An Alternative to the Language Laboratory: Online and Face-to-Face Conversation Groups

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Abstract

An alternative approach to the language laboratory may foster much needed additional communicative practice for foreign language learners to achieve higher levels of oral proficiency. This study proposes an alternative language laboratory experience that promotes communication and practice of oral language skills. This study investigated second language students’ perceptions about an alternative approach to the language laboratory requirement in their Spanish intermediate courses. Students participated in conversation hours online through Second Life and face-to-face as a laboratory requirement.

Introduction

Opportunities to develop oral proficiency in the traditional language classroom are very limited as college language courses usually only meet between three and four hours each week. The language laboratory is usually where students go to reinforce and practice what is learned in the classroom. However, this experience may have limited value as language laboratories were designed with audio-lingual applications inspired by the late 19th century study of phonetics (MacDonald, 2011). Students work on computerized repetitive drills for listening,
reading, and grammar with no opportunity for interpersonal communication or social interaction. This format is not sufficient to promote the development of communicative competence. Further, and as suggested by Weyers (2010), students learning foreign languages need more hours of language exposure and instruction than the typical college curriculum provides.

Virtual environments, or multi-user virtual, (MUVEs) web-based, three-dimensional, immersive environments offer virtual innovative platforms as a means to communicate, including a text-based and voice-based chat (Bell & Trueman, 2008). Findings of previous studies in the area of virtual environments and language learning have shown the potential for using this technology in promoting language learning (e.g., Deutschmann, Panichi, & Molka-Danielsen, 2009; Diehl & Prins, 2008; Shih & Yang, 2008; Shively, 2010; Von der Emde, Schenider, & Kötter, 2001; Wang, Song, Xia, & Yan, 2009). McDonald (2011) proposes the implementation of a virtual language laboratory without one specific location that provides students with the assistive technological tools to enhance the L2 learning experience. Virtual environments can provide the tools and capabilities to promote communicative practice for distance learners, or a virtual language laboratory to complement courses on campus.

A review of the literature revealed a lack of research regarding students’ perceptions about face-to-face versus online conversational practice. Therefore, this study aims to address the following question: What are the differences and similarities of the perceptions of students’ participating in virtual and face-to-face conversation groups?

**Purpose of the Study**

This study investigated language learning through social interaction thereby altering the language laboratory experience from one of individualized computer-assisted practice to a language laboratory centered with communicative activities to promote conversation and social interaction. Students practiced the target language in a low-anxiety setting, with native-speaker tutors. The participants (intermediate Spanish college students) were divided in two groups to participate in conversation hours online through Second Life and face-to-face. This study explored the perceptions of these language learners regarding an alternative approach to the language laboratory requirement.

**Literature Review**

*The Traditional Language Laboratory*

Most of the literature regarding the effectiveness of the language laboratory dates back to the 1960s and 1970s (Higgins, 1969; Hocking, 1964; Turner, 1968). A study conducted at the Defense Language Institute in Monterrey revealed that students in the experimental group (lab use) had superior sound perception and pronunciation over the control group (no lab use), however there were no differences noted in grammar use (Hocking, 1964). Language laboratory experiments conducted in 1962-1963 by the Bureau of Audiovisual Instruction of the New York City Board of Education called
The Relative Effectiveness of Four Types of Language Laboratory Experiences concluded that the record-playback daily had more significant learning gains when compared with audio-active daily, record play-back once weekly, audio-active one weekly, and control group with no use of any laboratory equipment. Green (1965) expressed concern regarding validity of the study and questioned the interpretation of the results of the study.

Many practitioners have described the language laboratory and the audio-lingual method as mechanistic and as “an artificial, constraining, and even stultifying environment” (Mueller, McCavana, Ramsden & Shelly, 1987, p. 588). Lavine (1992) examined the main problems of the traditional audio laboratory including the teachers and dissatisfaction of lab instructional materials, but also the negative perceptions from the teachers and students of the laboratory. Salaberry (2001) noted that few quality empirical analyses had been conducted in the field regarding the pedagogical effectiveness of language laboratories due to problems with collection, scoring, and analysis of the data, such as apparent lack of control groups, lack of long-term studies, lack of systemic analysis of empirical research questions, and the use of post-hoc explanations that, at times, contradicted the analysis of the data gathered for the specific study. Therefore, more research is needed in the practical and effective uses of the current language laboratory.

However, most literature and research evidence revealed that the majority of students liked and preferred the autonomy given by the use of the language laboratory and the additional practice time that it provided (Mueller et al., 1987; Salaberry, 2001). The technological capabilities of the computer and language laboratories of today allow for experimentation with new approaches. The advances in technology and the propagation of the Internet have overcome the limitations of the language laboratory. Thorne & Payne (2005) described the generational shifts in Internet technologies and their proliferation and uses, with the majority of efforts focused on tools that support or mediate intercultural communication for purposes of L2 learning like contemporary environments such as blogs, wikis, podcasting, device-agnostic forms of Synchronous Computer Mediated Communication (SCMC), and advances in intelligent computer-assisted language learning (CALL).

Virtual Worlds used for Language Learning

Von der Emde, Schneider, & Kötter (2001) studied the pedagogical benefits of using a text-based virtual learning environment (MOO’s) for language learning between German and American students. This qualitative study found that virtual environments provide a context for authentic communication, authentic materials, autonomous learning and peer-teaching, individualized learning, elements of experimentation and play, and students acting as researchers. Shih & Yang (2008) performed an ethnographic study about situated language learning in a collaborative virtual three-dimensional environment. This study found that students’ perceptions of the use of virtual environments had a great impact on their overall educational experience. Students felt motivated to use the virtual world, and they felt more relaxed when communicating through their avatars. Similarly, Deutschmann, Panichi, & Molka-Danielsen (2009) found positive responses when they compared student participation (turn-length and
turn-taking patterns) using the virtual environment Second Life (SL), however, they concluded that more research is needed to seriously evaluate the potential benefits of the virtual environment in language learning. Diehl & Prins (2008) findings revealed that participation in SL enhanced participants’ intercultural literacy by fostering the use of multiple languages, providing opportunities for cross-cultural encounters and friendships, and promoting greater awareness of insider cultural perspectives and openness towards new viewpoints. Also, respondents from the survey given in SL lived in 12 different countries and spoke fourteen different languages with English being the most common, followed by Spanish, and Portuguese. The results of this study show that SL is an ideal environment to meet people from different cultures and that speak different languages. Wang, Song, Xia, & Yan (2009) performed an action research study that investigated students’ readiness and perspectives when integrating SL into a language program. Results showed that students were ready to use SL and that students had positive feelings towards SL as a language-learning platform.

Methodology

Context

While the majority of research criticizes the audio-lingual approach traditionally utilized in language laboratories, very little research has explored innovative ideas to implement in the language laboratory. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate second language students’ perceptions on an alternative approach to the language laboratory requirement in their Spanish intermediate courses. Students participated in conversation hours online through Second Life and face-to-face as a laboratory requirement.

Participants

The participants consisted of 62 college students enrolled in five sections of intermediate Spanish classes. The participants were selected by convenience depending on the course section in which they were enrolled in order to keep the same instructor for each treatment group. The courses selected for this study were Spanish language classes at the intermediate level designed with a language laboratory requirement of one-credit hour. Students enrolled in intermediate courses have taken at least one year of college-level Spanish or have otherwise qualified through a placement exam. Participants included 49 female students and 13 male students. From the total 62 participants, 11% (seven students) were Spanish majors and 50% (31 students) were completing a minor in Spanish. The other 39% (24 students) had a different major and minor. The majority (97%) of the students were native speakers of English. One student was a native speaker of French and one student was exposed to Spanish as a young child.

Procedures

The study compared students’ perceptions of two types of conversation hours, face-to-face and virtual, aimed at improving second language oral proficiency. The virtual environment, Second Life, was used as a meeting place for the online
conversation hours to practice communicative activities in the target language. The face-to-face conversation hours performed the same activities but met in person in a conference room at a university. The goal for each activity was the improvement of communicative competence with a focus on oral proficiency skills. The activities were diverse and students had to perform interviews, role-plays, descriptions, and narrations in different contexts, all while using the target language.

All courses involved in this study met for 16 weeks, which included three hours per week of lecture and one hour of laboratory work. Students were required to attend the Spanish conversation hour as part of their laboratory work for 50 minutes each week, starting during the third week of classes. The face-to-face group met on campus in the foreign language conference room, while the online group met in a location within SL but accessed SL from different locations (on campus or off-campus). Some students accessed SL from the language computer laboratory on campus while others from their personal computers at home.

During the first two weeks of class, the online group was required to attend a SL training session in the computer laboratory. A total of five training sessions were held to accommodate students’ schedules. In preparation for the SL training session, the SL program was installed on all computers in the laboratory. Instructors advised students in the virtual treatment group to bring their personal portable computers to the training sessions if possible. Many students brought their computers but experienced technical problems due to a slow wireless Internet connection. One student had a portable computer that did not comply with the minimum hardware requirements of SL. During the SL training session, students were introduced to SL by creating their account and completing a tutorial activity that provided training and guidance on how to use the various features of the virtual environment. Each student received an informational handout with specific instructions for downloading SL, technical requirements, location of the conversation hour, and tips for using the virtual environment (see Appendix B).

Students also visited the meeting place, or island in SL (places in SL are called islands). The researcher explained privacy issues online and requested that the students use aliases or nicknames for their avatars. Only the researcher knew the real identity of each avatar. Students were asked to use only Spanish within SL and not to leave the group or change their appearance during a given conversation hour. However, they could change their appearance and clothing from one conversation hour to another. Once all the students were in the indicated island, students tested their sound and speech capabilities. A total of four students failed to attend the SL training session. The researcher emailed the students the information packet and provided guidance on the phone, by email, and in person. Of these four students who missed the training session, two discontinued the treatment because they had difficulties using the SL software.

During the fourth week of classes, both groups started attending weekly conversation hours. The conversation hours for each group used the same native-speaker tutors and covered the same information. Students in both groups were
given a packet of handouts with the activities to complete for the semester (See Table 1).

Table 1. Activities’ Objectives & Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity #1</td>
<td>Students ask and answer questions.</td>
<td>Students interview a classmate regarding personal information and then introduce their partner to the group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>La entrevista</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Interview)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity #2</td>
<td>Students ask questions when presented with pictures of their classmates.</td>
<td>Students bring pictures of places they have been and/or things they like to do, and their partner asks questions about the pictures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Preguntas</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Questions)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity #3</td>
<td>Students describe people and activities in different tenses.</td>
<td>Students choose a famous person, change their appearance to look like the person chosen, and prepare a short presentation in Spanish about the person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿<em>Adivina quién soy?</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Guess who?)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity #4</td>
<td>Students ask for directions. Students will give directions.</td>
<td>Students present a scenario in which they have to find out how to get to different places in a city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿<em>Dónde se encuentra...?</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Where is it located?)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity #5</td>
<td>Students describe, narrate, and persuade someone.</td>
<td>Students visit a place of their choice in Second Life or in real life. Each student describes the place they visited and narrates what people were doing in this place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tour virtual</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Virtual tour)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity #6</td>
<td>Students explain a process.</td>
<td>Students explain how to travel to a destination abroad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Viaje al exterior</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Traveling abroad)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity #7</td>
<td>Students describe people and activities in the past.</td>
<td>Students chronologically reconstruct a love story when provided with pictures of the events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Una historia de amor</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A love story)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity #8</td>
<td>Students discuss activity \ by using past, present, and future tenses.</td>
<td>In pairs, students talk about what they did during the spring vacation, what they usually do for New Year’s Eve, and what they plan to do during the winter break.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Celebraciones</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Holidays)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The instructional method is a peer-based, task-oriented conversation hour as an adjunct to classroom instruction in a formal language-learning context. The activities designed for the conversation hours are a combination of action learning
(Revans, 1982) and strategies to develop communicative competence (Savignon, 1997). Learning modules based on action learning are characterized by closing the knowing-doing learning gap (Molka-Danielsen & Deutschmann, 2009, p. 91). There are four steps in the action learning cycle: explore, plan, act, and reflect. According to Molka-Danielsen & Deutschmann (2009) action learning works when using virtual worlds because this model allows students to engage in authentic tasks in which they can:

- Explore—content, context, locations, communities, or a combination of any of these roles;
- Plan and act—based on the roles explored in the previous step, a plan is formulated to put into action; and,
- Reflect—refers to reflection as a social process. After each activity, students will reflect on their own learning.

Participants explored a topic before meeting for the conversation hour, then planned their performance, acted out orally, and reflected on their learning (see Appendix C).

The researcher supervised and monitored all conversation hours to ensure that the content and the activities were carried out the same way in the face-to-face and online groups. The conversations were under the direction and guidance of a hired native speaker tutor. Two native speaking tutors worked during the conversation hours. There were two sessions a week for the face-to-face group and two sessions a week for the virtual group. Each tutor worked in both types of sessions. The tutor organized the students into pairs or small groups, explained the activities, kept students on task, and provided feedback.

The face-to-face group met in person on Tuesdays and Thursdays during the day in a conference room with the tutor. The conference room had a blackboard, chairs, and a round table. The online group met Tuesdays and Thursdays in the evening in an island in SL called “EDUNATION.” The area used also had a large board and chairs, and students performed the same language activities (see Figure 1 on the next page).

Students completed the activities in pairs using the target language to practice the interpersonal mode of communication. After all groups finished the activities, they regrouped to practice the presentational mode of communication as the students talked about their conversations to the whole group using the target language. Some activities took two meeting sessions to complete and the most difficult activities were repeated for additional practice. The same approaches were taken for all the groups as they worked on the same content and activities each week. Students were not required to write during the conversation hour as the focus was on speaking.

In Figure 2 (on the next page), some participants chose an avatar in the shape of an animal or even of the opposite gender (see Lion King and President Lincoln). Students were free to change the appearance of their avatar as many times as they wanted. For Activity #3 in which students chose a famous person to talk about, many students modified their avatar to the appearance of the famous person. The
participants in face-to-face conversation hours could potentially also change their appearance by wearing a costume, but only two students dressed up in the face-to-face meeting.

Figure 1. Setting of the online conversation hour held in SL. The meeting place includes black chairs and an overhead projector on which websites or links can be uploaded to show to the class.

Figure 2. Affordances of a online conversation hour held in SL. The picture shows all the tools available to the students in the side bar and bottom bar. The researcher’s avatar stands on the side while the conversation hour is in session.

Students were required to use the speech capabilities during the activities with their partners but they could also use text chat simultaneously to ask questions of
the tutor. As you can see in Figure 3, there are many buttons around the screen including the options of “chat” and “speak” at the bottom of the screen. Many students took advantage of the “chat” feature by asking the tutors for the meaning of words and how to say something they needed to communicate in Spanish. In addition, the tutor used both tools when making corrections, via voice chat and text chat during the activities and group presentations.

The activities were completed over a period of 11 weeks, including a make-up week for students who missed a session. Both groups were able to complete activities during the make-up sessions held in the respective format, face-to-face and online.

Data Collection

During the first week of classes, instructors informed the students about the opportunity to participate in the research project. The instructor offered to provide an alternative assignment if a student was not willing or able to participate. All the students agreed to participate in the study voluntarily. The internal review board for human subjects approved this protocol. Language background information, course information, and schedule information about each student was collected during the first week of classes using a student information sheet. The students’ information sheet helped in identifying outliers and obtaining additional relevant information about each participant (see Appendix A).

The week after all the conversation hours ended, the instructors provided the survey form for the students to complete to provide feedback about their experience in the conversation hours (see Appendix D). The survey included questions regarding the language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) used during the conversation hour, the communication tools used in SL (voice-chat and text-chat), ten scaled questions regarding learning and motivation and two open-ended questions asking what things they liked and would change about the conversation hours.

Data Analysis

The participants’ responses from the two sections of the survey were tabulated into Microsoft Excel for analysis. Frequencies of responses were calculated and then converted to percentages and graphs were created to visualize the data. In addition, the means of the ten Likert scale questions were calculated for each group for each of the participants (virtual and face-to face). Open-ended responses were transcribed and analyzed by looking for emerging themes in the responses that provided a more in-depth understanding of participants’ perspectives and experiences.

Results

A total of 53 students responded to the survey including 30 students from the face-to-face conversation hour and 23 students from the online conversation hour.
The results of the first section of the survey asked which skills they used the most when participating in the conversation hours. Participants in both groups rated “speaking” as the skill they most practiced during the conversation hour, including 58% of the online and 62% of the face-to-face group. However, the second most rated skill differed between the two treatment groups. In the online group, 38% of respondents rated the skill of “listening” as their most used skill, while in the face-to-face conversation group only nine percent agreed. The face-to-face conversation group selected the skills of “reading” and “writing” as their second most rated skills with 29% each (see Table 2).

Table 2. Skills most practiced during online conversation hours (N = 53)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virtual</td>
<td>14 (58%)</td>
<td>9 (38%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>20 (62%)</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
<td>5 (16%)</td>
<td>4 (13%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The next part of the survey consisted of ten scaled questions in which the participants rated their experience during the conversation hours. The Likert scale contained the conventional options of: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. The aggregated data results are listed in Table 3 for the virtual group and Table 4 for the face-to-face group.

Table 3. Virtual group’s perceptions in regards to the conversation hours (n=23)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the face-to-face participants (97%) agreed or strongly agreed that the tutors in the conversation hour were helpful and knowledgeable, and only 65% from the online group. 30% percent from the online group reported a neutral rating (See Figure 5 on the next page). Participants were asked if the instructions on the activities were clear, both groups had similar responses. Most participants
in both groups agreed that the activities provided them with opportunities for communication.

**Table 4.** Face-to-face group’s perceptions in regards to the conversation hours (n=30)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5.** Tutors’ helpfulness and knowledge.

Most of the students in the face-to-face group (87%) thought the conversation hour was beneficial to their learning, while only 52% agreed or strongly agreed to the same statement (see Figure 6 on the next page). Similarly, 60% of participants
thought the conversation hour was fun and engaging in the face-to-face group, while only 21% from the online group agreed or strongly agreed (Figure 7 below).

Figure 6. Perceived benefit from the conversation hour on learning.

Figure 7. Participants’ opinion about the conversation hour.
Participants responded that the conversation hour helped them perform better in class in only 21% of the cases from the online group and in 50% of the cases for the face-to-face group. The majority of the students in both groups reported that they were able to communicate in Spanish during the conversation hour. Most of the participants of the face-to-face group (80%) also believed that the activities helped improved oral proficiency, while only 43% of the online group. The majority of participants (52%) would not recommend the online conversation hour to other students. In contrast, 60% of participants would recommend the face-to-face conversation hour (Figure 8).

![Figure 8. Participants' responses in regards to recommending the conversation hour to other students.](image)

Open-Ended Responses from Survey

These opinions are also supported by the responses to the two open ended questions asked at the end of the survey: what did you like about the conversation hour and what would you change about the conversation hour?

Twenty-three students from the online conversation hour responded to the open-ended section of the survey. Students in the online group enjoyed having opportunities to communicate with other students and native speakers of Spanish from home. They also liked having the tutor and teacher available for help and corrections. A student from the online conversation hour commented, “It allowed us to speak the language and practice our grammar outside class.” Students in the online group felt that the activities helped improve their speaking skills. A student commented, “It was practice for speaking Spanish fluently. It taught me how to listen and speak consistently.” Participants enjoyed the option of using private chat when working in pairs from home. They also enjoyed relying on listening skills.
Regarding what they would change about the online conversation hours, students commented mostly on the technical difficulties and the schedule. Technical difficulties included sound problems and program updates, and many also disliked the Second Life program altogether.

Thirty students from the face-to-face conversation hour responded to the open-ended section of the survey. Students enjoyed being able to engage in conversations with others outside their classes. Several students commented that the activities were easy and the environment was friendly. Four students commented that the conversation hours were fun, interactive, and helpful. One student commented, “It was highly useful for my own Spanish level. I was personally able to practice that which I was learning in class.” Students thought the activities were interesting and reinforced what was being learned in class. They also liked the tutor, the structure, and guidance. One student commented, “The group sizes were perfect amount of students and the activities were good. Also the instructor was good help and made you feel comfortable to talk in Spanish even if you make mistakes.”

Regarding the things they would change about the face-to-face conversation hours, students commented on the schedule and making directions for the activities clearer. They also commented that they wanted more speaking and less writing.

**Discussion**

The problem of developing oral language proficiency has been an issue of debate among schools, language education organizations, and universities. The lack of oral proficiency may be a contributing factor to the attrition rate of students beyond the second year of language study. In June 2008, the Center for Applied Linguistics completed data collection from primary and secondary schools in the United States for its third national survey (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009). The data showed trends in foreign language education at three points in time: 1987, 1997, and 2008. The survey revealed that foreign language instruction decreased in elementary schools from 31% to 25%, in middle schools from 75% to 58%, and remained the same in the high school level at 91%. More importantly, it showed a great shortage of language teachers in the United States. The percentage of uncertified language teachers had increased from 17% in 1997 to 31% in 2008. (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009).

New enhanced standards in foreign language education have increased the requirements for oral proficiency for future teachers of foreign languages and made more difficult to obtain certification in an accredited institution. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) collaborated to develop the Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers (ACTFL, 2002). These standards require a strong emphasis in development and continuous assessment of oral proficiency for foreign language education majors. These majors must achieve high levels of oral proficiency in the foreign language, which can be difficult to attain when they cannot, or do not, go abroad for immersion experiences.
Findings of previous studies in the area of virtual environments and language learning have shown the potential for using this technology in promoting language learning (e.g., Deutschmann, Panichi, & Molka-Danielsen, 2009; Diehl & Prins, 2008; Shih & Yang, 2008; Shively, 2010; Von der Emde, Schenider, & Kötter, 2001; Wang, Song, Xia, & Yan, 2009). This study implemented many of the recommendations learned from previous studies that revealed great potential for virtual environments for language practice, however, when comparing student's perceptions of their learning, the findings in this study were not as positive. Shih & Yang (2008) found that students’ perceptions of the use of virtual environments had a great impact on their overall educational experience. In contrast, this study found that the online group did not enjoy the conversation hours as much as the face-to-face group. It appears that the novelty effect of using Second Life and the Avatars was quickly gone by the end of the semester when the online conversation group completed the evaluation. Only 21% of the students in the online group thought the online conversation hours were fun and engaging. Since the activities, tutors, and students’ participation were the same for both groups, the only difference was the SL interface and its affordances. The technical difficulties with the SL platform may have contributed to students’ frustration and lack of engagement towards the end of the semester.

Deutschmann, Panichi, & Molka-Danielsen (2009) found positive responses when they compared student participation using the virtual environment Second Life (SL). This study found more positive results from participants in face-to-face versus the virtual group. Most students in the face-to-face group reported that the conversation hour helped them perform better in class, they were able to communicate in Spanish during the conversation hour, the activities helped them improve their oral proficiency, and that they would recommend them to other students. In contrast, in only 21% of the participants in the virtual group reported that the conversation hour helped them perform better in class, only 43% believed that the activities helped improve oral proficiency, and the majority of participants (52%) would not recommend the online conversation hour to other students. These results also contradict Wang, Song, Xia, & Yan (2009)’s results which showed that students were ready to use SL and that students had positive feelings towards SL as a language-learning platform.

Results from the survey showed that participants’ perceptions about which language skill they practiced the most, varied significantly among groups. The online conversation hour group felt that they practiced listening and speaking skills the most. The affordances of virtual environments may have played a role in the skills most practiced by the students. While in SL, students wore headphones and used a microphone and had to rely on listening and speaking for communicating. The face-to-face conversation group also stated they practiced speaking; however, a high number of respondents stated that they practiced writing and reading skills. They relied on reading the instructions more than on listening, and writing their answers than on speaking.

Results from a Likert scale completed by the students who attended the face-to-face conversation hours were very positive. Most of the students thought the
conversation hours were fun, engaging, and beneficial to their learning. On the other hand, the online group did not enjoy the conversation hours as much but they did focus their time more on listening and speaking.

One of the major limitations of this study was the unexpected small sample size. Usual enrollment in second year Spanish classes is larger than it was during the semester when the study was performed. The sample was also not drawn randomly and students were assigned to treatments according to their course section in an attempt to keep the treatment groups even in size and to balance the groups for instructors. All the students who participated in the study were voluntarily assigned to a treatment group depending on their schedules. Assignment did not include considerations of computer literacy among the participants. Participation in the study was also limited to students in second year courses of Spanish, therefore, the results of the study are not generalizable to all levels of proficiency in Spanish or to other languages.

Although information collected and analyzed could be valuable to those interested in other content areas, this study was confined to obtaining data needed for further research and improved practice in the area of language education. As the oral proficiency levels of language students have been an area of primary concern to language programs due to high requirements set by the Illinois State Board of Education and NCATE, the study sought to explore an alternative approach to develop only this language skill.

Implications and Future Research

This study utilized a framework of pedagogically sound instructional practices to improve oral proficiency of language students at the college level. It provided them with an alternative approach to the traditional language laboratory experience. Students were able to practice the language in a low anxiety environment. Instructors of the courses participating in the study agreed that the laboratory experience of hosting conversation hours and the designed activities that focus on oral proficiency were a great improvement to the previous practice of isolation in the laboratory.

The results of this study are valuable in the language education field because they suggest there is potential benefit in learning the effects by delivering a known and accepted language learning method with an alternative approach. Designers and instructors of language courses delivered online will be able to take advantage of the affordances that an immersive virtual environment offers knowing that this environment can be used to promote oral proficiency.

The approach of using weekly conversation hours with native speakers of the target language offers an alternative that does not compare to the potential cost of traveling abroad that a language learner may incur while attempting to acquire a second language. While not as costly as immersion approaches, both virtual and face-to-face conversation hours required regular practice from the language learner, a condition similar to that experienced through immersion. Through the use of a virtual environment, the language learner is given a more cost effective method to practice the target language with native speakers and on a regular
basis. Schools may see this approach as an opportunity to recruit international students or other target language speakers to participate regularly as tutors in the conversation hours.

The proliferation of online learning can take advantage of the affordances of virtual environments to provide more opportunities for students to receive equivalent language benefits to those in a face-to-face setting. Participants reported malfunction of the SL software during various occasions indicating a need for the development of virtual environments that are technically efficient and reliable. Virtual environments currently available lack the special features for educational needs such as grading, recording, and tracking attendance among others. Also, these sophisticated programs need to be more stable and reliable as constant updates and lag time create disturbances in the learning environment. The results of this study add to current literature and encourage further research in the area of innovative approaches to implement in language laboratories to develop second language oral proficiency. As the current wave of technology advances, more empirical research is needed to address the actual learning gains and influence on the use of the technology on learning languages.

References


Appendix A

Student Information Sheet

Student Information

Class: __________  Section: __________  First Name: ______________  Last Name: ______________

Current status:  freshman / sophomore / junior / senior / graduate / visiting

Major: ______________  Minor: ______________

Phone #: ______________  Email: ______________

1. Is your native language English? Yes/No. If not, which? ________________________________

2. Have you taken Spanish classes before? Yes/No.

   If yes, where? ______________  Which classes? ________________________________

3. Did you take the Spanish placement test? Yes / No  If yes, how did you score? _________

4. Have you studied any language other than Spanish? Yes / No

   If yes, which? ______________  How long? ________  Where? ________________________________

5. Why are you taking this course? ________________________________

6. What grade do you expect to receive? ________

7. How many credit hours of classes are you taking this semester? __________

   Which classes? ________________________________

8. Circle one day/time you are available to meet for the conversation hour:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mesa Real</th>
<th>Mesa Virtual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesdays 3:30-4:20pm</td>
<td>Tuesdays 8:00-8:50pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursdays 12:30-1:20pm</td>
<td>Thursdays 8:00-8:50pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fridays 12:00-12:50pm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   *If you cannot attend any of these days/times, proof of your unavailability must be provided.*

9. Do you have any disabilities or learning disorders of which your instructor should be aware?

   ____________________________________________________________

10. Please sign on the line below if this statement is true:

    "I have read the syllabus and I understand it."

    Sign: ____________________________  Date: ____________________________
Appendix B
Online Conversation Training Manual

Second Life Training Session

The training session will help you become acquainted in using Second Life (SL). However, you must practice and become proficient in using the software before our first meeting. We will meet in different places in SL to perform language-related activities. Therefore, make sure that you create your account, install the program in your computer, and practice using it. If you don’t have a computer you can work at the language laboratory.

What is Second Life?
It is a multiuser 3D digital world, imagined, created and owned by its residents. You are only a resident once you buy land in SL. For this class we will meet in different places and you must always be respectful of residents and their rules.

Technical Requirements
Good news! SL runs on both platforms Windows and Macs. However, your computer and internet connection must be fast (Cable or DSL). Additionally, SL runs best on newer computers with advanced graphics cards. To learn more about specific system requirements, go to www.secondlife.com.

Join Second Life (for free)
It is very important that you familiarize yourself with SL. Creating an account is easy and free. Just go to the join page and register. You'll need to choose a standard avatar, an inworld name, and provide basic contact information before you can download the SL viewer—essentially your Second Life browser.

1. Open your browser and go to www.secondlife.com
2. Click on Join Now>>
3. Enter the requested details to create your Second Life identity.
   a. For your username, use a fake name, maybe a Spanish name of your choice.
   b. Choose a password and remember it!
      Username: __________________________
      Password: __________________________
4. Once your account is created, you will receive an email confirmation to activate your account.
5. Open your email and click on the link to activate your account.

Downloading the Second Life
- The link in your email will take you to the website to download the software
- If not, go to www.secondlife.com, click on <Download Second Life> at the bottom of the page
- Choose the appropriate download button depending on your system (e.g., Windows XP or Mac)
- Click on 'run' to download and install the software (say 'Yes' to security message about authorizing download)

Learn to Work in a Virtual Space

Once you download the Second Life Viewer, you enter the Second Life environment on Orientation Island. This will be your first inworld experience and includes several training modules to become proficient in using the program.

Moving around
- Move forward / backward ➔ up / down arrow keys on keyboard
- Change direction ➔ left / right arrow keys on keyboard
- Fly ➔ click on the <Fly> button in the bottom menu or use the Page Up / Down buttons

Gestures
- Sit down ➔ right click on the seat and select <Sit here>
- Stand up ➔ click on the <Stand up> button in the bottom menu
- Gestures ➔ click in <Edit> for more possible gestures
Camera Views

- Zoom in/out: Use the roller on your mouse or the ALT key.
- MouseLook: When you are looking through your mouse and your avatar's head is not in the way, you can use the mouseLook view to get a better angle on everything. Go to the top menu and click View MouseLook. To come out of MouseLook click on ESC or on the arrow keys.
- Changing the Light: If it seems too dark, in the top menu bar, click on World > Environmental Settings > Midday to increase the sunlight.

Text Chat

- Make sure your toolbar is on view at the bottom of the screen.
- Click the button that says “Chat.”
- A button saying “History” will appear, next to a bar with a space to type. When you type, your avatar will appear to be typing on an invisible keyboard.

Voice Chat

- Remember you must wear a headset to participate in the conversation hour.
- Generally, it’s best to connect your audio devices before you start Second Life. After you have connected your headset (or speakers and microphone), you may need to configure your sound devices. To do this, choose Me > Preferences > Sound & Media. You’ll be able to select your input and output devices and change your volume setting. Once you have configured your sound devices, simply click Speak to speak to those nearby. Click it again to turn off your microphone.

Sound Settings

You will quickly find out the some places have very loud music and environmental noises. You can change the sound setting to lower these volumes and increase the volume of the people that you are talking with. On the top menu go to Me, then select Preferences, go to the Sound & Media tab, lower the volumes for everything (disable Streaming Music and Media), and increase the volume for Voice chat.

Personalize Your Avatar

An avatar is a virtual representation of you. You can use your basic avatar as a starting point—given to you when you join—later you can then change nearly every element of your appearance from body size to hair color to clothing. Click Avatar to change your avatar to one of the free provided avatars. You’ll be able to choose from a wide variety of people, robots, animals, and even vehicles. For information on customizing your avatar, see “Editing your appearance.”

Places in Second Life World

The meeting place that we will use every week is EDUNATION.

SLURL: http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/EduNation/50/50/51

Day: ___________ Time: ___________
However, some activities may require you to travel on your own and have previous preparation. In order to travel and go to different places in SL, first you need to login using your username and password, then in the top/right HOME tap you will find a category called DESTINATION GUIDE, here you can search for places of your interest or you can simply type a word of interest in the search space on the top right of the screen.

SPANISH SPEAKING PLACES TO VISIT
- Barcelona Virtual http://slurl.com/secondlife/barcelona%20del%20oeste/169/71/24/
- Marbella http://slurl.com/secondlife/paseo%20banus/70/97/22
- Mexico City http://slurl.com/secondlife/mexico/94/125/25
- Mexico, Monterrey http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Monterrey%20Mexico/98/117/174

UnHispana

Virtual Spain
Virtual Spain boasts an active Spanish language community to help newcomers to Second Life, including tutorials, daily classes, cultural activities, festivals, live music and more. http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Virtual%20Spain/169/125/46

Guadalajara Mexico
This sim captures the exotic beauty of one of Mexico’s oldest cities. Explore Colima’s Volcano or the Catedral de Guadalajara on your own or hop aboard the Tequila Express for a guided tour. http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Guadalajara%20Joven/123/17/21

Maracaibo Life
This replica of the city of Maracaibo in Venezuela showcases some of its famous landmarks and offers visitors a relaxed atmosphere in which to spend time with friends, play games, try some kart racing, or party at the disco mall. http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Maracaibo%20Life/83/92/23

Barcelona Plaza Real
Stroll the tree-lined streets in Barcelona’s famous La Rambla avenue, then stop to meet new friends in the central Plaza Real (Plaça Real) in Second Life. http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Barcelona%20de%20la%20Rambla/156/77/29
Appendix C
Sample Activity Handout

MESA DE ESPAÑOL  Nombre: ______________________ Apellido: ______________________
Clase: ______________________ Sección: ______________________
Mesa: Real / Virtual  Fecha: ___________  Hora: ___________

Activity #2 Preguntas
Exchange pictures with your partner and, after reviewing each picture, ask five (5) questions about each picture. Your partner answers each question thoroughly. You may take notes in the space provided below so you can remember facts that you will share with the class. QUESTION WORDS: ¿Qué? ¿Quién? ¿Con quién? ¿De quién? ¿Cómo? ¿Cuándo? ¿Dónde? ¿Porqué? ¿Para qué?

Foto #1

Foto #2

Foto #3

Reflect on your learning
Answer the following questions regarding this activity:

1. How well were you able to communicate in Spanish?  
(Not at all) 1 2 3 4 5 (Excellent)

2. Did the activity provide language practice relevant to you?  
(Not at all) 1 2 3 4 5 (Excellent)

3. What would you change about this activity?

4. Other comments:

FOR NEXT WEEK: Research facts about a famous person and be prepared to answer questions. The class must be able to guess your famous person.
APPENDIX D

*Mesa de Español* Evaluation

---

1. Which conversation hours did you attend? Please write the day/time that you assisted weekly.
   - Real:
   - Virtual:

2. Rate 1 to 4, what skills did you practice the most during the activity?
   - Speaking
   - Writing
   - Reading
   - Listening

3. During the conversation hour, which communication tools did you use?
   - None
   - Second Life Text chat
   - Second Life Voice chat
   - Other:

4. Please rate your experience during the conversation:

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<th>[0]</th>
<th>[1]</th>
<th>[2]</th>
<th>[3]</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The tutors in the conversation hour were helpful and knowledgeable</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. The instructions on the activities were clear</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. The activities provided me with guidelines and opportunities for communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. The conversation hour was beneficial to my learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. The conversation hour was fun and engaging</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. The conversation hour helped me perform better in class</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. I was able to communicate in Spanish during the conversation hour</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. The activities used in the conversation hour helped improve my oral proficiency</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. I would recommend the conversation hour to other students</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. I expect to receive a good grade in the conversation hour</td>
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</table>

5. What did you like about the conversation hour?

6. What would you change about the conversation hour?