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Can the use of VoiceThread technology enhance boys' engagement and achievement in their study of the Spanish language?

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ABSTRACT

Thirty eighth grade students from St. Albans School in Washington, DC, participated in an action research project to answer the question: *Can the use of VoiceThread technology enhance boys' engagement and achievement in their study of the Spanish language?*

VoiceThread is a web-based program that allows people to share stories with images and voiceovers. The program allows students to record their voices at home, and save these recordings on the web. The goal of this project was to evaluate if the use of this program as a homework tool helped students' pronunciation, aided in the fluency of their speech, and gave them more confidence to speak Spanish in and out of the classroom. Prior to the research project, the eighth grade students were only assigned homework that targeted their writing, reading, and listening skills. Unfortunately, the only speaking work they participated in was during class time; classes are limited to only 50 minutes per day. Additionally, the school does not have a language lab.

VoiceThread was used for in-class activities and for homework tasks. The intention in using VoiceThread was two-fold: to engage the students and to give them a tool that would enhance their speaking skills. Through surveys, questionnaires, in-person interviews and graded homework assignments, I was able to assess the effectiveness of the VoiceThread technology. The results of the surveys indicated an overall decrease in confidence levels after using VoiceThread, but a majority of the students, twenty two out of the thirty surveyed, mentioned how much they enjoyed using this program. The decrease in confidence may be attributed to the fact that the students were listening to their own voices, which studies have shown can increase an affect behavior towards oneself, and they were speaking to a computer instead of a person. While the students' confidence level decreased, their speaking abilities improved. The average

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score for their graded homework assignments related to VoiceThread increased during the semester.

INTRODUCTION

Students, particularly boys, often struggle to master a foreign language. It has been shown in the United Kingdom that girls outperform boys across the curriculum on General Certificate of Secondary Education exams. The performance gap in the study of modern languages between boys and girls has been particularly evident (Clark & Trafford, 1995). This disparity in scores may be the result of the different attitudes that boys and girls have towards foreign language studies. Statements such as, “languages are boring,” (Carr, Attitudes to language learning, para. 3) are commonly expressed by boys. This lack of interest found in boys contributes to the reasons why they do not continue their language studies beyond the required years. However, “many of the boys talked nostalgically about their experience in primary school when languages had been more interactive and task-based, where they did things with the language rather than just `copy from tile board or read out of the textbook” (Carr, Attitudes to language learning, para. 3). Incorporating a more interactive activity into the curriculum, such as VoiceThread where all students have the chance to participate, may motivate eighth grade boys to improve their speaking skills and want to continue their foreign language studies.

Motivation and attitude are important factors in the language learning process, and most researchers believe that attitudinal and motivational characteristics (i.e. the desire to integrate in the community of the target language) “facilitate the acquisition of a second language,” (Gardner, 1991, p.50). Krashen (1981) supports this theory by explaining it in terms of integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. While both can achieve proficiency in a second language, with instrumental motivation, the learner, who is mainly studying a foreign language for practical reasons, may only acquire the basic patterns of the language. From this, one can assume that a student who is successful in second language acquisition will be a motivated student with a positive attitude, and most likely continue their foreign language study beyond the required years. In addition, Gardner and Lambert (1972, cited from Krashen, 1981, p. 27) propose that integrative motivation “provides the student with the necessary motivation to persist in the second language studies.”

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Second language theorists maintain that language is best learned through interaction. Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993, cited from Blake, 2008, p. 1) state that “language learning is assisted through social interaction of learners and their interlocutors, particularly when they negotiate toward mutual comprehension of each other’s message meaning.” Ideally, students would immerse themselves in the country where the target language is spoken to gain competency in a second language. However, it is unrealistic to think that every learner can do that, particularly for this age group.

I searched for new ways and methods to engage my students. I felt strongly that one way teachers can engage their students, especially boys, in the study of foreign language is through the use of computer-based technology in and out of the classroom. Teachers are always looking for new ways to improve their courses with the fundamental goal of having their students feel involved in the learning process, feel confident in their abilities, and achieve a certain degree of success. I thought it was important to examine the possible benefits of incorporating new technologies, such as VoiceThread, in my Spanish classes to increase the opportunity for the boys to use the language. I decided to explore the following research question: *Can the use of Voice Thread technology enhance boys’ engagement and achievement in their study of the Spanish language?*

In my research question, the word *engagement* refers to the student’s enthusiasm for and involvement in learning Spanish. Boys want to feel part of the learning process and not just be told what to do. They need task-oriented activities. *Achievement* is what the students experience once they have felt they were part of the learning process and not just a product. Students need to have a strong belief in their ability to learn a foreign language and to be able to communicate in that language. There is a sense of success among the students in the skills they have acquired.

In order to determine the levels of *engagement* and *achievement* among Spanish language students, I qualitatively and quantitatively evaluated the value of the VoiceThread technology in my eighth grade all-boy class. This was conducted using action research methodology.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

St. Albans School is an all-boys' school that educates around 565 boys in grades four through twelve, or Forms C through VI. It was established in 1909 by the Protestant Episcopal Foundation. St. Albans School is located in the northwest region of Washington, DC.

Foreign Language study begins in the fourth grade with Spanish as a required course through the sixth grade. At the end of his sixth grade year, the student is able to choose from the following languages: Japanese, Latin, French or Spanish. Once the student reaches the ninth grade, he can choose from the aforementioned languages or Chinese, which is taught at the sister school, National Cathedral School for Girls. The student is required to study the same language for three consecutive years, starting in the eighth grade, in order to graduate with a diploma from St. Albans.

My sample group for the research project consisted of thirty eighth grade (Form II) Spanish students. Out of the thirty boys, one was a new student this year, and six were new students the previous year. The rest of the class began their Spanish study in the fourth grade and had consecutively taken Spanish for the last four years with different Spanish teachers. The seven new students generally succeeded at integrating into the class and have performed well in the areas of speaking, writing and listening comprehension. There is a range of abilities in this class with regard to vocabulary use, speaking abilities and general comprehension. A few of the boys speak a foreign language at home and have had a smoother transition in their formal study of Spanish.

RESEARCH METHODS

Action research, as defined by McNiff (2002, Action research for professional development, para. 1) is a "form of self-reflective practice" which encompasses a cycle of the following steps:

- identify an area of practice to be investigated
- imagine a solution
- implement the solution
- evaluate the solution

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- change practice in light of the evaluation (McNiff, 2002, How do I do action research, para.4)

More specifically to educators, action research “provides the means for teachers to enhance their teaching and improve student learning” (Stringer, 2008, p. 1). Stringer goes on to say that “action research always has an immediate practical or applied purpose” (2008, p. 5). Using action research methodology for this project, I identified an area in the current eighth grade Spanish curriculum that needed to be enhanced, searched for a solution, and then put that into practice.

The goal of the project was to evaluate if the use of the VoiceThread technology as a homework tool improved students’ pronunciation and oral fluency, while keeping them engaged in the task. VoiceThread technology, a web-based computer program, gives students the opportunity to practice their oral and listening skills outside the classroom. In addition, the program allows for more oral participation from all the students and not just a few, as is typical in a classroom setting. The activities that were set up for them varied in format and level of difficulty. Depending on the grammar or vocabulary being studied that week, the activities included: answering questions and narrating scenes. It was my hope that these types of activities, which foster a more student-centered curriculum and autonomy, would motivate the students to embrace and learn the language, and at the same time enhance their skills. Students used VoiceThread technology several times in class but mainly at home as a homework assignment. In total, students were given a VoiceThread assignment eight times throughout the semester.

To assess the students’ engagement and achievement in the project, qualitative and quantitative analysis was used. Online surveys, questionnaires, in-person interviews, and graded assignments were analyzed for this project.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The responses of the students surveyed were analyzed, and the following five shared themes were identified:

1) Decrease in confidence levels:

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Initial survey results showed a decrease in confidence level between pre- and post-VoiceThread use surveys. When asked about their feelings of comfort in speaking Spanish in class, approximately one third of the class (20 students) answered that they were somewhat or extremely confident. However, post-VoiceThread use showed a decrease in confidence levels, with only 12 students feeling somewhat or extremely confident. There may be a direct correlation between VoiceThread use and decrease in confidence levels. Students' confidence may have been lowered as they were listening to their own voice and speaking to a computer and not a person. In studies of people's reactions to listening to their own voices on a tape-recorder, Holzman, Rousey and Snyder (1966, p. 432) state that "listening to one's own voice is a disruptive experience which mobilizes a person's defensive behavior." In their study there was a heightened reaction measured by galvanic skin response from their subjects once they heard their own voice in comparison to the other voices they heard on the tape recorder. On the questionnaires and in-person interviews, a couple of students expressed their dislike at hearing themselves speak as well as the strange feeling they felt when speaking to a computer.

"I do not find that my speaking skills have improved drastically over the time that I have used VoiceThread. When I speak Spanish now, I feel less comfortable speaking. However, I am not sure this is the fault of VoiceThread."

2) Speaking a language needs to be a back and forth conversation:

Pica, Kanagy and Falodun, (1993, cited from Blake, 2008) stress the importance of social interaction when learning a language. When asked if VoiceThread technology improved their speaking skills, approximately seven students commented that the activities and the program itself did not allow them to have that back and forth conversation needed to improve their language skills.

"The VoiceThread program is good. It helps with fluidity when speaking Spanish, but not as much as conversing in Spanish with other people."

"The Voice Thread program helped some, but speaking with other people was better and helped more."

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3) Additional positive strategy for studying:

Even though there was a decrease in confidence levels, a majority of the students (22) commented on the positive aspects of the program, stating it was another engaging and interesting way of practicing the language.

“I like it a lot. It is fun to answer in Spanish and it is cool to have homework other than worksheets.”

“It is not ‘busy work’ because it actually helps us improve at speaking Spanish and developing what we want to say.”

4) Opportunities for correction:

When asked if they liked VoiceThread technology and if it improved their speaking, five students found the VoiceThread program beneficial because it gave them opportunities to correct their speaking mistakes.

“...it’s better than when you do an oral presentation/oral test you don’t have any second chances, but while using VoiceThread, you can cancel your comment and redo it.”

“I believe that it has because I can hear myself talk and can correct my mistakes.”

5) Some difficulty using the program:

When asked to describe their experience with Voice Thread technology and whether they liked using it, several students stated that it was difficult to use. As with all technology, it does not always work smoothly. Slow internet connection, program freezes, and incorrect hardware (microphone/headphones) are just a few of the problems some students encountered.

“In all honesty I find it difficult to use and glitch at times.”

“Sometimes it didn’t work or the website wouldn’t work.”

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In addition to the qualitative data I gathered from the students' questionnaires, surveys, and in-person interviews, I also graded the students' VoiceThread assignments. I used a simple rubric taken from our textbook, *En español 2 Teacher's edition*, where I graded them one through five in three different categories: vocabulary usage, accuracy and organization. The first time the program was used, the students were in the computer lab. The assignment was to describe the paintings, *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso and *La Vista de Toledo* by El Greco. Students seemed at ease when using the program. The boys scored well on that assignment. In spite of this great start, the second assignment, which the students were asked to do at home, was more challenging and the results were not as encouraging. This could be a result of a combination of factors: 1) the assignment dealt with using the preterit tense, instead of the present tense as was the case in the first in-class assignment, and 2) this was the first time they tried VoiceThread at home. For the first lesson the average score was 13 out of 15 while on the second lesson the students averaged 11.6. Despite this decrease in their scores at the beginning of the project, there seemed to be a slight, but gradual increase in their performance for the remainder of the semester. By Lesson four, students averaged 13.9. Appendix 1 demonstrates the students' improvement where the average score was 13 at Lesson 1 and 14.4 at Lesson 8. As seen in the appendix, standard error is minimal and decreases from beginning to end of the project.

CONCLUSION

Can the use of VoiceThread technology enhance boys' engagement and achievement in their study of the Spanish language? It is important for students to feel that language learning is not just about writing their answers and reproducing orally what they have written. Language is best learned by conversing with others. However, when exchanges with native speakers are not available on a daily basis, it is challenging for students to practice their speaking skills outside of the classroom.

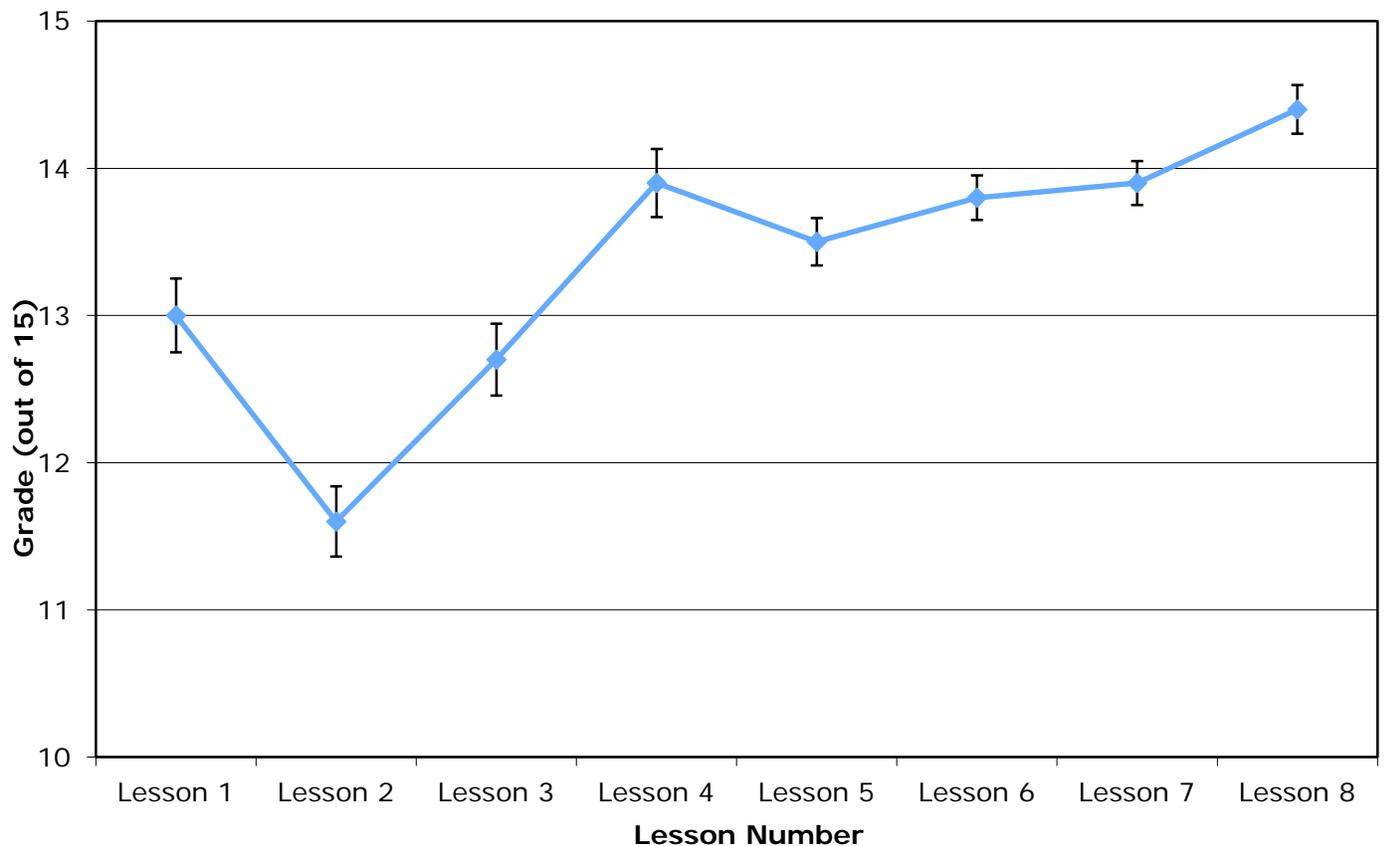
VoiceThread technology is one of many programs that can enhance the foreign language curriculum. The use of this program gives all students a chance to speak and to listen to themselves. The goals are that they will improve their speaking abilities and feel confident that they are able to communicate in a foreign language. While the program may not have raised the

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students' confidence levels, overall the boys thought it was a worthwhile program to use. There was a sense of achievement as evidenced by their assignment grades, which slightly, but gradually improved throughout the semester. A possible factor for the decrease in fluency confidence is that they were listening to their own voice for the first time and speaking to a computer and not a person. This is only the beginning of my search for better programs and technologies that will not only enhance the curriculum and motivate the boys to practice speaking Spanish more outside of the classroom, but will give the students a sense of success in the skills they have acquired.

APPENDIX 1

Average Scores on VoiceThread Assignments



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REFLECTION

As an educator I am constantly looking for ways to engage my students and improve my curriculum, but sometimes I find it difficult to find the time to truly explore the current technological tools. Being part of the Action Research Team for the IBSC gave me the opportunity to explore this but in a more formal way.

When I was selected to be part of an action research team, I was both excited and in conflict. I felt excited because I had the opportunity to reflect on my classes, to explore ways to enhance the curriculum, and to meet teachers around the world who are just as passionate about teaching as I am. I experienced conflict because I did not know if I would have the time to add one more project to an already busy year.

As soon as the school year started, I hit the ground running. I was excited to tell both students and parents about the new VoiceThread technology I was introducing that year, especially since our school does not have a language lab, and opportunities for speaking outside the classroom are limited. Throughout the year, I was able to incorporate VoiceThread technology into the curriculum with ease. Of course, there were the usual issues with microphones and internet access problems among some of the boys, but overall, most did not have a problem gaining access to the program. My hope was to find a program that would give the students the ability to practice their speaking skills at home and engage them in activities they had never done before.

After using VoiceThread technology, surveys were turned in, interviews were completed and assignments were scored, but the results were not necessarily what I expected. I was surprised to see their confidence level decreased after using the program, but their scores on the assignments increased through time. More research needed to be done to find a reason for this decrease in confidence, yet an increase in scores. From the research, I concluded that in order for my students to feel more confident about using technology such as VoiceThread and other voice recording programs to perfect their speaking skills, they will need to use it more. The more they practice listening to themselves, the more comfortable they will become with this type of technology.

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While the results were not the most ideal, this was a meaningful experience for me. I learned a great deal about boys and second language acquisition. It has inspired me to continue to look for novel technologies that boys would enjoy using and end up feeling that their language acquisition has been enhanced. A bonus was meeting a wonderful, engaged group of teachers, with whom I hope to keep in contact in the future so we may continue to share our experiences.