

Hablando se entiende la gente: Online speaking homework

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Abstract

This action research project explored the use of online interactive speaking activities to expand the scope of homework beyond the traditional written assignment. A class of ninth- and eleventh-grade boys in intermediate Spanish at St. Mark's School of Texas, a boys' school in the United States, participated in an intervention to determine if such homework assignments would enhance boys' engagement and achievement in the study of Spanish. For each unit, several written assignments were replaced with online oral assignments using LingtLanguage and VoiceThread. The asynchronous nature of the assignments allowed boys to listen to the questions and videos as many times as necessary and gave them time to think and plan their oral responses. Though the time commitment and computer access needed to complete this type of assignment seemed to detract from their enjoyment of the project, the students, in general, were willing to put in the extra effort required. The boys' enthusiasm for assignments that promoted authentic communication suggests that such online speaking tasks may have a place in foreign language classes.

Introduction

Like any new skill, learning to speak a foreign language requires practice. However, even when the class period is devoted primarily to oral and aural activities, the amount of time that any individual student spends speaking is limited. Boys who are less confident of their oral skills or who are slow processors are often hesitant to volunteer to participate in oral activities. The use of pair and group work can increase the practice time per student, but it is still difficult to provide sufficient opportunities to develop confident speakers of the new language. Though the purpose of homework is to provide students with additional practice in the language, it has traditionally been limited to reading and writing. The advent of the Internet has provided language teachers with access to up-to-date authentic materials and with the ability to assign computer-graded work, but until the recent development of online asynchronous environments

such as LingtLanguage and VoiceThread, it was not feasible to use this remarkable tool to have the students practice their oral skills. This action research project examined the effects of using these two programs to explore the following question: How does the use of online interactive speaking homework develop and enhance boys' engagement and achievement in the study of Spanish?

In order to have a clear sense of the objectives of this project, it is important to define the terms "engagement" and "achievement." On its website, the Department of Education and Training of the State of Queensland (Australia) explains that:

Academic engagement is identified by on-task behaviours that signal a serious psychological investment in class work; these include attentiveness, doing the assigned work, and showing enthusiasm for this work by taking initiative to raise questions, contribute to group activities and help peers ("Academic Engagement," 2004).

Likewise, Chapman (2003) suggested that engagement consists of a cognitive component that includes attention and mental effort, behaviour such as active participation, as well as the affective aspects of the students' interest and attitudes toward the task. "Achievement," for the purposes of this research, is defined as meeting the goals of the assignment and is measured in terms of task completion and development, comprehensibility, vocabulary, fluency and pronunciation, and general accuracy.

This project was carried out under the auspices of the IBSC's Action Research in Boys' Schools program. Action research provides a means for teachers to reflect upon their practices in a systematic way (McNiff, 2002). The researcher aims to improve his or her teaching in a way that brings about "educational change that *enhances the lives of children*" (Mills, 2003, p. 10).

Literature review

Online asynchronous environments such as LingtLanguage and VoiceThread are websites where students can listen to recorded material and post their own recordings. Unlike synchronous environments, users do not need to be online at the same time, which allows the student to do the work according to his own schedule. Asynchronous environments also give the student the

opportunity to listen repeatedly to a question or prompt, to consult resources such as a textbook or dictionary, and to re-record his posting if he is not satisfied with the quality of his response. This time to think and plan also has a positive effect on the learner's attitude toward the subject matter (Meskill & Anthony, 2010).

The use of asynchronous communication can reduce the level of student anxiety with respect to speaking tasks since students who are hesitant to participate in class are often more comfortable participating in such an environment (Meskill & Anthony, 2010; Sun, 2009). Boys, in particular, are often uncomfortable in taking the risks inherent in oral activities because they are afraid of embarrassing themselves (Carr & Pauwels, 2009). Moreover, anxiety itself has a negative effect on students' performance and on their willingness to communicate (Kissau, McCullough, & Pike, 2010; MacIntyre, Noels & Clément, 1997). Conversely, Young (1990) stated that students would feel more confident about their oral skills if they practiced speaking often. Students in her study also felt less anxious about speaking when they did not have to make a presentation in front of the class. While there is certainly a place for formal presentations in a language classroom, this project sought to explore the usefulness of online asynchronous environments in providing additional oral practice in a less intimidating setting.

Of course, the environment alone does not lead to communication. The tasks must be carefully developed and the students must be trained to use the interface. Carr and Pauwels (2009) noted that boys enjoy the use of technology, but students come to class with differing levels of technological expertise, so it is vital that the teacher give explicit instruction in the technological tools that the class will utilize (Kissau et al., 2010). Boys also prefer using the language in a variety of authentic tasks that have a connection to the "real world." Likewise, scaffolding of oral activities gives them the tools they need to communicate successfully (Carr & Pauwels, 2009). Finally, as Nunan (1989) pointed out, the communicative task should "have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right" (p. 10).

Research Context

St. Mark's School of Texas is an independent boys' school of 850 students in grades 1-12 located in Dallas, Texas. A college-preparatory school whose mission is to educate the "whole

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boy,” St. Mark’s offers a rigorous academic curriculum combined with strong programs in the arts, athletics, and community service. Thirty-two boys enter the first grade each year, and admissions to the school are structured in such a way that the number of students in a graduating class grows until there are approximately ninety students in the ninth grade. (Students are also occasionally admitted to grades 10 and 11.)

The study of Spanish is required of all boys beginning in the first grade. In seventh grade, boys may opt to continue to study Spanish or may begin another language. Because boys enter the school at different grades and with varying levels of language proficiency, Spanish classes in the Middle and Upper Schools often have boys of several grades in the same class.

Research method

The sample group for the action research project consisted of sixteen boys in Intermediate Spanish B, which is essentially a third-level high school course. Four of the students were in the eleventh grade; the remaining twelve were ninth graders. This group was chosen because the students had differing levels of experience with Spanish. While some began to study the language in the first grade, others began as late as grade 9. One of the eleventh graders was new to St. Mark’s.

This intervention aimed to add three oral homework assignments to each unit and to scaffold the assignments to help the boys develop the skills to become more confident with the spoken language. LingtLanguage exercises provided practice using the vocabulary and grammatical structures in controlled situations. At the end of each unit a VoiceThread presentation required students not only to present, but to comment on other students’ presentations as well. Many of the exercises were adaptations of written exercises covering the same material. For example, in the lesson that included vocabulary to discuss the arts, reviewed the preterit and imperfect tenses, and introduced the use of the past participle with the verb *estar*, I created a LingtLanguage activity on the past participle. Students heard a command such as “*Pinta las paredes del baño*” and responded using the past participle to indicate that the action had already been completed (“*Las paredes ya están pintadas*”). The second part of the assignment included a YouTube music video. After watching the video, the students responded to oral questions using the

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vocabulary from the chapter. For the VoiceThread project at the end of the unit, the students used the past tenses to produce a review of a movie, concert or other performance for an imaginary television show. It should be noted that, once I had begun the intervention, several factors, including the pacing of the course and the overall school calendar, caused me to vary slightly the number of online activities per unit.

A variety of data collection methods was used to ensure validity of the data. Anonymous pre- and post-project questionnaires examined the students' attitudes and confidence about speaking Spanish. At the conclusion of the intervention, students were invited to participate in individual interviews as well as in a focus group. During the project, student responses to each oral task were recorded, providing evidence of student achievement. In addition, at the beginning, mid-point and end of the project, students were given speaking evaluations in the language laboratory. These evaluations were scored according to the Intermediate Spanish B oral exam rubric, which is based on the speaking rubrics for the College Board Advanced Placement Spanish Language Examination. Areas addressed by the rubric are task completion and topic development, comprehensibility, vocabulary, fluency and pronunciation, and general accuracy.

The small sample size and the action research model suggested a qualitative approach to data analysis. Likewise, the subjective nature of student engagement made its empirical measurement difficult, if not impossible. The lack of a control group and the inability to fully isolate the effects of the action also precluded a quantitative approach (Grady, 1998).

Though data analysis was primarily summative, I collected informal student feedback throughout the project and recorded it in an online journal. Formative analysis shaped certain aspects of the tasks, such as the decision to try to include a video in the LingtLanguage exercises whenever possible. Likewise, reports of technological difficulties changed the number of assignments given early in the project. Despite the challenges of getting the programs to work at home, initial student response indicated that the boys liked the added variety and were willing to spend the extra time needed to complete the online homework

The first step in the summative analysis of the data was to read through student responses from the interviews and focus groups, as well as the answers on the pre-project and post-project

questionnaires. Responses were carefully analyzed and coded to detect themes and trends. Student performance on the pre-project, mid-point, and final evaluations was also examined to identify changes in student achievement. Student grades were compared, as were the specific areas addressed by the rubric.

Results

The initial questionnaire indicated that students at St. Mark's do not fit the profile suggested by previous research done on boys and foreign language. At the beginning of the project, nine of the sixteen boys in the research sample indicated that speaking is the activity they most enjoy in Spanish and that it is the skill they consider most important to them. Likewise, when asked to rank their confidence level with the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), many students expressed confidence in their speaking ability. Eight were most confident about speaking; four more ranked speaking second in terms of assurance. They were, however, less sure of their listening skills. Six students ranked listening third in terms of their level of confidence. Six more ranked it fourth.

The post-intervention questionnaire showed a significant growth in confidence in the area of listening comprehension, with ten students ranking their listening ability first or second. Conversely, there was a drop in confidence in speaking when compared with other skills; only half of the students ranked it first or second. However, when asked specifically whether or not they were more confident when speaking than at the beginning of the year, ten of the sixteen students noted increased confidence, and twelve of sixteen indicated that they believed their speaking skills had improved.

The majority of the students (eleven of fifteen) reported doing their online speaking assignments all or most of the time, although my records indicated that the number completing all or most of the exercises was substantially higher (fourteen of sixteen). The students were almost evenly divided on whether or not they enjoyed doing their online speaking homework, with seven expressing some degree of enjoyment. It should be noted, though, that five strongly disagreed with the statement, "I enjoy doing my online speaking assignments." Six students, however, agreed with the statement, "I prefer doing my homework when it is a speaking activity." The

students were also split with respect to the statement, “My online speaking assignments do not usually help me learn the material.” Nine students agreed or strongly agreed, while seven disagreed. Nevertheless, eleven boys believed that the online assignments prepared them to use the language. In addition, prior to completing the project, seven students believed that their work in Spanish was equally divided among the four skills. After completing the project, ten students agreed that their work was evenly distributed.

The students’ written reflections and interview responses reflected a similar split in opinion. Several students mentioned that the online exercises took more time to complete than the traditional grammar and vocabulary assignments. Technological problems also added to the time commitment and detracted from the overall experience for a number of students. Moreover, as the following student indicated, there are no access issues when homework only involves a book or a worksheet, but completing the online speaking activities requires access to a computer and a microphone, as well as a quiet place to work.

There's almost always problems with the online speaking exercises, and to do it well it takes way longer than normal homework, and on top of that it can only be done in a quiet place where there is a computer. This makes it near impossible to get it done during school for the days when there isn't much time after school. The exercises in the books and even worksheets are definitely preferred.

Nevertheless, most students reported doing their speaking assignments at least as frequently as their written homework. One such student asserted that, although he did his Spanish homework “less than half the time,” he completed his speaking exercises “most of the time.” He maintained that speaking activities were “*better than writing homework*,” noting that he “*hate[s] that junk*.” Another found the work “*a little tedious at first, but easy to get the hang of*.” The fact that the assignments were graded may have been an incentive for some, as the following student pointed out:

Some of them can be a little time consuming, depending on if we, like, have to watch part of a video, try to comprehend it, and then answer questions on it, but others were worth

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the time, I believe. I also like how they give you an opportunity for a grade on some of them, and that they are not just worthless and kind of busy work.

The asynchronous nature of the speaking assignments also had advantages and disadvantages. A number of students judged it as unnatural *“because most of the time you are answering a question you are reading it off of a sheet so it's more like reading rather than actually speaking off the top of your head.”* As another student stated, *“in real life you don't have time to write something out before you say it. You're going to have to say it, and you might mess up, but that's how it works in real life.”* One student, who was new to St. Mark's and entered the class significantly behind in his oral skills, echoed the sentiments of those who found that the asynchronous character of the assignments allowed them time to plan their responses. He maintained that *“when you write it down, I think you get a little bit more preparation. You kind of get to see how everything is spelled out, um, and I know for me, especially, that helps out a lot.”* The assignments themselves varied in terms of the level of preparation required. When asked about the degree of written preparation that went into their assignments, the students noted that they wrote out the VoiceThread presentations, but that for the LingtLanguage exercises, which generally elicited shorter answers, they seldom wrote out their complete responses, though they did use notes at times. Many students observed that writing their presentations and then reading them served as reinforcement of the vocabulary and structures: *“you get practice writing down what you're going to say, and then you actually say it, instead of just writing it down and turning it in.”* Referring to the final VoiceThread project, a call-in advice show, which was adapted from a composition assignment used in the other sections of the course, another student remarked, *“we wrote the letter anyways, but then we also just [said] it all aloud, and that's like an extra step which they didn't get to do, so it's like we automatically got more practice with the language doing this same assignment.”*

Student comments revealed a preference for assignments that simulated ways the language would be used outside the classroom. Again, however, the boys differed on which activities best accomplished that goal. Many students displayed a strong preference for LingtLanguage activities that included both oral questions and a related video. The structure of the LingtLanguage exercises promoted responses that were more typical of interpersonal communication, as this student indicated: *“I prefer LingtLanguage to VoiceThread because it is*

easier for me, and I don't think that longer comments that wouldn't be used in conversation are as applicable as the LingtLanguage assignments.” Because they did not tend to compose their entire responses before recording them, several boys noted that LingtLanguage elicited more spontaneous speech. One boy found that it “*encourage[d] fluency and improv[isation],*” while another cited the need to “*think of the thing as I was saying it.*” Though students could, if they wished, write out the full answer for any question, this student’s experience was typical:

I didn't do it [write out the responses before recording] all the time. Sometimes I just, like, went with the flow, just, like, answered it as I figured it out, but sometimes it, like, definitely helped to have it written down, but I think that as you practice more and more, the less you have to write; like the last LingtLanguage thing that we did, I just wrote down a word, a single word for every single answer, and then I'd just ... form, like, the sentence in my head and use, like, that one word.

On the other hand, the call-in advice show on VoiceThread was praised for its interactive, “real-life” qualities. Students were instructed to imagine that they had a problem and to call the program to ask for advice. Because comprehensibility of the problem was essential to the project, the students composed a rough draft of the problem, which had to include uses of both the present and imperfect subjunctive, and submitted it to me for review. I then made corrections and suggestions and returned the paragraphs to the students so that they could record them. Once the problems had been recorded, the students were required to give advice to three classmates. So that everyone would receive at least one comment, students were assigned one problem on which to comment but were free to choose the remaining two. Though students frequently mentioned this project as the most time-consuming, every boy interviewed remarked on the opportunity for peer interaction and feedback. This student observed that linguistic goals were accomplished while achieving enjoyable, authentic communication:

Not only was that the most fun, ... they were real-life problems, I mean they were, for the most part, they were actually things that people were going through, and it was fun to actually get to react to something your friends said. And also, not only did it have the real-life aspect, but also it taught us the subjunctive, I mean, and that was the goal.

Both programs provided the students the opportunity to hear their own speech, a feature that many found beneficial. One student acknowledged that *“Hearing myself ... was probably the biggest thing that I've taken away from that, knowing where to improve based on where my pronunciation is or the way I conjugated a verb in speaking it or certain things like that.”* Teacher feedback was likewise cited as a positive aspect of the project, as was the chance to hear other students' responses on VoiceThread. This student's comment reflected the views of many: *“I think the part that helped people achieve the most was ... your feedback, the way you give feedback both by audio and by written—both of those work well—and ... the ability to compare yourselves to others and see what you need to work on.”*

Examination of student performance on the pre-project, mid-point and final evaluations revealed no significant improvement as a result of the intervention. Each evaluation was graded using the same speaking rubric, but the tasks required the student to use the vocabulary and grammatical structures being studied at the time. Thus, control of more advanced structures was required on the final evaluation than for either the pre-project or mid-point assessment. Student performance on the three oral evaluations was fairly consistent in the five areas evaluated. Only two students demonstrated significant improvement as measured by the rubric, while none showed a noticeable decline in performance. The final assessment did, however, reveal significant levels of student achievement as measured by the amount of language produced. On the first part of the exam, in which students had to give health and fitness advice based on picture prompts, all but three students filled the entire time allotted (forty-five seconds per picture). While some students used the entire time because they lacked the linguistic resources to answer more efficiently, others had the confidence and skills to fully address and complete the task. The responses spanned a range of grammatical and lexical accuracy, as the following samples suggest:

Tú estás muy estornudo. Necesita, necesitas que duermas mucho, um, porque, um, um, bebe mucho jugo de naranja y toma, sí, toma , um, la le-, no, toma la sopa de, or, del pollo, um, y evita las comidas basuras porque um tú, never mind ... (time)

Sugiero que no comas la comida basura; es terrible para la salud. Come la comida nutritiva. También bebe la, el, la agua; no bebas las, los jugos que tienen, que son tan terribles para la salud. Tú tienes los hábitos alimenticios malos ahora. Necesitas comer

bien. También sugiero que hagas ejercicio. Haz los flexiones, los abdominales, y también sugiero que hagas un, un, uh, ejer-, unos ajer- ejercicios aeróbicos porque son buenos para la salud y son ... (time)

Likewise, most students went beyond the minimum requirement of giving two complete sentences to respond to the three questions in the second half of the exam. Although I had reminded them that two “good sentences” were enough, the majority gave extensive responses that far exceeded expectations in terms of length. Again, the quality of the answers varied significantly.

No me gustan las cualidades de mi mejo-, mejor amigo como, porque él es chismoso y un pequeño vanidoso, y no me gustan los, las cualidades porque, porque si él es chismoso, no puedo confiar en él porque no, porque no puede guar-, guardar un secreto. Y también si él es vanidoso, él siempre habla com-, como él y nunca para mí.

El amigo mío debe ser honesto y puede, y debe, uh, guardar mis secretos. Y, uh, tengo que, uh, contar e-, contar con él. No puede ser chismoso. No puede ser vanidoso o egoísta, uh, y tiene que apoyarme siempre y especialmente en los momentos difíciles como cuando estoy depresado, deprimido. Uh, y también mi amigo, uh tenemos que, tenemos tener mucho en común.

Con mis padres yo necesito, um, haga, haz las paces. Um, yo necesito, sorry, yo necesito hago las paces con ellos, um necesito que, um necesito que ayudes, ayude a ellos cuando los necesitan mi ayuda. Necesito, necesito estudiar más por, porque mi estu-, mi uh, hábitos, hábitos estudiaros, estudiar no es más bueno, y por eso mis padres me griten mucho. Um, necesito, um, necesito hablar con ellos.

As the student responses indicate, the intervention did not appear to have a significant impact on student achievement, but it did seem to alleviate the stress normally associated with the trimester oral exams. I did observe that, as the exam approached, students exhibited less anxiety than previous groups. The students themselves agreed that the oral practice lowered their stress level somewhat, but, as one boy noted, “*On the oral exam you have [a time limit]. Obviously we're going to have some stress.*”

Conclusion

While the results of this intervention do not provide clear evidence of the efficacy of the use of online speaking assignments to improve boys' engagement and achievement in Spanish, neither do they rule out their place in the curriculum. Clearly, technological problems and access issues detracted from the enjoyment that the students may have derived from working online. Nevertheless, the boys' enthusiasm for authentic tasks, such as the VoiceThread project that involved "real-life" communication with their peers, confirmed the findings of Carr and Pauwels (2009). The difficulty of designing such tasks in an asynchronous environment is evident, but it can be argued that even such an artificial environment comes closer to listening and speaking in the real world than the typical written homework assignment. While the asynchronous nature of the assignments could not replicate the spontaneous quality of most listening and speaking tasks, it did give students a chance to listen repeatedly to the prompts and to compose their responses before recording their answers. Although many of the stronger students considered this feature to be a shortcoming of the program, some of the weaker students found it quite beneficial and were willing to listen repeatedly and refine their responses in order to get them right. Given that students enter the language classroom with different skills and learning styles, it is not surprising that the intervention produced varied results in terms of student achievement. It did, however, provide another vehicle for students to practice Spanish beyond the bounds of the classroom. Since the students began the year with a high level of confidence in their oral skills, it is difficult to determine whether or not the additional speaking practice had an impact on their confidence in using the language, but it did seem to reduce anxiety when faced with an oral examination. Likewise, during the oral exam, the boys seemed eager to go beyond a rudimentary response, even when their skills limited their ability to do so.

The mixed results of this intervention suggest that more research is necessary to determine the efficacy of using online asynchronous environments to enhance boys' engagement and achievement in Spanish. As several of the students themselves pointed out, the technology is sure to improve with time, which should eliminate some of the problems the boys experienced and make the overall process of completing such assignments more enjoyable. In addition, student feedback from this intervention suggests that future research should focus on striving to create tasks that are as close to "real life" as possible.

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Just as the Internet has enabled foreign language teachers to bring the world to their classrooms, the development of interactive websites such as LingtLanguage and VoiceThread promises to change the way students and teachers view homework assignments. Like most innovations in teaching, however, online asynchronous environments are not a panacea but rather another useful tool in the teacher's repertoire and, as such, can play a role in achieving a greater balance among the four language skills. Online speaking assignments, particularly when the tasks are designed to be as authentic as possible, seem to provide some incentive for boys to become more actively engaged in the learning process while building the confidence they need for effective oral communication.

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Reflection

Since the beginning of this action research project, I have experienced a variety of reactions and emotions. After the initial excitement of being selected, the first meetings in Philadelphia made me nervously begin to wonder what I had gotten myself into. When we broke into teams, however, I started to feel the power of such an international collaboration. Early in our work, my plea for feedback from the team elicited numerous thoughtful and helpful responses, and the support and encouragement from colleagues around the world has continued throughout the project. I end this phase of the research somewhat disappointed that the results of my intervention were not more conclusive, but this same sense of disappointment has led me to a deeper understanding of the value of action research.

Before participating in this project, I would have attempted an innovation such as this without the systematic approach that the action research model provides. In doing so, I would have been much more limited in my evaluation of the success or failure of the changes I had implemented. Because I now have data specific to my classroom, I can adapt the project in the future to better fit the needs of my students. The cyclical nature of action research means that the inconclusive results of this project are not the end but just a step along the way to improved classroom practice.

Although I do plan to continue to work with LingtLanguage and VoiceThread, at least for the near future I will probably reduce the frequency of the assignments and focus my efforts on the authenticity of the communicative situation. I hope that doing so will allow me to capitalize on the strengths of this type of task while lowering the level of student frustration.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the IBSC and St. Mark's School of Texas for giving me the opportunity to participate in this action research project. I have truly enjoyed the chance to work with such wonderful colleagues from around the globe. In particular, I am grateful to Di Laycock and Margot Long for their support and encouragement, as well as for the deadlines along the way. Finally, I would like to thank my friend and colleague, Marsha McFarland, for her feedback on the drafts of this report.