Experiences of University Students in Online Exchanges with Native Spanish Speakers

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Introduction

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) recommends that teachers and students speak and interact in the target language for at least 90% of each class session in order to support students in developing oral communicative competence in the target language. Experienced language teachers often provide opportunities for students to use the target language in class. Although valuable, this interaction is limited in that the people the students communicate with are not usually native speakers. When communicating with native speakers, students must negotiate meaning on every level. An L2 classroom, by itself, it is not enough for students to sufficiently develop the ability to negotiate meaning in intercultural exchanges.

Language teachers and researchers continually search for opportunities for their students to communicate with native speakers and give them the opportunity to develop these essential language skills (Lee & Markey, 2014). Educators and researchers have taken advantage of opportunities afforded by new technologies for enriching language education with intercultural and online exchanges with native speakers. These technologies include blogs, social media platforms, podcasts, and video and audio chats. This is done with the hope that this linguistic contact will improve the cultural experience and L2 proficiency of language learners.

Benefits and Drawbacks of Online Exchanges

Utilizing current technological affordances, students can communicate with native speakers through text-based, or asynchronous, means or through synchronous audio or video chats. Much of the research regarding online exchanges has been dedicated to understanding the pedagogical benefits to students or the linguistic aspects that present themselves (Belz, 2002; Lee & Markey, 2014). The overwhelming amount of research on this topic makes clear that this online contact yields academic benefits in foreign language classrooms. Students generally improve in overall oral performance (Yamada, 2009) and increase in cultural understanding and sensitivity (Lee, 2009; Lee& Markey, 2014; Ware, 2005). Additionally, students feel a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment after successfully communicating in the target language with a native speaker (Belz, 2002).

Researchers often report students' overall opinion of their experience in online exchanges rather than a detailed description. Most students describe their experience as beneficial to their learning and cultural understanding (Hampel & Stickler, 2012; Lee, 2009), but this is not always the case. Some students report mixed opinions when asked about their overall feelings about the online exchanges. Belz (2002) conducted a study of Spanish-American telecollaboration in a language class in which students worked with just a few speaking partners through the duration of the class. She found that although most of her students enjoyed the process, some just wanted to end it altogether. These results produce important questions about the i Sk efgWWfeYjbWqlWWUWS VbWLWWa`↑`WWjUZS`Ywz

Many students report very negative experiences with these online exchanges. Ware (2005) lists three sources of tension that occurred during a study on German-American telecollaboration. These tensions included differences in expectations, meaning that one speaking partner did not take some tasks as seriously as the other; logistical constraints regarding times to meet and exchange information; and finally, social factors. These factors included cultural misunderstandings and simply not getting along. Ware, however, insists that these social factors are essential for developing cultural understanding. While most researchers would probably agree, it is unclear whether or not these tensions have a negative impact on students' experience with online exchanges.

In addition to social factors, anxiety may play a role in online exchanges. Salehi and Marefat (2014) investigated the relationships between foreign language anxiety, test anxiety, and test performance in ELL students. They found that foreign language anxiety had a statistically significant debilitative effect on exam grades. Many students experience foreign language anxiety (Chen & Lee, 2011) when using the target language as beginners or even at intermediate levels. This anxiety can also reduce students' desire to continue their study or learning of the target language. Researcher opinions vary regarding anxiety in online exchanges. Hampel and Stickler (2012) suggest that video communication reduces the level of student anxiety as compared to audio communication because students gain the additional communicative tools of gestures and body language. In support of this theory, Yamada (2009) and Senem (2009) suggest that social presence is essential for these exchanges to be mutually beneficial and enjoyable. Social presence is the perceived proximity to real-time face-to-face interactions. In other words, social presence is how "real" the experience feels for the student. Yamada and Senem assert that high levels of social presence will lower stress, create a sense of community and belonging, and reduce student anxiety or defensiveness. Although this may be true for more confident students, it may have the opposite effect for students who are more withdrawn. It is possible that if students experience anxiety or other negative emotions while communicating with native speakers online, their overall performance will suffer rather than improve.

Beers Fägersten, Cunningham, and Holmsten (2010) experimented with several modes of communication used to facilitate online intercultural exchanges and concluded that:

> "The problems experienced by learners… are both exacerbated and ameliorated by the computer-mediated channels open to learners and teachers… However, the multimodality offered by the software enables students and teachers to compensate for these problems in a way that more than makes up for the disadvantages. (p. 174)

This notion is a common assumption in this field of research. Although students may experience social and logistical challenges while using online exchange technology, educators assume that the academic benefits of communicating with a real native speaker through an online exchange outweigh these concerns. Though the academic benefits cannot be ignored, we must ask if these pedagogical benefits truly outweigh the anxiety and other social difficulties faced by each student in these unique situations. Using these technological tools may not be a one-size-fits-all solution for all language learners and all language classrooms.

Purpose of the Current Study

Understanding the student experience is important in order for educators to properly prepare and support them beforehand and create valuable practice and experience. Despite the wealth of research on online intercultural exchanges, information is lacking with regard to the student experience in these online interactions. Chen and Lee (2011) state: "In learning scenarios, teachers who make correct judgments about the emotional status of students can improve the effectiveness of their interactions with students" (418). Although researchers do address the student experience in

these online interactions, they consistently do so in relation to student performance and overall sense of improvement. Researchers rarely address students' emotions relating to the task of communication in the target language for the first time with a native speaker in an online environment. By investigating this phenomenon, researchers and educators can become more familiar with the student experience and by so doing enhance their use of these tools and the overall language learning of their students.

The purpose of the current study is to better understand L2 learners' experience communicating with native speakers online. Students' experience with this kind of task can vary from student to student and it is important for educators and researchers to understand these perspectives so as to use modern educational tools to their utmost potential in the classroom. Though the results of this study may not represent every learner's experience using online exchange tools, it is hoped that the results of this study can begin to inform future pedagogical practice in this area.

Methodology

Research Questions

The principal research question addressed in this study is: How do students describe the experience of communicating with native speakers of Spanish online?

Additional questions addressed in this study: What positive or negative emotions do students feel during this process? What difficulties are students presented with during this experience? How do students react to these difficulties? Do students feel that the experience is beneficial?

Sample and Participants

The participants in this study were nine native English speaking students enrolled in my Spanish 105 class during a summer term at Brigham Young University. Spanish 105 is for "high beginners," students who have had two or more years experience studying Spanish in high school or middle school or who have previously completed Spanish 101 and Spanish 102 at the college level. A 105 class was selected in order to ameliorate the problem of anxiety that may exist for beginning Spanish learners. Students enrolled in Spanish 105 have some experience with the language. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 23. None of the students in the class had used WeSpeke software previously. All students' names have been replaced with pseudonyms in the final data analysis.

Implementation of the Online Exchange Assignment

Students used WeSpeke to communicate with their online partners. WeSpeke is a website that connects language learners to native speakers from many countries. The website matches people with similar interests and complementary language goals in order for the communication to be mutually beneficial. Speaking partners on WeSpeke can communicate through text-based, audio, and video formats. Participants in this study were required to use either audio or video communication with speaking partners once a week.

Sources of Information

QUESTIONNAIRE. Students completed a questionnaire after being assigned to use WeSpeke five times. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions designed to provide insight into students' experiences and opinions about WeSpeke.

INTERVIEWS. Using students' responses from the questionnaire, three students were selected and asked to participate in a follow-up interview about their WeSpeke experience. In order to select students using maximum-variation sampling, the three students were selected because they had reported a low, average, and high opinion of using WeSpeke,

respectively. Questions for the interview were partially generated from each interviewee's responses to the questionnaire. Once data had been analyzed from questionnaire responses and interview transcripts, these interviewees were asked to provide a member check of my interpretations.

Researcher Biases

Before continuing I would like to make clear any biases that I may bring into my interpretations of the following data. When I began teaching classes at Brigham Young University in 2015, many beginning foreign language classes were being required to use services like WeSpeke. The practice intrigued me and I considered it to be a helpful opportunity for students to practice using the target language in near-authentic situations. After assigning my beginning Spanish students to complete conversations on WeSpeke each week, I began to notice negative feelings from the students. Many said that they did not enjoy the experience, but when asked whether or not they felt it was beneficial to their language learning, they admitted that they thought it was. On the other hand, many students reported making friends and having valuable learning experiences using the software. After hearing this, I wanted to better understand what my students went through when they used WeSpeke. I also wanted to know how I could better support them as an instructor.

In my own experience with WeSpeke, I have been able to connect with native speakers quickly and have had short, valuable conversations with each person I have met. I have felt that it is good practice and a great opportunity to experience other perspectives on language and culture. These experiences and opinions will likely influence my interpretation of the following data.

Member Check

In an effort to increase the validity of this study, I asked each of the three interviewees to review the findings reported here and describe whether or not they felt the data reflected their own experience using WeSpeke software to speak with native speakers. Two of the three interviewees responded in support of the findings, whereas the third did not respond at all. In support of these findings, Hannah (name has been changed) said, "I feel that the report accurately and clearly displays and explains the use of WeSpeke and the reactions of students."

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from the questionnaires and interviews were analyzed using Weft QDA software in order to identify recurring themes and categories presented in student responses. Some of the themes addressed by students were expected while others came at a surprise to me. The students' responses were coded into four main themes, each with two to four subthemes as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Factors Influencing Students' Experience with WeSpeke

Major Themes	Sub-themes
Technological Issues	Software Limitations
	Desire for Alternate Technology
The Importance of the Speaking Partner	Speaking Partner English Skill
	Frequency of Contact
	Personality

Major Themes	Sub-themes
Positive Aspects of Students' Experience	Excitement
	Expectation of Learning
	Sense of Accomplishment
Negative Aspects of Students' Experience	Comfort Zone
	Language Barrier
	Task Avoidance
	Problems with Assignment Parameters

Theme 1: Technology

SOFTWARE LIMITATIONS. Students experienced various technological difficulties when using WeSpeke. This is to be expected when students use a new kind of software, but it had negative effects nevertheless. Students struggled with the software for several reasons. Some of the most common difficulties were: getting the software to match the student up with an experienced speaking partner, being able to successfully use audio and video components of the software to facilitate communication, and coordinating with speaking partners in order to agree on times for conversations to occur.

When asked what advice they would give to someone who was going to use WeSpeke for the first time, every student mentioned technology in some way. This suggests that the challenges of navigating the new software could be one of the most negative aspects of online exchanges.

DESIRE TO USE ALTERNATE TECHNOLOGY. Many students had to resort to using alternate technology, such as Skype, to conduct the actual conversation:

We used Skype because his browser didn't support audio or video. (Ben, interview)

Some students became so frustrated with the technology that they said they would prefer finding people to speak with face-to-face or calling people on the phone:

I would make it accessible on the phone. It would make it so much easier! (Natalie, questionnaire)

Theme 2: The Importance of the Speaking Partner

Students expressed often the desire for good speaking partners in their experience using WeSpeke. When asked what advice she would give to someone using WeSpeke for the first time, Hannah said:

Find someone who is just as serious about learning, or at least focused on talking that you could stick with and plan on, so you know you will always get to talk at least once a week. (Hannah, questionnaire)

SPEAKING PARTNER ENGLISH SKILL LEVEL. Many students preferred a speaking partner who was proficient in English. The data suggest that this is because students regularly use their speaking partner for communicative support during the conversation as illustrated by these experiences from Ben and Sophia:

He spoke really good English so I did kind of resort to that a lot when I said something he would say, "I don't understand, can you ask me in English?" and he understood pretty much everything I said in English. He was pretty much fluent in English so that was pretty nice. I felt like it was good to just kind of break through that barrier of not being nervous to talk to a native speaker. (Ben, interview)

When [speaking partners] are native you are like, you have to rack for words if they don't speak well in Englih, but if they do I would [say], "Did I say that right?" or, "How would I say this?" And they would tell me in English why they say this or why did they say that. They can explain things better. (Sophia, interview)

Educators are encouraged in many teacher preparation programs and by ACTFL to use the target language during instruction as much as possible. This practice promotes incidental learning and promotes more academic success for students. It is hard to say whether this communicative support from speaking partners promotes or hinder student learning in the long run, but it is clear that stronger English skills possessed by the speaking partner improve student comfort during communication.

SPEAKING PARTNER CONTACT FREQUENCY. Not all students were able to communicate with the same speaking partner more than once, but those who were able to do so enjoyed a better experience with WeSpeke overall. Students indicated that speaking with someone they had already met took a lot of the stress out of the process overall. Students describe talking with the same partner multiple times as more "realistic" and more "comfortable":

> I feel it makes it easier because you start getting to know this person and it makes the conversations easy. Also you can talk about new things instead of always doing the same introducing yourself and the basics like that. (Jacob, questionnaire)

> I have messaged a girl from Argentina multiple times and gotten to know her a little bit. It was more fun to actually feel like I was talking to a real person. (Diana, questionnaire)

One participant, Hannah, had a particularly notable experience. After meeting her speaking partner, a woman named Elena (name has been changed), Hannah would speak with her often twice per week, even though she was assigned to only have one online conversation per week.

> I have talked with the same person every time, and it has been a great! It makes it really easy to coordinate and then we just have a set time we plan on. It takes a lot of stress off that comes with needing to find someone and just hope that they are respectful and available to talk. We have also then been able to see a difference in our ability to speak together. (Hannah, questionnaire)

On the other hand, Ben, who reported a very low level of enjoyment of WeSpeke (a 2 out of 7), only spoke with his speaking partner a single time. Perhaps multiple conversations with the same speaking partner would have improved his overall opinion of the experience. This is not to claim that speaking with the same speaking partner more than once will always increase students' enjoyment, but it seems to be a factor in more than one case.

SPEAKING PARTNER PERSONALITY. Many students emphasized the importance of having a speaking partner they could relate to and have a positive experience with. Students often pointed out similarities they have with their favorite speaking partners or positive aspects of the partner's personality. It is safe to assume that a more relatable speaking partner will improve the experience of speaking online with native speakers, while a less relatable person will make the experience less enjoyable:

> I talked to him about some pretty cool stuff. Like we connected on the fact that we were both Christian and I told him about me going on my mission and he thought that was pretty cool . . . and then he asked me questions about college and stuff and he told me he had a friend in Louisiana and I was like hey that's pretty close to Arkansas so that's pretty cool. (Ben, interview)

Some students expressed dissatisfaction because they were contacted by speaking partners who had no interest in learning languages, but rather in pursuing the student romantically. Five out of six female students reported this happening to them, but it was often more of an annoyance than something that would ruin their experience. It was not reported by the male participants. Three examples of this situation follow:

Yeah, I actually kind of accidentally clicked on her and accidentally tried to call her, and she replied back and she just came back with this whole thing about how, if you're going to talk about anything inappropriate, and all this, like I'm not talking to you. And I said perfect because I had lots of weird people message me. (Hannah, interview)

No bueno. Random men from other countries kept messaging me asking if I had a boyfriend or saying I'm pretty. I did find a few girls who were normal on there but having constant messages from weird guys wasn't fun. (Diana, questionnaire)

Yes, there are some creeps out there . . . but there are so many other people on WeSpeke who are anxious and willing to help. (Charlotte, questionnaire)

Theme 3: The Positive Aspects of the Task

EXPECTATIONS FOR LEARNING. When students were asked about their initial reaction when learning that they would be using WeSpeke in class, a common reaction was a desire and expectation for learning to occur. Students recognized the benefits of communicating with native speakers from the beginning:

I thought it was a really great opportunity and felt empowered and like I was actually learning Spanish every time I got done with a conversation. (Emma, questionnaire)

After using WeSpeke for several weeks, students indicated having noticed a difference or increase in their overall ability with the language:

We have also then been able to see a difference in our ability to speak together. (Hannah, questionnaire)

Students also expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to learn more about other cultures:

I feel it went really well. The opportunity to meet someone of a different culture was a great learning experience. (Jacob, questionnaire)

The things that I liked was that it was kind of fun to speak with people from different countries and really hear the language spoken by natives because it is totally different from, well, from most people who learn it as a second language. (Sophia, interview)

These feelings reflected in the data indicate that students perceive the experience as beneficial, or at least potentially so to their learning. Because these students elected to enroll in the Spanish course, we can presume that improving their language skill is an important goal for each of them. Despite some of the negative feelings associated with WeSpeke in the data, many students can at least feel that they have come closer to meeting the goal of fluency because of this activity.

EXCITEMENT AND ENTHUSIASM. A few students e xpressed excitement when they learned about and started the assignment:

I was pretty excited I thought that would be pretty interesting. (Hannah, questionnaire)

I was excited because the way you really learn a language is by speaking it, so I was glad to have the opportunity to actually have real conversations in Spanish. (Emma, questionnaire)

After completing their WeSpeke component of the course, many students expressed a sense of accomplishment for what they were able to do:

It was kind of fun to speak with people from different countries and really hear the language spoken by natives because it is totally different from most people who learn it as a second language. (Sophia, interview)

Others had mixed, but generally positive, emotions:

I was excited, but a little annoyed. I felt like it would be time consuming and hard to find people to talk to. (Natalie, questionnaire)

Given the variety of enthusiasm expressed by students, it seems clear that the experience was enjoyed (or not enjoyed) differently by each student involved. Each student had a unique experience and reaction to the conversations that he or she participated in.

FEELINGS OF ACCOMPLISHMENT. Most students indicated a strong sense of accomplishment after having conversations on WeSpeke. Students felt that they had gained some ability with Spanish and that they had accomplished something difficult – conversing in a foreign language:

It went really well, I spoke all in Spanish, learned many new words. I felt competent and confident, especially after the conversation ended. (Alex, questionnaire)

Today I was on and it went really well. I have been able to talk with the same person, so she actually made the comment today that we have full conversations now. It was super smooth to spend 15 minutes on English then 15 on Spanish. Usually we talk for about an hour, but today was shorter. (Hannah, questionnaire)

[The experience] really empowered and motivated me to keep learning Spanish. Everyone likes getting compliments, so I guess that's what made it positive! (Emma, questionnaire)

This sense of accomplishment can be the most important thing students feel as they converse with their native speaking partners. It is essential as learners learn a second language that they feel successful in their efforts.

Theme 4: Difficult Aspects of the Task

PROBLEMS WITH THE COMFORT ZONE. As one would expect, many students struggled with breaking out of the comfort zone. Speaking with a previously unknown person can be difficult, and that difficulty is only exacerbated by the fact that the other person does not share the same native language. When asked how they felt when they were told about the assignment, some students expressed frustration or apprehension:

I groaned internally because I don't like talking to strangers much less in another language. (Diana, questionnaire)

Really nervous, kind of annoyed. (Ben, questionnaire)

I'm more uncomfortable doing internet talking or interaction with people I like seeing them face to face with real people I mean not that they are not real when you see them but it's just a little different, a little sketchy to me.

(Sophia, interview)

Once students broke out of the comfort one, many of them indicated that conversations became easier, and they reported more satisfaction overall:

[It] wasn't as bad as I was expecting. Like it was easier to talk to [native speakers] than I thought like when you see that they are actual people. (Ben, interview)

When asked about her overall experience with WeSpeke, Hannah said:

I think, well, it's a little freaky in the sense that you have to, well I had some interesting people, not necessarily creepy but interesting people messaging me constantly and you sit there like, if it wasn't for a class I don't think I would do this. So I think that once I got past that then it's been fine. But yes there is a bit of, like, I don't know, it's a random person in another country with a camera you're just like, ugh I don't know how I feel about this. (Hannah, interview)

When asked to give advice for other students, Ben recommended that they not be afraid to make mistakes. It seems clear that though Ben struggled to get out of his comfort zone, he still appreciated the benefits of doing so:

> I definitely messed up but that's how you learn. You learn through making mistakes. So if you're afraid of sounding stupid that's only gonna hold you back. Yeah just go for it. (Ben, interview)

LANGUAGE BARRIER DIFFICULTIES. Surprisingly, few students mentioned the language barrier when asked about the difficult aspects of talking with native speakers online. Most students focused on technological difficulties, meeting strange people, or getting out of their comfort zone. However, some students did address the issue of language difficulties when discussing what they experienced in their actual conversations:

> I was uneasy due to having to cross language barriers with people I have never met before. (Jacob, questionnaire)

Some students, like Sophia, struggled with having enough things to say in the target language:

> I think language is kind of hard. I guess just where I'm at its hard. If I were fluent it would be easier to [talk for] 20 minutes... I struggle with just like forming sentences in Spanish so it made i t difficult to go that long. (Sophia, interview)

Other students mentioned language difficulties in the first few minutes of the conversation:

> I feel like once you get past the first like 5 minutes then it just flows and it's not that bad. (Hannah, interview)

It seems evident that though the Spanish language did present some difficulties, those difficulties are ones that students are accustomed to facing in any L2 classroom. The difficult part, for these students, is not in the language barrier but rather in the activity itself of speaking online with native speakers they have not met. This raises concerns about the nature of this task and whether or not the concerns raised by students outweigh the linguistic benefits they are enjoying.

TASK AVOIDANCE. For some students, the discomfort experienced in the study was enough that it caused them to seek out alternatives to performing the task assigned, even though many of these alternatives were not approved by the instructor. Students asked weekly for permission to video chat with friends or relatives who were native Spanish-speakers. Some allowance was given for this, but students were still required to use WeSpeke regularly for the purposes of the assignment and the study. Despite this, two students completed other activities in place of regular WeSpeke conversations:

> I Skyped with people from my boyfriend's mission in Spain and it helped me. (Diana, questionnaire)

> So yeah, [my brother] is pretty much as good as fluent. So he will correct my grammar a ton, like, every sentence because he is kind of a "grammar Nazi". So it was good to talk to him. (Ben, interview)

Though rare, these efforts by students to avoid the task suggest that educators need to be very clear about expectations and perhaps have measures in place to ensure that students complete the tasks given to them. Alternatively, teachers may allow students to speak with friends and family as long as the Spanish language is used constantly. This will ensure that they obtain useful linguistic practice; however, students will miss out on the opportunity to meet new people who come from previously unknown cultures.

FRUSTRATIONS WITH THE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS AND EXPECTATIONS. Finally, some students had issues with the assignment itself, expressing dissatisfaction with conversation lengths and a desire to find native speakers to speak with face-to-face. When asked what they would change about the WeSpeke component of the course. Students replied with the following suggestions:

> I would prefer to meet face to face with native speakers instead of online. (Ben, interview)

I probably would have done native speakers. I probably would have called up old [friends] and I would have just talked with them. (Hannah, interview)

Because so many students indicated a desire for face-to-face contact with native speakers, we can assume that for many of them, the uncomfortable part of this assignment was connecting with previously unknown native speakers online, not necessarily the language itself.

Discussion

The findings of this study support claims made by previous researchers investigating online exchanges. Students in the study indicated an increase in cultural understanding, similar to the findings of Lee and Markey (2014) and Yamada (2009). Students were reluctant at first to communicate with previously unknown native speakers, but after doing so they were able to enjoy a sense of having learned more about both the language and the culture of their speaking partners. Students also felt that their overall linguistic ability with Spanish had increased, supporting the findings of Belz (2002), who indicated the importance of students feeling a sense of accomplishment after completing online exchanges.

With regard to speaking partners, many students were able to connect with speaking partners once they had established a strong social presence, as described by Yamada (2009) and Senem (2009). Several students indicated that after speaking with a speaking partner for a few minutes, and especially over the course of several conversations, that person became more "real" to them. This helped them relate, connect, and converse without some of the frustration and nervousness that existed previously.

Conversely, Ware (2005) addressed some of the tensions that arose when an English class in Germany was paired with a German class in the United States. One of the major tensions that arose was the existence of differences between the speaking partners. In the current study, much of the data indicate that students felt greater satisfaction when they were matched up with a more compatible speaking partner. They also felt more positive when able to relate culturally with the other person. Interestingly, Ware did not address a language barrier as being one of the tensions existing in the exchanges in his study. Similarly, students in the current study experienced more social and technological frustration rather than linguistic.

With regard to anxiety, the data from this study do not indicate large amounts of anxiety, but rather annoyance or frustration. Any initial anxiety experienced by students was usually eliminated, or at least made manageable, after contact with a speaking partner had been established. Though many students felt some level of frustration or annoyance at being asked to communicate with native speakers online, it seems that at least for the students in this study, the academic benefits of the task were recognized by students (Chen & Lee, 2011; Marefat, 2014).

Again, the findings of Beers Fägersten, Cunningham, and Holmsten (2010) seem relevant here:

> The problems experienced by learners . . . are both exacerbated and ameliorated by the computer-mediated channels open to learners and teachers. . . . However, the multimodality offered by the software enables students and teachers to compensate for these problems in a way that more than makes up for the disadvantages. (p. 174)

In the current study, it is clear that technological issues interfered with students' overall enjoyment and learning. Additionally, many students indicated a preference for face-to-face interactions because of some of these difficulties. This would seem to support the quote above, but not prove that the advantages of online communication necessarily outweigh the disadvantages. That probably varies depending on each student's own experience. Some have several readily-

available connections to native Spanish-speakers, but many do not. More research is needed to prove that this online interaction is really the best choice for all learners, despite this notion being widely accepted in this field of research.

Pedagogical Implications

The results of this study provide several implications for educators' pedagogical implementation of online exchange software such as WeSpeke in their classroom. First, educators must address the problems and difficulties that students will inevitably face with the technology. My class was provided with a short demonstration of the use of WeSpeke software, but perhaps more preparation would have been beneficial. Educators may consider using a computer lab, having students register on the website, and even setting up conversation appointments together as a class. This will provide an opportunity for students to get help from each other and from the instructor before using the software alone in their homes. This should help students avoid technological issues in the future as well as ameliorate some of the initial anxiety many students felt before their first conversations.

Second, educators should encourage students to speak with the same speaking partners multiple times, especially if they were able to relate and connect with someone during the first conversation. The data in this study indicate that multiple contacts with the same partner can increase student enjoyment of the process.

Third, teachers should find ways for students to be held accountable and provide a detailed report of their experience with each conversation. This can be beneficial in a number of ways. It will provide students with an opportunity to reflect on what they learned and enjoy the feelings of accomplishment that usually accompanied completion of these conversations. It will also ensure that students do not avoid the task, as some students did here.

Finally, I will address the question of online interaction itself. More than half of the participants in this study indicated that they would have preferred finding native speakers in the local community or through existing social connections to holding conversations online with people they didn't know. It is important for educators to step back and consider the goal of online exchanges. Certainly, the principal goal is to provide students with opportunities to practice the target language in authentic situations. Speaking with a native speaker requires bridging information gaps that may not be possible to replicate in the classroom. If linguistic development is the only goal with these online exchanges, then it seems advisable to allow students to contact friends or family and converse with them in the target language. On the other hand, online tools such as WeSpeke allow students to connect with people they have never met, and likely would never meet, from many different countries. This allows students to interact with people from different cultures who hold their own unique beliefs and opinions. Allowing students to simply call a native speaking friend may rob them of valuable opportunities to develop cultural understanding.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on the experience of nine students as they communicated with native speakers on WeSpeke. The experiences described here may not be applicable to every student, but I believe them to be fairly representative of what students and teachers can expect when implementing online exchange tools like WeSpeke in their classrooms. These students were required to speak with native speakers for 20 minutes each week for seven weeks. The data may be different for classes lasting longer than seven weeks or in which the assignment parameters are significantly different.

It would be advisable to conduct an investigation similar to the current study with a larger sample size and longer duration. In addition to providing more data, a more lengthy investigation could eliminate some of the negative effects

experienced due to technological difficulties in the first few weeks of using WeSpeke. It may also be valuable to invest-igate differences in assignment parameters. For example, perhaps requiring students to have longer conversations with native speakers would promote familiarity and improve the students' overall experience. Research can also be done to assess other online tools similar to WeSpeke and compare students' experience with each.

The data collected in this study clearly indicate that each student's experience during online exchanges is different. This strongly challenges the assumption that new online tools can be a one-size-fits-all solution for L2 learners. Although tools like WeSpeke may greatly enhance the experiences of some students, they may actually restrict the learning of others. Several students in the current study may have benefitted more from simply seeking out native Spanish speakers in the local area rather than dealing with technological difficulties. Further research into this phenomenon would be valuable to better understand how educators and developers can support students using tools such as WeSpeke as they work to improve their overall L2 proficiency.

The ultimate goal with research in this field, of course, should be to better understand what students experience in order to provide quality experiences to improve their L2 proficiency together with their cultural knowledge and understanding.

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