voice tools found in VoiceThread. Participants enjoyed connections and interactions as an

important factor in their wellbeing, as seen in the results. It was important to them to see their classmates' faces and hear their voices to feel connected to their peers and the class.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, changes in the instructional landscape, and drawbacks inherent to incorporating new technology to the online classroom, fostering an environment that focuses on enjoyment and engagement in the language learning journey is an achievable goal.

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