Developing and measuring interpersonal communication in the online second language (L2) Spanish classroom

Jeremy W. Bachelor
PhD in Education, Spanish Applied Linguistics
Institution: Heartland Community College
Address: 1500, West Raab Road, Normal, Illinois, 61761
E-mail: jeremy.bachelor@heartland.edu

ABSTRACT
This paper examines the use of technology in the development and assessment of interpersonal communication skills in an online second language (L2) Spanish classroom. The study explores the use of synchronous and asynchronous communication tools and strategies to promote interaction among learners, while also considering the challenges and limitations of assessing interpersonal communication skills in an online setting. The results of the study provide insights into effective evaluation methods for measuring the progress of L2 Spanish learners in the area of interpersonal communication.

Keywords: online language teaching, interpersonal communication, second language acquisition, language assessment, technology in education.

1 INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of technology in second language (L2) classrooms has significantly increased in recent years. Technology has had a profound impact on interpersonal communication, particularly in online platforms where L2 learners can communicate with native speakers, which is crucial for language development. Nevertheless, the lack of nonverbal cues and the anonymity of online interactions can create difficulties for learners to communicate effectively, and for teachers to assess their progress. This article aims to explore techniques for developing and evaluating interpersonal communication in online L2 Spanish classes. It will analyze the application of both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools, and methods for promoting interaction among learners. Furthermore, the article will address the challenges and limitations of assessing interpersonal communication skills online, and provide recommendations for effective evaluation methods. To accomplish this, the study will answer the following research question: How do in-person beginner Spanish students perform in comparison to online students in relation to their interpersonal speaking skills?

Assessing the interpersonal communication mode is crucial in improving language learning for online students. However, a major hurdle in this area is the absence of genuine interactions with native speakers that can limit language skill development. Additionally, providing administrators and accreditors

with more data is necessary to improve their understanding of online language instruction effectiveness. In the online L2 classroom, a significant challenge is the lack of student opportunities and time, as well as student fear, which can hinder interpersonal communication development. These obstacles emphasize the significance of researching and implementing effective solutions to enhance interpersonal communication in the online L2 classroom.

The aim of this article is to investigate various techniques for evaluating interpersonal communication in the online second language (L2) Spanish classroom. The study intends to introduce a "simulated conversation" function in the Canvas learning management system and use the TalkAbroad platform to offer real communication opportunities with native speakers. The objective is to provide data that are easy to access by using outcomes-based rubrics. Moreover, this article endeavors to support students in enhancing their confidence to converse at their own level, thus improving their interpersonal communication skills.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Interpersonal communication is a vital component of second language (L2) instruction and has been studied extensively in both traditional classroom settings and online contexts. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) is a professional organization that promotes the teaching and learning of foreign languages. One of the key focuses of ACTFL is on developing effective communication skills in the target language. Interpersonal communication, in particular, is an essential aspect of language proficiency. It refers to the ability to interact with others in a meaningful way through spontaneous, unrehearsed communication (2012; 2017). ACTFL emphasizes the importance of authentic communication in real-world contexts, where learners can use the language for practical purposes such as making friends, solving problems, and engaging in cultural exchanges. By providing guidelines and standards for language proficiency, ACTFL encourages teachers and learners to prioritize interpersonal communication as a means of achieving language proficiency and developing global competence.

Research has shown that the use of synchronous communication tools, such as video conferencing and instant messaging, can enhance L2 learners' opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning, leading to improved language development. However, challenges such as lack of nonverbal cues and difficulty in building rapport can still exist in the online L2 classroom (Kessler, 2016).

Measuring interpersonal communication in the online L2 classroom can be a complicated task, given the presence of various modes of communication and technological tools. To tackle this complexity, researchers have devised a number of assessment instruments, such as the Computer-Mediated Communication Scale (CMC), Interaction Analysis of Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (IAS-CMC), and Online Interaction Coding System (OICS), aimed at examining distinct aspects of online

interaction. These scales measure diverse factors, such as task-based interaction, communication volume, and participation in online discussions (Cerezo & Oskoz, 2018).

However, the use of technology in the L2 classroom presents an opportunity to develop and measure interpersonal communication in ways that were not previously feasible. Further research could concentrate on creating and validating novel measurement tools, evaluating the effectiveness of various synchronous communication tools, and addressing the unique challenges of online L2 instruction.

In the field of language assessment, a major principle is authenticity, where the assessment task or sample is naturally and meaningfully relevant, and thematically integrated, rather than in isolation (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). This principle aligns with the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning, which emphasizes the importance of interpersonal communication and the ability to negotiate meaning in real-world situations (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, 2019). Research has shown that effective interpersonal communication skills are strongly correlated with success in both school and the workplace (National Research Council, 2011).

In the online classroom, effective language instruction is centered on four key concepts: communication, cognition, socialization, and immediacy (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Norris, 2017). Instructors must facilitate real-time opportunities for conversations and effectively communicate and structure the online environment to ensure that all learning goals are met (Ghentulescu & Barbu, 2022). Authentic language opportunities and collaborative tasks are essential for promoting learner confidence, motivation, and language proficiency (Lian, Chai, Zheng, & Liang, 2021). Additionally, active involvement with the instructor, classmates, and the world, through community and connectedness, is crucial for language learning (Ghentulescu & Barbu, 2022). Immediacy, or the perceived proximity between the instructor and students, both verbally and non-verbally, can increase cognitive learning and create higher learner motivation and engagement (Wang, 2021).

However, online instructors face several challenges when it comes to facilitating interpersonal communication in the target language. These include a deficiency in face-to-face interactions, lack of immediate feedback, time and scheduling constraints, and increased opportunity and access for students to use other sources and plan responses (York & Richardson, 2012; Holden, Norris, & Kuhlmeier, 2021). Therefore, it is important for future teachers and researchers to continue to explore and develop strategies for effectively promoting interpersonal communication skills in the online language classroom.

3 METHODOLOGY

The research study, which received IRB approval, sought to examine how well different methods could evaluate interpersonal communication in the online L2 Spanish classroom. The study group was composed of 56 students attending a community college in Illinois, taking either Elementary Spanish I

(four class sections) or Elementary Spanish II (one class section). Out of the five classes, three were online, while two were held in-person, and the participants mirrored the general college population with regards to gender, ethnicity, and age distribution, with 71% identifying as white, 55% female, and 61% between the ages of 18-23.

The study design included bi-weekly opportunities for students to meet with classmates on Zoom and record Spanish conversations with a provided prompt, both as informal and formative assessments. Additionally, five assessments in Canvas were administered at the end of each module, which were "Simulated Conversation" exams. Furthermore, students participated in three assessments through TalkAbroad.

For the Zoom conversations, students were required to sign up with classmates, and the instructor provided a role-play scenario for them to follow. Students then submitted the Zoom recording for feedback (see Appendix A for an example). The Simulated Conversations were modeled after the Spanish Praxis and AP interpersonal speaking test sections, in which students were asked to open a quiz on Canvas. The quiz consisted of 3-5 audio recorded questions in Spanish, with each subsequent question being a follow-up question. Students were required to immediately record their responses to the questions before submitting, with the quiz automatically submitting in 5 minutes, in an attempt to reduce the use of outside resources or preparation (see Appendix B for an example).

Lastly, the TalkAbroad assessment involved online video conferencing to connect students with native speakers of the target language. The assessment consisted of three 15-minute spontaneous conversations in which the native speaker had hidden instructions from the instructor to help guide the conversation. The student had a general topic idea of the conversation but the conversation was spontaneous (see Appendix C for an example). For all assessments, outcomes-based rubrics were used as the basis for interpersonal speaking scores (see Appendices A-C for rubrics).

The procedures section of this paper aims to answer the research question, "how do in-person students perform in comparison to online students in relation to their interpersonal speaking skills?" To do this, the study compares the scores of online and in-person students on two measures of interpersonal speaking skills: 'Simulated Conversation' oral exams and TalkAbroad conversations.

To begin with, the average score of the 'Simulated Conversation' oral exams is computed for the online students. Likewise, the mean score is calculated for in-person students. An unpaired t-test is calculated to check if there is any statistical significance between the scores of the two groups.

Afterwards, the average score of TalkAbroad conversations is calculated separately for the online and in-person students. Then, an unpaired t-test is performed to determine if there is any statistical significance between the scores of the two groups. This approach helps the instructors and researchers to

compare the interpersonal speaking skills of the online and in-person students and to identify any differences.

4 RESULTS

The findings of the study suggest that there is no noteworthy difference in the interpersonal speaking abilities of students in online and in-person settings. The average score for online students in all 'Simulated Conversation' oral exams was 84% (rounded), whereas for in-person students, it was 87% (rounded). An unpaired t-test was performed to identify any statistical significance between the scores of the two groups. The outcome did not show any significant difference; $t(54)=0.9380$, p=0.3524.

Similarly, when comparing the mean score among all TalkAbroad conversations for the online students (86%, rounded) and the mean score among all TalkAbroad conversations for in-person students (88%, rounded), the results of an unpaired t-test showed that there was not a significant difference in the scores; $t(54)=0.7932$, $p=0.4311$.

Overall, these results suggest that the mode of instruction (online or in-person) does not have a significant impact on the development of interpersonal speaking skills among L2 Spanish students.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, the purpose of this study was to evaluate online students' interpersonal speaking skills by providing them with practice and evaluation. The study design allowed the instructors to give their online students opportunities for interpersonal speaking practice and assessment. The results showed that there were no significant differences between the scores of the online and in-person students on the 'Simulated Conversation' oral exams and TalkAbroad conversations. This outcome was desirable since the goal was not for one group to perform better than the other but for the online students to have similar chances to improve their interpersonal communication skills as the in-person students.

It is crucial to note, though, that this study had certain limitations. For instance, it is difficult to extrapolate the results to other groups because the study only lasted one semester and was carried out with a particular set of students. True interpersonal communication is very challenging to assess, even in face-to-face situations. Additionally, technical difficulties occurred during the study, forcing some students to retake the 'Simulated Conversation' exam, while others withdrew from the class after seeing all of the course requirements. Additionally, some students might have used online translation tools during their speaking assessments despite precautions taken to prevent it.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study can still be utilized to enhance online instruction and achieve program/course outcomes related to interpersonal communication skills. These results can encourage instructors to offer online language courses that prioritize interpersonal speaking

skills for their students. Additionally, future research can build upon these findings to improve the assessment and instruction of interpersonal speaking skills in online language classes. As such, there are a number of recommendations for future teachers and researchers in this field based on the insights obtained from this study.

First, the importance of giving their online pupils the chance to practice interpersonal speaking must be understood by instructors. This study showed that it is possible to create an outcome-focused, well-structured method for assessing interpersonal speaking abilities online. This enables instructors to give online learners similar opportunities as their in-person counterparts to improve their interpersonal communication skills.

Second, future research should consider extending the length of teaching and expanding the sample size in order to overcome the limitations of this study. To get a more complete view of students' speaking ability, other interpersonal communication measures, including in-person observation or more sophisticated technology, might be included.

Third, it is recommended that researchers and educators explore the potential benefits of integrating technological platforms, such as TalkAbroad, to offer students genuine conversation opportunities with native speakers. This technology can prove to be an effective tool in improving students' proficiency and self-assurance in the target language, while also providing valuable insights into students' progress through data collection.

Finally, those working in online language education should keep investigating cutting-edge techniques for assessing and improving interpersonal communication abilities in virtual environments. This continuous research can assist teachers in better understanding the needs of online students and fostering their success on a worldwide scale.

The ability to teach language effectively in virtual environments is crucial for educators given the increasingly linked and international nature of the globe. Instructors should strive to provide online students with similar possibilities as in-person students to improve their language fluency and confidence by implementing cutting-edge technologies and research-backed teaching methods. As educators explore new avenues for online language instruction, it is critical to understand that such initiatives may have a positive impact on students all over the world.

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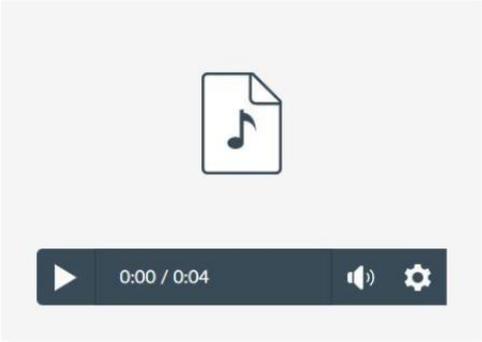
APPENDIX A

Formative Zoom Conversation Prompt Example with Rubric

	Criteria
In groups of 2-3, choose **one (1)** of the two situations to act out with your partner(s). You do not need to act out both. 1. You and your partner are both looking for an apartment in town to rent together as roommates. Interview each other to determine what you both need in an apartment (number of bedrooms, bathrooms, other) and in the surrounding area (restaurants, coffee shops, other). 2. One of you is a realtor (*agente inmobiliario*) and the other is a potential home buyer (*comprador/a*). The agent needs to find out exactly what the buyer is looking for in a new home (location, amenities, features, etc.). Make sure the agent gets all of the information they need to subsequently identify potential properties for the buyer.	**What language students use** Can use words, lists, and highly practiced phrases with a high degree of language accuracy **What information students present** Can present basic biographical information and topics of high interest **Who can understand the students** Can be understood by people who are accustomed to interacting with language learners, though sometimes with difficulty **What strategies students use** Can use the following strategies: Presentational Speaking: - Use facial expressions and gestures - Repeat words - Occasionally resorts to first language

APPENDIX B

Simulated Conversation Prompt Example with Rubric

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APPENDIX C

TalkAbroad Prompt Example with Rubric

	Criteria
	What language students use
Conversation 2	Can use words, highly practiced phrases, and repeated words based on the question with a high degree of language accuracy
Length of conversation?	
15 minutes	
Assignment Due Date	
2022-10-31	**How students communicate**
Instructions for Partner and Student	Can respond to highly practiced or simple questions to complete the task
Get to know a new partner OR continue learning about the same partner from conversation.	Can ask highly practiced questions
1. Discuss where partners go in their city and/or on vacation, as well as activities they do there.	Can provide appropriate answers
2. Additionally, find out about your partner's family. Does your partner have siblings, cousins, or other relatives? What is each person like ("¿cómo es tu hermano?")? Be prepared to provide the same information.	**Who can understand the students**
	Can be understood by people who are accustomed to interacting with language learners, though sometimes with difficulty
Attachment - Pdf only	
Choose File No file chosen	**What cultural awareness students exhibit**
Private Instructions for Partner	Can use some culturally appropriate gestures and expressions
Conocerse...	
¿Adónde van en su ciudad y para las vacaciones?	
¿Qué hacen en estos lugares?	
Hablen sobre sus familias.	