Integration of TalkAbroad Conversations: A Study on Learners' Preparation and Perceived Learning Gains with Different Tasks

Sara Fernández Cuenca
Department of Spanish and Italian, Wake Forest University
Sean Michael Muller
Department of Spanish and Italian, Wake Forest University

Abstract

Language interaction has been shown to positively impact second language development (Long, 1996). However, whereas research that examined interactionist approaches to second language acquisition (Gass & Mackey, 2006) has meticulously studied how different factors in the interaction (interactional context, type of task, etc) may affect L2 learners' outcomes (Ziegler, 2016), telecollaboration research has not (Dooley, 2017), mostly because this kind of research is often embedded into a course curriculum, and factors such as type of task vary widely across the board (O'Dowd & Waire, 2009). The current study aims to contribute to telecollaboration research by examining type of task, as well as the potential preparation L2 learners may engage in before participating in videoconferencing sessions. Twenty Spanish L2 learners completed two videoconferencing sessions (framed as two different tasks) with Spanish native speakers, using TalkAbroad. L2 learners' perceived learning gains and preparation data before participating in the videoconferencing component was obtained via an English guided self-reflection assignment completed post-interaction. Results suggest that learners experienced language (i.e., vocabulary) and personal learning gains (cultural knowledge and an increase in confidence), but how many learners, and how they prepared for these two different sessions differed depending on the task.

Keywords: L2 interaction, telecollaboration, TalkAbroad, preparation, task type.

Literature Review

The Role of Language Interaction in Second Language Acquisition

Long (1981, 1996) was one of the firsts to note that language communication or interaction in the second language (L2) is necessary and can aid development of the L2, with the Interaction Hypothesis. More recently, the Interaction Hypothesis has shifted to a multi-faceted approach: The Interactionist Approach (Gass & Mackey, 2006), which acknowledges how a wider array of features "interactionally modified input, having the learner's attention drawn to their interlanguage, opportunities to produce output, and opportunities to receive feedback" (p. 10) are core to interaction and its role on L2 development. Since the mid-1990s, hundreds of empirical studies have found that interaction and this array of features are beneficial for different language features (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Ellis et al., 2006; Sheen, 2007, among others) and languages (de la Fuente, 2002; Ishida, 2004, *inter alia*). Nevertheless, the current research agenda has moved away from investigating if interaction impacts L2 outcomes and is now focusing on determining what forms of interactions are the most beneficial for L2 learners. The present study aims to contribute to this new line of research by examining how type of task during videoconferencing sessions with native speakers (NS) of the target language affects L2 learners' perceived learning outcomes. But before describing the current study in more detail, we

review previous research that investigated L2 learner-NS interaction in a virtual setting and its effects on L2 learners' outcomes, as well as research that examined the role of tasks in the field of telecollaboration.

Empirical Research on Language Interaction in a Virtual Context

Although research on interactional approaches to SLA does not seem to find a clear advantage for computer-mediated (CM) over face-to-face (f2f) interaction (Gurzynski-Weiss & Baralt, 2014; Loewen & Wolff, 2016; Saito & Akiyama, 2017; Sauro & Smith, 2010; Ziegler, 2016), there is a large body of research within the field of telecollaboration that finds significant benefits for L2 learners who engage in telecollaboration—in the form of videoconferencing—and therefore in a synchronous fashion (Dooley, 2017). The term telecollaboration can encompass a wide variety of different virtual types of collaboration (written, audio, video, etc), but it is often referred to as e-tandem or videoconferencing, which is understood as virtual synchronous collaboration of L2 learners with NS of the L2 (sometimes in both directions[1]), with the goal to improve these learners' foreign language skills (Pérez- Hernández, 2014). Another existing problem when defining telecollaboration is the wide range of pedagogical underpinnings of online exchanges, which range from loosely guided speaking practice to thoroughly structured activities with a problem- solving or shared-knowledge objective (Dooley, 2017, 2018). Finally, telecollaboration's lack of consistency in methodology, may also be due to telecollaboration being a technique used in a wider range of fields (i.e., language teaching, intercultural education, etc) that have different learning objectives (Dooley, 2017).

With these limitations in mind, telecollaboration research has shown that L2 learners can improve their learner autonomy as a result of these virtual exchanges (O'Rourke, 2007; Schwienhorst, 2000) and some researchers believe that task design can play an important role in this newly gained autonomy (Collentine, 2011; Schwienhorst, 2007). Other reported benefits are linguistic accuracy and fluency (Kinginger & Belz, 2005; O'Rourke, 2005, inter alia), intercultural awareness (Müller-Hartmann, 2000; O'Dowd, 2007; among others), and online intercultural communication skills (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003).

Telecollaboration, in the form of videoconferencing, can occur between peers in the same class, between classes or between educational institutions. More recently, there has been an increase in studies that examined the benefits of telecollaboration between L2 learners and NS via open-source platforms (such as LinguaMeeting, TalkAbroad, WeSpeke, etc) and its benefits for L2 learners, when integrated as a foreign language course component (Cuervo Carruthers, 2017; Sama & Wu, 2019; Marull and Kumar; 2020, among others). We now proceed to review this fairly new body of research, which is highly relevant to the present study because the study presented here employed one of these open-source platforms (TalkAbroad) as its form of telecollaboration.

Cuervo Carruthers (2017) investigated Spanish L2 learners' perceived learning gains in language proficiency and interest in learning about the target language and culture (among other factors) upon completion of four TalkAbroad conversations. L2 learners were enrolled in a Spanish intermediate course and these virtual exchanges were a component of the course. In order to do this, she used a questionnaire that included Likert scales for self-rated proficiency and open-ended questions for the remaining areas under investigation. This questionnaire was administered before and after L2 learners engaged in these conversations via TalkAbroad (TA). Self-rated proficiency results did not significantly differ from pre- to posttest. Similarly, interest in learning the language and culture results did not differ significantly over time, but the kind of

response L2 learners provided did. Post-survey responses only showed an increase in interest to travel abroad, in addition to the interest in learning how to speak another language and learning about the culture, which was already present in the pre-test. Similarly, Conboy (2019) utilized TalkAbroad, but with the goal to enhance intermediate French learners' intercultural communicative competency, which was one of the learning components of the course in which L2 learners were enrolled. French L2 learners took part in three 30-min conversations and completed a survey and quiz that focused on cultural elements before and after their TalkAbroad conversations. Conboy found that learners improved on several cultural elements such as locating French-speaking countries on a map and learning about diversity of cultural practices with the French-speaking world. Moreover, learners reported perceived linguistic gains after participating in these interactions with French NS.

Another study that used TalkAbroad, this time with Italian L2 learners and also as part of an intermediate language conversation course, is Sama and Wu (2019). The focus of their study was on linguistic performance (fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, communication strategies), which was assessed by comparing the first 15 minutes of the first and fourth conversation, and the learners' affective experience (learner autonomy, anxiety, confidence, etc.) collected via student self-reflections and a course exit questionnaire. Learners showed the most improvement in the category of linguistic accuracy followed by fluency, which did not reach significance. With regard to learners' affective experience, participants reported having become more engaged and autonomous learners. Massery & Merrill (2019) also examined the impact that consistent and sustained oral interaction with Spanish NS of the target language using TalkAbroad could have on L2 learners' language skills. These L2 learners were enrolled in an intermediate level Spanish conversation course when the study was conducted. Learners joined two different experimental groups that differ in the number of TalkAbroad sessions learners had to complete. Language skills were assessed using the Avant Stamp Test (Bong et al, 2019) at the beginning and at the end of the semester. Results showed that learners who took part in more TalkAbroad conversations (seven in one semester) improved in all four skills, whereas learners who only participated in two TalkAbroad conversations, only improved in writing and they performed worse in the category of listening. More recently, Granda (2020) examined the implementation of TalkAbroad conversations with novice Spanish learners as part of a Spanish language course and examined changes in L2 learners' linguistic and cultural proficiency as the result of this interaction. Learners completed three 15-minute conversations with Spanish NS. Upon completion of each conversation, the students were asked to write a conversation summary, a transcription of part of the conversation, and a self-reflection (in English). Learners' responses to the self-reflection assignments showed that conversation transcriptions helped them improved their linguistic comprehension and proficiency. In addition, some learners reported not always preparing for these conversations and developing metalinguistic awareness of conversational strategies that often involved preparing vocabulary.

Unlike these previous studies, Hetrovicz (2020) focused on the impact that two TalkAbroad conversations could have on Spanish L2 learners' confidence in their Spanish language skills. She used a confidence Likert scale questionnaire before and after L2 learners completed these conversations, as well as two post-conversation open-ended questionnaires. Results from the confidence questionnaires before and after TalkAbroad interaction—obtained upon completion of a factor analysis—showed no significant difference, in terms of communicative competence, but responses from the open-ended questionnaires showed that L2 learners found interaction with NS helpful for language learning. On the other hand, confidence

questionnaire data yielded a positive effect of self-assurance, suggesting that L2 learners felt more emotionally stable in their performance upon completing these conversations, which she interpreted as an increase in confidence.

Finally, Marull and Kumar (2020) used LinguaMeeting, a similar platform to TalkAbroad, to assess L2 learners' self-perceived learning gains and personal experience with different components of an online class —one of them being telecollaborative virtual exchanges with Spanish NS—using a voluntary post-course survey. This survey contained several Likert scales questions (0- not at all, 100-very much), some targeting student learning gains and some targeting students' personal experience, as well as open-ended questions. Overall, L2 learners reported that these virtual exchanges were an excellent way to learn about the target culture and that they offered a great opportunity to practice their language skills with a NS. L2 learners' highest rated areas of improvement were listening comprehension ($M = 85.36$; $SD = 18.21$), cultural knowledge ($M = 85.09$; $SD = 20.66$), Spanish pronunciation ($M = 81.25$; $SD = 21.44$) and applying classroom skills to a "real-life" context ($M = 80.37$; $SD = 23.27$).

So far, this growing body of research that uses open-source platforms to examine the benefits of L2 learner-NS interaction is very promising. Still, consistency in methodology is lacking and factors such as preparation pre-videoconferencing with NS and the type of task these sessions were framed as are not considered when discussing the benefits of these videoconferencing sessions on L2 learners' learning gains. Most of these studies reported using TalkAbroad or LinguaMeeting as a component of the course in which L2 were enrolled (Conboy, 2019; Marull & Kumar, 2020; Sam & Wu, 2019). Sam & Wu (2019) mentioned preparing L2 learners for the TalkAbroad conversations, L2 learners in Granda (2020) reported not preparing at all, and the rest of these studies do not mention any preparation inside or outside the classroom. In addition, several of these studies reported that the TalkAbroad conversations were framed as language practice (Cuervo Carruthers, 2019; Granda, 2020), whereas other studies framed these conversations as different tasks (an open discussion about life vs. a picture description task, in Cuervo Carruthers, 2017), and at least one study clearly indicated not providing learners with any type of prompt (Conboy, 2019). The following section will review the body of research that studied the role of tasks in language interaction, with a focus on L2 learners' outcomes.

The Role of Tasks in Language Interaction and Videoconferencing Exchanges

Over the last three decades, tasks have become central to L2 language pedagogy and research (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014), leading to the emergence of a new strand of research known as task-based language learning (TBLL). Research within interactionist approaches to SLA has also considered the role of task on L2 learners' performance during interaction (De Long et al., 2012; Kuiken & Vedder, 2012, among others). One of the factors that have been most studied in relationship to task type, is task complexity and its effects on L2 learners' performance and learning gains. Research on task complexity and L2 production often aims to test two opposing theoretical accounts. The first one is Skehan's (2009) Trade-Off Hypothesis which predicts that increasing task complexity will make it more difficult for L2 learners to attend to multiple linguistic aspects at once, and as a consequence, there will be a trade-off between complexity and accuracy, because these two dimensions compete for attention resources. The second is Robinson's (2007) Cognition Hypothesis which predicts that as task complexity increases (along resource-directing dimensions[2]), this will lead to both superior complexity and accuracy. Overall, research in this area, suggests that increasing task complexity

(number of elements to focus on and reasoning demands) can lead to certain improvements in L2 output, consistent with the later theoretical account (Kuiken et al., 2005; Levkina & Gilabert, 212; Révész, 2011, among other), but some studies find no differences in L2 outcomes based on task complexity (Michel, 2013).

As previously stated, the role of type of task on L2 outcomes and performance, has not received much attention in the telecollaboration realm, and some scholars argue that future research should consider this factor when assessing the benefits that L2 learners experience as a result of telecollaboration (Collentine, 2011; Dooley, 2017). O'Dowd and Waire (2009) acknowledged this lack of consistency in task design with a synthesis paper, which identifed the 12 most recurring tasks in telecollaborative exchanges. These were grouped into three subcategories: information exchange, comparison and analysis, and collaborative. The first category, information exchange tasks, are the most used with open- source platform research. In this type of tasks, L2 learners often discuss one topic (assigned by the language instructor) with their telecollaborative partners, without a specific goal other than practicing their language skills. This type of tasks are often used as introductory activities for two groups of learners who are not familiar with each other, and can sometimes be considered "monologic" (O'Dowd & Waire, 2009, p.175) because it leads to little linguistic or cultural negotiation of meaning. The second category, comparison and analysis tasks, are more demanding because they not only require that the L2 learners exchange information with their telecollaborative partner, but that they also push the L2 learners to go one step further and carry out comparisons and sometimes critical analyses of cultural or linguistic products. Finally, category three, collaborative tasks, require that the L2 learner exchanges, compares information, and collaborates to produce a joint product or conclusion with their telecollaborative partner. O'Dowd and Waire (2009) took an important first step at identifying and classifying the most used telecollaborative task into three main categories. In addition, they indicated that no study has examined if there is a correlation between learner proficiency level and task type, and that task choice has differed from study to study due to the theoretical approach adopted (psycholinguistic, sociocultural, etc). Hence, future studies that examine task type in relationship with L2 learners' outcomes, in the context of telecollaboration, are needed.

The Present Study

Telecollaboration research, in contrast to research that studied interactionist approaches to SLA, is mostly conducted as part of a course curriculum. However, no attention has been paid to any potential preparation L2 learners may have engaged in before partaking in videoconferencing sessions, and how this preparation could consequently affect L2 learners' outcomes, which are often assumed to be the by-product of just the time spent in the virtual exchange.

In addition, task type (and task complexity) have the potential to influence L2 learners' outcome, particularly during oral interaction because cognitive demands increase (Robinson, 2007; Skehan, 2009). However, this has not been addressed in telecollaboration research and poses a problem, because task type varies significantly depending on the research approach the researcher adopts (psycholinguistic, intercultural, socio-cultural, etc). The new emerging body of research that examines the benefits of L2 learner-NS interaction via open-source platforms also displays this inconsistency in methodology by framing these videoconferencing sessions differently: as simple language practice, problem-solving tasks (Cuervo Carruthers, 2017;

Granda, 2020; Marrul & Kumar, 2020), or by providing no instructions and therefore no context for the interaction (Conboy, 2019). Moreover, some studies mention that L2 learners received scaffolded preparation before engaging in virtual conversations with NS (Sam & Wu, 2019), others mention that L2 learners did not prepare at all (Granda, 2020) and finally, the majority of these studies do not mention preparation at all (Massery & Merrill, 2019; Cuervo Carruthers, 2017, etc), even though these virtual exchanges were part of the course curriculum L2 learners were enrolled in.

The current study addresses these gaps in previous studies by examining preparation pre-videoconferencing sessions with NS as well as how task type (an information exchange vs. a comparison and analysis task) can affect this preparation and L2 learners' perceived learning gains (post-interaction). We posit the following research questions:

1. Do Spanish L2 learners prepare for TalkAbroad sessions? If they do, is this preparation different depending on the task (an information exchange vs. a comparison and analysis task)?
2. Do L2 learners report gaining any perceived learning gains? If they do, do these perceived learning gains differ depending on the task (an information exchange vs. a comparison and analysis task)?

Methodology

Participants

A total of 18 English L1-Spanish L2 learners and two Spanish heritage learners took part in this study. Of these L2 learners, 13 were female and seven were male students. Their age ranged from 19 to 23 years of age ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 1.4$). They were enrolled in an intermediate Spanish conversation course when the data was collected, and the TalkAbroad conversations were built as a course component. L2 learners completed these conversations during week 9 and 14 and a guided self-reflection assignment after each conversation, which was used as the assessment tool in the present study. When the semester came to an end, L2 learners were asked to sign a consent form to allow a group of researchers to use their conversation recordings as well as their self-reflection assignment responses for research purposes.

The Platform TalkAbroad

The telecollaboration component of this study was conducted using TalkAbroad (TA), an open-source platform that connects individuals with NS of a particular language to hold 15 or 20-minute conversations for a fee. In addition to individual use, foreign language instructors can register an account and ask their students to complete an assignment that involves them communicating with a NS via videoconferencing. The participants in the current study (as part of their coursework), registered and paid a fee, to gain access to a pool of Spanish NS' profiles and their availability to schedule a session. These NS labelled "conversation partners", are coached to interact with foreign language learners and can receive instructions from the language instructor to help learners complete the assignment.

The Tasks

Students had to complete two 30-minute conversations that were framed as two different tasks following O'Dowd and Waire's (2009) classification of tasks in telecollaboration research. Task instructions can be found in Appendix A. The first task was an information exchange task,

in which students were asked to draw from one of the topics discussed in class and to talk about it with a NS. The topics covered in class included language and society, art, health and wellbeing, sports, education, the environment, and cuisine. The overall objective of this task was for L2 learners to practice their language skills with Spanish NS, while discussing a topic of interest to them.

A month later, students were asked to complete task two, a comparison and analysis exchange task. This time, students were asked to pick a topic from one of the thematic units covered in class and to formulate a question that included a comparison or contrasting feature. For example, one student posited this question *¿Es la educación bilingüe en España diferente que en EEUU?* (Is bilingual education different in Spain than in the US?). Most of the questions that students proposed compared one aspect of the Spanish-speaking world to this same aspect in the United States. Thus, part of the information required to answer this question (formulated by the student), had to be obtained by conversing with a Spanish NS. This second task was designed for L2 learners to go beyond superficial communication and prompted them to ask more questions and often take the lead in the conversation. After this second task, L2 learners had to participate in a discussion board assignment embedded into the overall Spanish conversation course that asked them to state their question and report what they had learned after talking to a Spanish NS. All students completed the information exchange task first and the comparison and analysis task second. Although L2 learners practiced their speaking and comprehension skills as part of the conversation course, they did not receive any targeted preparation prior to engaging in these two TalkAbroad conversations.

Assessment Tool

In order to determine how L2 learners prepare before participating in these TalkAbroad conversations, and what they perceived as learning gains post-interaction, we used L2 learners' responses to a guided self-reflection assignment that they completed after each task, similar to previous research (Granda, 2020; Sam & Wu, 2019, among others). This self-reflection assignment was part of the conversation course and consisted of four main sections: (a) description of the experience upon completion of the conversations, (b) preparation for the conversation, (c) perceived learning gains, and (d) perceptions of these assignments in general.

All sections contained a series of open-ended questions. In the first section of the guided self-reflection assignment, L2 learners were asked to reflect on their experience before and after conversing with a Spanish NS. The second section prompted L2 learners to report how they had prepared for the conversation. They were asked to specify any broad approaches they had taken such as note-taking or writing questions. This section also prompted them to report any linguistic strategic preparation such as searching specific vocabulary or reviewing grammar. The following section asked L2 learners to reflect on what they had learned due to this interaction from a language and personal standpoint. Finally, the last section of the guided self-reflection assignment was devoted to students' overall perception of these assignments (tasks). The prompt for the guided self-reflection was the same except for one extra question that was added the second time around to explicitly direct L2 learners to compare their perceptions across tasks. For a full list of the questions in each section, see Appendix B.

Data Coding

To identify if L2 learners prepared and experienced any type of perceived learning gain, we coded their responses to the questions "Did you prepare before participating in this

conversation?" and "Did you gain any personal/language learning gains?". If their response was affirmative, they received a 1 and if they were negative a 0 was assigned. We then quantified the number of L2 learners who had responded affirmatively and reported the percentages for each task. To examine which types of preparation L2 learners engaged in and what types of learning gains they perceived, we read all responses to the follow-up questions (i.e., elaborate or list the strategies you used to prepare) and classified them by theme. Finally, we quantified the number of times these themes appeared in L2 learners' responses and calculated percentages for each task

Results

Preparation Results

Our initial step was to examine if students had prepared for these TalkAbroad conversations by examining responses to the first question in the preparation section of the guided self-reflection assignment. Responses revealed that more students prepared for the comparison and analysis task than for the information exchange task, with 95% of students reporting that they had prepared for the comparison and analysis task, in comparison to only 63% for the information exchange task. An independent sample t-test showed that the difference in preparation between the information exchange ($M = 0.63$, $SD = 0.50$) and the comparison and analysis task ($M = 0.95$, $SD = 0.22$) was significant, $t(38) = 2.84$, $p < .001$. The second step was to examine the techniques L2 learners reported adopting to prepare for these conversations. For the information exchange task, the most popular preparation approaches were reviewing relevant vocabulary (29%) and creating a list of questions to ask their TalkAbroad partner (29%), followed by making a list of talking points (21%), and looking at TalkAbroad conversation partners' profiles (21%). On the other hand, when preparing for the comparison and analysis task, the most popular approach was to research their selected topic by reading articles on the internet (34%), followed by searching for relevant vocabulary to have it at hand during the conversation (27%), and making a list of questions (27%). Research on the selected topic often involved reading digital newspaper articles about the topic in Spanish to gain content knowledge.

Overall, L2 learners reported preparing for both tasks and how this preparation helped them complete these conversations successfully. Although L2 learners were not explicitly prompted to compare their preparation across tasks, some of them did and their responses support the numeric difference we mentioned previously, suggesting that they prepared more for the comparison and analysis (conversation 1) than the information exchange task (conversation 2).

> "I did, however, look at the syllabus to think about certain things that I could speak about to the speaker. This preparation came in handy as the speaker asked me what things we learn about in class when the conversation began to lull" (P.1908)

> "I spent much more time preparing for this conversation than I did for the first one. I read a variety of articles about the state of the environment in Costa Rica and the US as a result of the virus. I also looked up a variety of vocabulary words that I thought would be useful. When I was reviewing different articles to prepare and came across a word, I wasn't sure how to say in Spanish I looked it up and wrote it down" (P. 2008)

Interestingly, L2 learners mentioned a great deal of vocabulary learning during the preparation process, which was also one of the most listed perceived learning gains in the third section of the guided self-reflection assignment.

Perceived Learning Gains' Results

Perceive learning gains were examined by categorizing and quantifying L2 learners' responses to the two questions in the third section of the guided self-reflection assignment, which targeted personal and language learning gains. Personal learning gains results showed that the number of L2 learners who reported having experienced personal learning gains upon completion of these tasks differed, with 70% of the students in the information exchange task and 85% of the L2 learners in the comparison and analysis task. However, the difference in personal learning gains between the information exchange ($M = 0.70$, $SD = 0.47$) and the comparison and analysis task ($M = 0.85$, $SD = 0.37$) was not significant, t (38) = 1.12, $p = .26$[3]. With regard to the type of personal learning gain made, students reported having gained confidence in their Spanish abilities and a great deal of cultural knowledge, in addition to an increased interest in studying or traveling abroad. Several students remarked that the confidence they had gained after completing these assignments encouraged them to pursue further interaction with Spanish NS outside the classroom. In quotes taken directly from students' self-reflections, they stated:

> "The thing I love most is learning about the other person's culture from someone who actually lives there and experiences it." (P.1905)

> "It gave me the confidence to partake in more conversation in Spanish. Our neighbors are having work done on their house. When I came outside, my mom was talking to the owner of the company and his wife. He is from Guatemala, and his wife is from Mexico. I was able to converse with them in Spanish, and he said my accent was very good." (P.2003)

Similarly, the number of students who reported language learning gains did not differ greatly by task. A total of 95% of the students reported having gained language knowledge (vocabulary, etc.) after completing the information exchange task, and 85% of them after the comparison and analysis task. The difference in language gains made in the information exchange ($M = 0.95$, $SD = 0.22$) and the comparison and analysis task ($M = 0.85$, $SD = 0.37$) was not significant, t (38) = 1.04, $p = .30$. Regarding the type of language gain, the most reported learning gain in both tasks was vocabulary, followed by conversational strategies, and understanding different Spanish accents. One student reported:

> "I learned new things about both Colombia and Costa Rica and at the same time improved my confidence and proficiency in understanding their respective accents" (P.1904)

Students reported having learned a great deal of vocabulary as the result of completing these tasks, but also alluded to some of this vocabulary learning happening during the preparation stage. When it comes to conversation strategies, most students reported using circumlocution as a useful strategy that they resorted to frequently. Some students reflected on how they felt embarrassed to ask the NS to repeat to ensure that they understood but

acknowledged the importance of doing so if they wanted to learn how to communicate effectively.

> "I had to know a lot more words pertaining to the dance and other aspects of it. I specifically remember learning the word for internship as *la pasantía* which I used during my conversation." (P.1901)

> "I don't ask them to repeat it because I usually understand the message she is conveying as a whole. Although, I do think I should get better about this and not be embarrassed to ask because it is a learning opportunity and an important tactic to overcome a language barrier." (P.1905)

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to examine how task type (an information exchange vs. a comparison and analysis task) can affect how L2 learners prepare for videoconferencing sessions with Spanish NS (using TalkAbroad) and what they perceived as learning gains (post-interaction). Our study found that L2 learners did prepare before these virtual exchanges and that the number of learners who reported preparing changed significantly by task. Similarly, the type of preparation strategies adopted by L2 learners before partaking in these TalkAbroad conversations also changed depending on the task. L2 learners prioritized vocabulary search and making a list of questions when preparing for the information exchange task but utilized a more holistic content-based approach in preparation for the comparison and analysis task by reading articles about their topic of choosing on the internet. In addition, L2 learners reported experiencing personal and language learning gains post-interaction. More L2 learners reported perceived language gains (vocabulary and conversation strategies) after completing the information exchange task and more L2 learners reported perceived personal gains (confidence and cultural knowledge) upon completing the comparison and analysis task; however, these differences across tasks were not significant,.

Previous research that examined the benefits L2 learners experience after completing TalkAbroad conversations, did not consistently report whether L2 learners received some type of preparation prior to engaging in this videoconferencing sessions. The few studies that mentioned preparation noted that L2 learners did not prepare at all (Granda, 2020) or received targeted preparation in the form of conversation strategies and error correction practice during class time (Sam & Wu, 2019). The present study is the first study to operationalize preparation as a variable and examines if it can be affected by the manner in which these videoconferencing sessions are framed as different tasks. Our findings show that when asking L2 learners about preparing for a videoconference session with Spanish NS, that either had an analytic/ comparison component or was framed as conversation practice, more L2 learners reported preparing for the former than the later. This finding strongly suggests that the type of task used to frame these videoconferencing sessions matters.

Another reason as to why it is important to consider preparation, is the fact that most research, which examines the benefits of open-source platforms on L2 learners' learning gains, is conducted as part of a foreign/second language course (Marull & Kumar, 2020; Massery & Merrill, 2019; Sam & Wu, 2019). In these studies, these videoconferencing sessions with NS were a component of the course. Nevertheless, any learning gains that L2 learners experienced is often associated only with the videoconferencing sessions themselves, and any potential

preparation L2 learners may have engaged in prior to this interaction is neither considered nor discussed. In the present study, we find several mentions of language learning (particularly related to vocabulary) at the preparation stage. A theme that was present in L2 learners' responses in the preparation as well as the perceived learning gains sections of the guided self-reflection assignment. This finding supports the need to consider the role of preparation (in isolation or in combination with the virtual exchanges) in tellecolaboration research, to better identify the source of the learning outcomes reported by L2 learners.

Overall, our perceived learning gains findings, regardless of task type, align with previous research that studied the benefits of L2 learner-NS telecollaboration. Research in this area often finds that L2 learners gain confidence (Hetrovicz, 2020), cultural knowledge (Conboy, 2019; O'Dowd, 2007, inter alia), as well as language or linguistic gains such as improving their comprehension skills (Granda, 2020; Marull & Kumar, 2020) and general communication/ conversation skills (Belz & Müller- Hartmann, 2003; Massery & Marrill, 2019). The second contribution of the present study is the inclusion of task type as a factor that may modulate the learners gains L2 learners experience as a result of this interaction, which is an area of research that needed to be studied (Collentine, 2011; O'Dowd & Waire, 2009; Schwienhorst, 2007). Previous research targeted different learning gains: culture-related (Schwienhorst, 200), personal (Hetrovicz, 2020; Marull & Kumar, 2020) and language-related (Massery & Merrill, 2019, among others). The present study targeted personal as well as language-related perceived learning gains and explored if these learning gains could change depending on the task L2 learners were asked to complete. Our results suggest that upon completing an information exchange task (language practice) L2 learners perceived more language-related learning gains (such as learning of vocabulary and conversation strategies), but after completing a task with a comparison or analytic component, more L2 learners reported experiencing more personal learning gains (intercultural knowledge and confidence). It is practically impossible to compare our findings with previous studies in this area because most of these studies do not provide a description of how these virtual exchanges were framed (i.e., language practice, etc). Sama & Wu (2019) was the only study that examined personal as well as linguistic learning gains, however, it is not clear how these TalkAbroad conversations were framed. Future research in this area needs to provide a more detailed description about L2 learners preparation, and the instructions that L2 learners receive before engaging in these videoconferencing sessions with NS.

Although assessing task complexity is out of the scope of the present study, O'Dowd & Waire (2009) identify the comparison and analysis task as a more complex task than the information exchange task because cognitive demands are higher when L2 learners have to compare and contrast information in addition to communicating with NS. Thus, future research should also examine more comprehensively if and how task complexity in a virtual environment affects not only how L2 learners perform during the interaction, but also if the learning gains learners experience post-interaction differ depending on the task complexity.

In sum, the present study contributed to previous research that examined the benefits that L2 learners experience as the result of virtual interaction with NS (via open-source platforms), by examining the role of task type and the preparation L2 learners engaged in pre-interaction. Our findings suggest that type of task can affect not only the type of learning gains: personal (i.e., confidence or culture knowledge) and language-related (learning vocabulary and conversational strategies) L2 learners experience, but also how many L2 learners report preparing and how they prepare for these virtual exchanges with NS. Moving forward, research

in this area should describe how these virtual exchanges are framed (task type) and if L2 learners received any preparation pre-interaction in a more consistent and comprehensive manner.

Endnotes:

[1] L2 learners interact with interlocutors whose first language happen to be the second language they are learning and vice versa.

[2] Directing learning to deliberate about multiple elements within a task.

[3] Reviewer 1 mentioned that there must have been wide variance in the data, because the difference in personal learning gains between tasks was not significant. To address this, we conducted an inter-rater reliability analysis and obtained a Kappa value of 0.62 with $p < 0.001$, which is often considered substantial agreement in SLA research.

References

Belz, J. & Muller-Hartmann, A. (2003). Teachers as Intercultural Learners: Negotiating German-American Telecollaboration Along the Institutional Fault Line. *Modern Language Journal*, *87* (1), 71-89.

Bong, D., Bong, S., & Falsgraf, C. (2019). Avant Stamp Test. https://avantassessment.com/index.html

Collentine, K. (2011). Learner Autonomy in a Task-Based 3D World and Production. *Language Learning and Technology*, *15* (3), 50–67.

Conboy, A. (2019, September). The TalkAbroad case: addressing intercultural communicative competency in Fren311. Paper presented at the Thursday Forum Series in College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, Saint Joseph, MN. https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/forum_lectures/406/

Cuervo Carruthers, H. C. (2017). Students' Experiences During Cross-Cultural Video Chat Interactions. In Julia A. Foss (Ed.), *Performance+ Proficiency= Possibilities* (pp. 53-68). Robert M. Terry.

de la Fuente, M. (2002). Negotiation and oral acquisition of L2 vocabulary: the roles of input and output in the receptive and productive acquisition of words. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *24*(1), 81–112.

De Jong, N., Steinel, M., Florijn, A., Schoonen, R. & Hulstijn, J.H. (2012). The effect of task complexity on functional adequacy, fluency and lexical diversity in speaking performance of native and non-native speakers In House, A., Kuiken, F., & Vedder, I. (Eds.)*, Dimensions of L2 performance and proficiency: complexity, accuracy and fluency in SLA* (pp. 121-142). John Benjamins.

Dooly, M. (2017). Telecollaboration. In C. A. Chapelle & S. Sauro (Eds.). *The handbook of technology in second language teaching and learning* (pp.169−183). Wiley−Blackwell.

Dooly, M., & O'Dowd, R. (2018). Telecollaboration in the foreign language classroom: A review of its origins and its application to language teaching practice. In M. Dooly & R. O'Dowd (Eds.), *In this together: Teachers' experiences with transnational, telecollaborative language learning projects* (pp. 19–34). Peter Lang AG, International Publishers.

Doughty, C. and Varela, E. (1998). Communicative focus on form. In C. J. Doughty & J. Williams (Eds.). *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition* (pp. 114–138). Cambridge University Press.

Ellis, R., Loewen, S., and Erlam, R. (2006). Implicit and explicit corrective feedback and the acquisition of L2 grammar. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *28*(2), 339–368.

Gass, S. & Mackey, A. (2006). Input, interaction, and output in second language acquisition. In B. VanPatten and J. Williams (Eds.), *Theories in second language acquisition: An introduction* (pp. 175–199). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Granda, C. (2020, October 2-3). *Using TalkAbroad to Promote Linguistic and Cultural Proficiency Outside of the Classroom* [Conference presentation]. Symposium of Language Pedagogy in Higher Education. Champaign-Urbana, IL, United States.

Gurzynski-Weiss, L., & Baralt, M. (2014). Exploring learner perception and use of task-based interactional feedback in FTF and CMC modes. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *36*(1), 1-37.

Hetrovicz, L. (2020, September 24-27). *The Effects of NNS-NNS and NNS-NS Telecollaborative Interaction on the Development of Second Language Confidence* [Conference Presentation]. 49th Virtual Annual Meeting of the Linguistic association of the Southwest. Albuquerque, NM, United States.

Ishida, M. (2004). Effects of recasts on the acquisition of the aspectual form of –te i (ru) by learners of Japanese as a foreign language. *Language Learning*, *54*(2), 311–394.

Kinginger, C., & Belz, J. (2005). Socio-cultural perspectives on pragmatic development in foreign language learning: Microgenetic and ontogenetic case studies from telecollaboration and study abroad. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, *2*(4), 369–422.

Kuiken, F., & Vedder, I. (2012). Syntactic complexity, lexical variation and accuracy as a function of task complexity and proficiency level in L2 writing and speaking. In House, A., Kuiken, F., & Vedder, I. (Eds.)*, Dimensions of L2 performance and proficiency: complexity, accuracy and fluency in SLA* (pp. 143-170). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Kuiken, F., Mos, M., & Vedder, I. (2005). Cognitive task complexity and second language writing performance. In S. H. Foster–Cohen, M. P. García Mayo, & J. Cenoz (Eds.), *EUROSLA Yearbook 5* (pp- 195-222*).* John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Levkina, M., & Gilabert, R. (2012). The effects of cognitive task complexity on L2 oral production. In House, A., Kuiken, F., & Vedder, I. (Eds.)*, Dimensions of L2 performance and proficiency: complexity, accuracy and fluency in SLA* (pp. 171-198). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Loewen, S. & Wolff, D. (2016). Peer interaction in F2F and CMC contexts. In M. Sato & S. Ballinger (Eds.), *Peer interaction and second language learning: Pedagogical potential and research agenda (pp.*163–184). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Long, M. H. (1996). The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition. In W.C. Ritchie & T. K. Bhatia (Eds.), *Handbook of research on language acquisition* (pp. 413–468.). Academic Press.

Marull, C. & Kumar, S. (2020). Authentic Language Learning through Telecollaboration in Online Courses. *TechTrends 64*(4), 628-635.

Massery, L. & Merrill, K. (2017). Impact of consistent and sustained oral interaction with native speakers of the target language on macro-linguistic skills in L2 Spanish. *Modern Journal of Language Teaching Methods*,*7*(7), 10-22.

Michel, M. C. (2013). The use of conjunctions in cognitively simple versus complex oral L2 tasks. *The Modern Language Journal*, *97*(1), 178–195.

Müller-Hartmann, A. (2000). The role of tasks in promoting intercultural learning in electronic learning networks. *Language Learning & Technology*, *4*(2), 129–147.

O'Dowd, R. & Waire., P (2009). Critical Issues in Telecollaborative Task Design. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *22*(2), 173–188.

O'Rourke, B. (2007). Models of telecollaboration (1): eTandem. In R. O'Dowd (Ed.), *Online intercultural exchange* (pp. 41–61). Multilingual Matters.

O'Rourke, B. (2005). Form-focused interaction in online tandem learning. *CALICO Journal*, *22*(3), 433–466.

González-Lloret, M., & Ortega, L. (2014). Towards technology-mediated TBLT: An introduction. In González-Lloret, M., & Ortega, L (Eds.), *Technology-mediated TBLT: Researching technology and tasks* (pp. 1-22). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Perez-Hernández, D. (2014). Technology Provides Foreign-Language Immersion at a Distance. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. https://www.chronicle.com/article/technology-provides-foreign-language-immersion-at-a-distance/

Révész, A. (2011). Task complexity, focus on L2 constructions, and individual differences: A classroom-based study. *The Modern Language Journal*, *95*(1), 162–181.

Robinson, P. (2007). Task complexity, theory of mind, and intentional reasoning: Effects on L2 speech production, interaction, uptake and perceptions of task difficulty. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, *45*(3), 193–213.

Saito, K., & Akiyama, Y. (2017). Video-based interaction, negotiation for comprehensibility, and second language speech learning: A longitudinal study. *Language learning*, *67*(1), 43-74.

Sama, C. M., & Wu, Y. (2019). Integrating "Talk Abroad" into an intermediate foreign language course: Building learner autonomy and engagement through video conversations with native speakers. In Carrió-Pastor., M.L. (Eds.), *Teaching language and teaching literature in virtual environments* (pp. 73-94). Springer.

Sauro, S., & Smith, B. (2010). Investigating L2 performance in text chat. *Applied linguistics*, *31*(4), 554-577.

Schwienhorst, Klaus. (2007). *Learner Autonomy and CALL Environments*. Routledge.

Schwienhorst, K. (2000). *Virtual reality and learner autonomy in second language acquisition* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Trinity College Dublin]. Trinity's Access to Research Archive. http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/78619

Sheen, Y. (2007). The effects of corrective feedback, language aptitude and learner attitudes on the acquisition of English articles. In A. Mackey (Ed.), *Conversational interaction in second language acquisition. A series of empirical studies* (pp. 301–322). Oxford University Press.

Skehan, P. (2009). Modeling second language performance: Integrating complexity, accuracy, fluency, and lexis. *Applied Linguistics*, *30*(4), 510–532.

Ziegler, N. (2016). Synchronous computer-mediated communication and interaction: A meta-analysis. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 38*(3), 553-586.

Appendix A
Information exchange task (*instructions translated from Spanish*)
Instructions for students: It's time to practice. Choose one of the topics we have covered in class so far (art, sports, education, food, etc) and complete a 30-min TalkAbroad conversation.

Instructions for TalkAbroad partners: help the student by asking questions if you do not understand what they are saying or if they freeze.

Comparison and analysis task (instructions translated from Spanish)
Instructions for students: For this assignment, you are going to choose a topic of interest to you and write a specific question. For example: What are the requirements to apply for college in Mexico? This topic must be specific (rather than education in general, "college applications in Mexico") and the person you decide to talk to, must be familiar with this topic. It is also important that this question you are asking is comparative in nature, and that you compare what you know about this topic (from your experience in the US) to what your TalkAbroad partner discusses with you. Although the main purpose of the assignment is that you get information from your TalkAbroad partner, you should be ready to share what you know about this topic (from a US perspective) with your conversation partner. In addition to this conversation, you will have to complete a follow-up written assignment where you discuss what you learned about this topic after completing your TalkAbroad conversation. You will receive more information about this assignment next week.

Private Instructions: Even though the students need information from you to complete this assignment, we still want this to be a conversation. Please, ask the student from time to time "how does this work in the US?" to keep the conversation interactive.

Appendix B

Assessment tool: guided self-reflection assignment instructions

The goal of this assignment is to reflect on your experience using Talk Abroad and your language learning process, so you are encouraged to complete this assignment in English. It is recommended that you have access to the recording of your conversation (email me if you cannot find it). I want you to really try and think critically about your Spanish communication abilities and your Spanish language learning process. Use these questions to guide your narrative.

Part 1: Description of the experience
Summarize how the conversation went.
  o How did you feel about this assignment before you completed it (anxious, confident, etc)?
  o How did you feel while completing the assignment (nervous, frustrated, etc)?
  o How did you feel after the conversation was over? Was it a positive/ negative/neutral experience?

Part 2: Preparation for the TalkAbroad conversations
Describe any preparation you engaged in prior to completing this conversation.
  o Did you prepare before participating in this conversation?
  o If you did, please list all the strategies you use (i.e., vocabulary or grammar review, browsing of TalkAbroad conversation partners' profiles, note-taking, writing questions, etc).

Part 3: Learning gains
Reflect on what you think you have learned as the result of participating in these TalkAbroad conversations.
  o Did you gain anything at a personal level? Elaborate.
  o Did you gain anything at a linguistic/language level? Elaborate.

Part 4: Overall perceptions
Describe your overall perception of this TalkAbroad assignment.
  o Did you enjoy/ not like the experience? How so?
  o Did you find this assignment to be difficult? Elaborate.
  o List one good experience with this assignment (it can be anything: content, logistics, etc).
  o List one bad experience with this assignment (it can be anything: content, logistics, etc).
  o The goal for TalkAbroad conversations 1 and 2 was different. Did you prefer one over the other? Why? *(This question only appeared on the second guided self-reflection assignment)*