Videoconferencing: Developing Students' Communicative Competence

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Abstract: Recently, there has been a growth in the popularity of the application of synchronous tools in the language classroom with a view to developing students' communicative competence. For instance, desktop videoconferencing can provide students with the opportunity to practise and enhance their communication skills outside the classroom setting. With this in mind, the present study, which lasted for a semester, aimed to explore how (a) videoconferencing can help students to develop their speaking skills and (b) what students consider to be the most important outcomes of their learning experience. This was by means of task-based activities performed on an online platform via the Internet application, Zoom. The thirty EFL participants (levels C1 and C2) were divided into two groups, experimental (n = 18) and control (n = 12). The latter performed their bi-weekly tasks in their face-to-face classes, whilst the former engaged with their partners via videoconferencing. The findings indicate that the students who interacted virtually on videoconferencing outperformed those who interacted face-to-face. Despite certain drawbacks, videoconferencing can be deemed a convenient tool to motivate students to build up their confidence, negotiate meaning and construct knowledge, thereby enhancing their communicative competence.
Keywords: videoconferencing, speaking skills, face-to-face, computer-mediated communication, communicative competence.

Introduction

A number of studies have documented the affordances of networked multimedia as regards fostering communicative competence in foreign language learning (Yanguas, 2010). Furthermore, networked computer mediation has been found to provide language learners with increased opportunities to develop their skills in the target language as well as engage in active negotiation of meaning through different discourse strategies (Blake, 2000; Chun & Plass, 2000). Synchronous communication methods, for example, videoconferencing, can be employed as an alternative to face-to-face interaction to provide additional out-of-class speaking practice, thereby facilitating

engagement among learners. In this regard, Kern (2015) reported that in a synchronous group discussion students' production of sentences was two to four times greater than in face-to-face discussions. Exponential benefits have also been described when integrating Web 2.0 activities in the form of text, audio or video, one example being Skype or desk videoconferencing (Kroon, van der, Jauregui, & Thije, 2015; Tian & Wang, 2010; Vurdien & Puranen, 2018; Wang & Tian, 2013). Videoconferencing has been defined as "synchronous audio and video communication through computer and telephone networks between two or more geographically dispersed sites" (Lawson, Comber, Gage & Cullum-Hanshaw, 2010, p. 295). It provides instantaneous interaction, since students communicate with their peers in real time, as well as representing a solution for EFL learners who have fewer opportunities to communicate in the target language (Iino, & Yabuta, 2015). Additionally, communication through videoconferencing includes eye contact, gestures and turn-taking, which can enhance students' positive attitudes and motivation to learn the target language (Jauregui, Graff, Bergh & Khriz, 2012). Students also feel comfortable whilst interacting synchronously online because of its perceived proximity, close to real time speed and spontaneity of communication (Yamada & Akahori, 2009). Therefore, students are provided with the opportunity to engage in authentic interactions and practise how to negotiate meaning and learn different ways of expressing their views as they change from learning a language to using it (Alshahrani, 2016).

Consequently, and to add to existing research in this field, this paper seeks to explore how (a) videoconferencing can help students to develop their speaking skills and (b) what students consider to be the most important outcomes of their learning experience, by means of task-based activities performed on an online platform via the Internet application, *Zoom*.

Literature review

Interaction and communicative competence

Developing communicative competence has long been considered a significant factor in the field of second language acquisition, and it is one of students' goals when learning a language, since the ability to communicate effectively can benefit them in terms of gaining self-confidence and improving their performance in the other skills (MacIntyre, 2007; Trent, 2009). Communicative competence means having 'a competence to communicate' (Ahmed & Pawar, 2018). This competence can be oral, written or non-verbal, that is, the student possesses the knowledge of the language and the skill to use the language in real time situations for communicative purposes. The most common model of communicative competence for researchers in second language acquisition today is the one introduced by Canale and Swain (1980). They emphasise the interaction of both grammatical competence and social competence in any communicative activity. They claim that "the study of sociolinguistic competence is essential to the study of communicative competence as is the study of grammatical competence" (1980, p. 6). Grammatical competence, in their view, deals with the knowledge of lexical items, rules of morphology, syntax, grammar and phonology. In other words, it concerns the mastery of the linguistic code to understand and express the literal meaning of utterances accurately. Sociolinguistic competence involves interpreting and producing utterances appropriately in sociocultural contexts. Strategic competence, on the other hand, relates to verbal and non-verbal strategies that assist learners in coping with any breakdown in communicative competence. An additional component (Canale, 1983), discourse competence, includes the ability to combine language structures and functions into coherent and cohesive written and spoken texts. As a result, tasks focusing on communication should be carefully designed to enable students to use linguistic elements properly as well as to express themselves adequately in social contexts (Swain, 2000).

Engaging in interactions that take place between students in the classroom is of paramount importance if students are to enhance their speaking skills.

According to Long (1981), interaction simplifies comprehension and promotes second language acquisition, particularly in speaking. Learner-learner interaction has been deemed beneficial because it encourages students to improve their language skills; and interactive classroom activities can help students to achieve this aim through their use of the target language (Taous, 2013). Furthermore, negotiation of meaning (Long, 1996) conducted in authentic situations can foster the development of speaking skills. Nevertheless, it seems that learners' attention and output (Schmidt, 1990; Swain, 1985) are required in addition to interactional modified input for students to focus on differences between their interlanguage and the target language, since research has revealed that input alone is not effective (Ellis & Fotos, 1999; Wang & Castro, 2010). Long's (1981) Interaction Hypothesis suggests that learners engage in negotiation of meaning during their interactions so that they can focus on form and the input they obtain. Accordingly, this means that negotiated interaction, in which native speakers or language experts correct learners' output, reveals gaps in learners' interlanguage. By modifying their output in the target language and adapting to the negotiated interaction, language acquisition is facilitated.

In the present project videoconferencing was employed as a scaffold to motivate students to engage in online interactions to develop their communicative competence prior to the face-to-face context. The above-mentioned benefits apply to the traditional native-speaker to non-native-speaker (NS-NNS) interactional process (Long, 1996), whereas the participants in the current study negotiated meaning among themselves in the target language (NNS-NNS). As a result, the pattern of interaction differed from the conventional form (NS-NNS). The aim was to afford the participants the opportunity to communicate outside the classroom with their peers, which might be beneficial since they knew each other and would not feel inhibited when expressing their views.

Videoconferencing and the development of speaking skills

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) serves as a venue for social interaction, which provides students with opportunities to use language in an authentic context to express their views, convey information, obtain instantaneous feedback and assess their learning of the target language. According to Hashemi and Azizinezhad (2011), "CMC offers superior chances for interaction and improvement to students in an EFL setting where native speakers are few and far between" (p. 51). Thus, videoconferencing can be of assistance to students outside the classroom setting as it facilitates online interaction and leads to the development and enhancement of speaking skills. An additional advantage is that in videoconferencing both oral and body language can be used together with a range of different media, for instance, pictures, which allows learners to change the way they create meaning (Hampel & Stickler, 2012).

The pedagogical implications concerning the implementation of videoconferencing in language learning have been explored in several studies (Jauregui & Bañados, 2008; Lee, 2007; Wang, 2004 & 2006), and consideration has been given to how to best devise activities for such classes (Wang, 2007). Synchronous computer-mediated communication has been perceived as a convenient means of facilitating speaking skills acquisition and development of students' communicative competence ((Jauregui *et al*., 2012; Kervin & Derewianka, 2011; Levy & Stockwell, 2006), modified output (Bueno-Alastuey, 2013), willingness to communicate (Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006; Macintyre, 2007), and reduction of anxiety (Bueno-Alastuey 2011; Satar & Ozdener, 2008). In research conducted via desktop videoconferencing on a group of Korean students at a university in the US and their peers at a college in South Korea, Lim and Pyun (2016) highlighted that videoconferencing sessions had contributed to the development of their listening and speaking skills, apart from broadening their cultural horizons through exposure to the views of the target language speakers. Furthermore, in a tandem exchange, Coutinho (2016)

examined whether a group of ESL adults in the Middle East could improve their linguistic skills through performing collaborative tasks with Brazilian students. The Skype interviews aided the students in gaining confidence and enhancing their communicative skills, whilst broadening their knowledge and becoming more aware of the foreign culture. Other studies have exploited the benefits of using videoconferencing in the classroom to develop and enhance intercultural competence (Giralt & Jeanneau, 2016; Jung, 2013; Vurdien & Puranen, 2018; Yang & Chen 2014), motivate and build self-confidence (Jauregi, *et al.*, 2012; Kissau, 2012; Wu, Marek & Yen 2012), and assist in language learning (Ko, 2012; Lu, Goodale, & Guo, 2014; Satar, 2013; Yanguas, 2010).

However, certain mixed findings exist regarding the advantages of applying videoconferencing to the classroom context. Despite the fact that oral proficiency and pronunciation have remarkably improved (Lu, Goodale, & Guo, 2014; Xiao, Yang, & Zhang, 2010; Yanguas, 2010), some differences in students' speaking performance were noted in Ko's (2012) study as opposed to the choice of accurate words employed by students in other studies (Lu, Goodale & Guo, 2014). More standard modelling input (Bueno-Alastuey, 2013) combined with self-monitoring of students' linguistic output (Lu, Goodale & Guo, 2014) are deemed appropriate in students' fluency enhancement via videoconferencing.

Theoretical framework

Speaking is a social act that intends to communicate and exchange information with members of a community as well as developing and maintaining relationships (Spratt, Pulverness, & Williams, 2005). In recent years there has been a shift from learners' interaction with a computer to interaction with people via a computer (Warschauer, 2003). According to Duffy and Cunningham (1996), "learning is a social, dialogical process of construction by distributed, multidimensional selves, using tools and signs within context created by various communities with which they interact", (pp. 181-182).

Consequently, rather than the teacher delivering knowledge to the learners, language learning has become an active, social and collaborative process through which learners construct knowledge in a group by using language and artefacts, such as computers, to complete a joint task (Lee, 2004; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). Additionally, Kenning (2010) maintains that the target language knowledge is constructed through collaborative scaffolding and, with the teacher's assistance, learners can expand their zone of proximal development (ZPD). In this context ZPD refers to the gap between what learners can achieve by themselves and what they can achieve with the aid of others, that is their teacher or peers, the aim being to become autonomous learners (Lee, 2008). Therefore, and in view of the ample opportunities videoconferencing afforded the participants in the present study to engage in authentic conversations and to use language to express their viewpoints, negotiate meaning, clarify, share ideas, seek assistance and discuss solutions, a social constructivist approach to understand videoconferencing as a learning tool was adopted,

This study seeks to further contribute to the existing research base in the development of communicative competence by examining the effectiveness of the students' learning experience via videoconferencing. The two main questions that guided the current study are the following:

(a) How can videoconferencing help the students to develop their speaking skills?

(b) What do the students consider to be the most important outcomes of their learning experience?

Methodology

The project

A project to motivate students to develop their speaking skills was designed for a semester (January-June 2017), in a private language school in Spain, for a group of EFL students of levels C1 and C2. The participants were divided into two different groups, experimental (n = 18) and control (n = 12). The control

group performed their bi-weekly tasks (reading, vocabulary exercise and discussion) in their face-to-face classes for a duration of one hour, whilst the experimental group, once they had booked the meeting room via the *Zoom* application that was employed for their online debates, interacted in a desktop videoconferencing setting at their own pace for approximately fifteen minutes. Task performance (reading and vocabulary exercise) in the latter case took place at the students' own convenience. Both groups performed exactly the same tasks. Articles downloaded from the BBC or the Guardian newspaper provided the students with the background information for their debates. This was followed by contextual vocabulary exercises, each of which comprised ten True/False or Multiple Choice questions to check for comprehension, the idea being to encourage the students to incorporate the new lexical items acquired in their face-to-face or online interactions. The control group were requested to read their articles in the classroom prior to doing their vocabulary exercises. Subsequently, in small groups of three the students participated in their fifteen-minute face-to-face debates. Questions to prompt the participants to exchange views on the different subjects were formulated by the tutor. In the case of the experimental group, Google Docs spreadsheets were employed to share with the students the web links to their reading materials and their vocabulary exercises. Tasks were performed either on their smartphone, tablet or computer. Like their peers in the control group, these participants were divided into groups of three for their bi-weekly fifteen-minute online discussions via videoconferencing. The video sessions were recorded for later analysis by the tutor. In total the students participated in seven face-to-face or online discussions. Groups were not reassigned for task performance in order to maintain consistency so that the students might not feel uncomfortable should they have to change partners every two weeks.

Participants

All thirty participants were EFL students (20 females and 10 males) studying at a private language school in Spain and aiming to attain their Cambridge

English Certificate at either C1 or C2 levels (Common European Framework of Reference). They were 20-30 years old and studying different degrees at the university, namely medicine, engineering, law, economics and languages. Their speaking proficiency ranged from levels B2 to C1. They were not afforded any training in managing the videoconferencing tool, *Zoom,* because in their view it was user-friendly and similar to *Skype,* an application with which all the participants were familiar.

Online and face-to-face tasks

Seven topical articles, the aim of which was to spark off the students' interest, were selected from the BBC and the Guardian newspaper with a view to encouraging students to familiarise themselves with the subject of the articles prior to their engagement in their online or face-to-face discussions. Some lexical items were targeted in each article and in total seven vocabulary exercises were devised to check for comprehension, and the students were expected to incorporate the newly acquired lexical resources in their interactions in order to enhance their speaking skills. It was hoped that such exercises would benefit the students in their preparation towards their Cambridge oral examinations by providing them with additional speaking practice out of the classroom. Table 1 shows the articles the students read, followed by some questions to prompt student interaction.

Table 1. Tasks.

Reading materials	Examples of questions to prompt interaction
1. What is healthy eating?	What changes have occurred in our eating habits in the last twenty years? How do you foresee our diet in the future?
2. Will the monoglot ever understand?	To what extent do you all agree that we should all speak more than one language? How can we benefit from learning foreign languages?
3. Children should learn mainly to play until the age of eight,	How far do you believe that children can learn through play? Do you think

says Lego?	parents should play an important role in their children's education? Why? Why not?
4. Governments pro-EU leaflet: do its claims stack up?	If any, on what grounds do you think it would be beneficial for the UK to leave the EU? In what ways would the other EU countries be affected without the UK as a member?
5. It's seller beware as eBay's buyer guarantee is exploited by scammers?	What are the pros and cons of shopping online? Do you think there should be a law to protect online shoppers?
6. Five ways students can boost their confidence at uni.	Which of these five pieces of advice do you consider to be the most/least important in boosting university students' confidence? Talk about your own experience at university.
7. The world's most polite country.	To what extent do you think the Spaniards are polite? In your view, should children learn about good manners at home or at school?

Data collection and analysis

Both a qualitative and quantitative approach was adopted. Data were gathered from several sources: forty-two recorded videos, class observations, two questionnaires administered at the beginning and end of the project followed by individual interviews conducted upon completion of the study. The initial questionnaire collated data regarding the students' personal experience of communicating via videoconferencing and their expectations of the learning benefits. The final questionnaire sought to obtain additional information concerning their perceptions of the project and the most significant outcomes of their learning experience. Additionally, two speaking tests (pre- and post-) were devised to monitor the participants' progress in their speaking skills. Such tests were graded by the teacher-researcher. Three criteria, namely, lexical resource, discourse management and interactive communication were assessed. The marking scale (1-5) was based on the Cambridge English Language Assessment and examined (1) the range of vocabulary the students used when exchanging views on familiar and unfamiliar topics; (2) the extent of language produced by

the students and whether their contributions were relevant, coherent and varied; and (3) their initiating, responding, maintaining and developing the interaction and negotiating towards an outcome. The analysis of the video recordings was conducted by repeated viewings of the interactions and note-taking on the salient features, such as paralinguistic cues and the concept of turn-taking to convey meaning (Tannen, 2012).

Finally, a survey questionnaire (Table 2), comprising twelve statements was completed by the participants for further data analysis. A five-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 (I strongly disagree) to 5 (I strongly agree) was employed to evaluate how the students reacted to the project. Their responses corresponded to their perceptions of the most important outcomes of their learning experience.

A consent form was signed by all participants, who were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Table 2. Survey questionnaire.

Statement	Mean	Median	SD
1. I enjoyed using my Smartphone to do my reading and vocabulary exercises.	3.61	4	1.14
2. I felt motivated to interact with my peers via videoconferencing.	4.27	4	0.66
3. I acquired new vocabulary by reading the different articles.	3.88	4	0.90
4. I felt comfortable to use the newly acquired vocabulary in my speaking tasks.	3.33	3	0.59
5. I prepared the questions very carefully before I participated in the debates via videoconferencing.	3.16	3	1.04
6. I improved my speaking skills by incorporating newly acquired vocabulary in my discourse.	4.05	4	0.72
7. I felt more confident in	2.66	2	1.18

speaking via videoconferencing than in the classroom.			
8. I improved my speaking skills by interacting in small groups via videoconferencing.	4.02	4	0.64
9. I helped my peers with vocabulary in our online interaction.	2.27	2.5	1.07
10. I found the subjects of the online discussions motivating.	3.94	4	0.87
11. I preferred online debates to face-to-face speaking activities.	2.55	3	0.78
12. I felt more independent to plan my online debates without the teacher's help.	3.05	3	0.80

Results and Discussion

How videoconferencing can help students to develop their speaking skills

The general overview of the students' learning experience was positive. The students reported that they felt motivated and comfortable to interact via videoconferencing (Table 2, statement 2, mean = 4.27, median = 4) because the tasks were motivating. Similarly, the control group agreed that the tasks were useful and stimulated them to interact with each other. Although this finding corroborates with Canto *et al.*'s (2013) study, showing that their students were motivated when performing their tasks, Arnaiz (2012) found that her students did not feel comfortable in either online or face-to-face interactions because of their concern regarding the mistakes they made in both contexts, which they viewed as equally threatening.

From the present study it can be surmised that videoconferencing task design can have a positive effect on students, thereby leading to increased motivation, as reported in another study (Loranc-Paszylk, 2015). The students expressed an interest in the subjects under discussion because, in their view, they were thought-provoking and challenging. Furthermore, as argued by Lee (2007) and Martin (2005), close collaboration among the students, their interaction online and the strategies they used to respond spontaneously enhanced their

motivation and learning performance. Whilst the students in the experimental group claimed that there was no peer pressure (Arnold, 2007; Hurd, 2006) insofar as they could interact in a friendly atmosphere outside the classroom context, those in the control group stated that they were aware of their peers in the classroom and, as a result, felt inhibited at times as they did not want to make mistakes for fear of being ridiculed. Regarding this, one student said in the interview, "I was nervous when I had to interact with my mates in the classroom. I don't think my English is very good and I know that my classmates will laugh at me". Therefore, it should be noted that videoconferencing seems to be more effective in terms of overall group gains. The participants in the experimental group had time to plan their discourse and, unlike the control group, they made an attempt to incorporate the newly acquired vocabulary in their discourse to enhance their oral discourse (Table 2, statement 6, mean = 4.05, median = 4), because they felt more independent when managing online interactions (Table 2, statement 12, mean = 3.05, median = 3). They could ponder the appropriate lexical items to be used in their interaction due to their having time to prepare their discourse prior to their online discussions. One student stated in the final questionnaire that "I took my time to go over the vocabulary exercises we did and chose the right word to use when I prepared for the online interaction with my classmates". Subsequently, the effectiveness of learning via videoconferencing is related to the preparatory time students are afforded prior to their online interactions. The control group carried out their tasks during classroom time with no extra allowance for task preparation, which accounts for the differences noted in the learning context.

As can be perceived in the figures below, there exists a difference in the average score between the pre- and post- tests. Three criteria, namely discourse management, lexical resource and interactive communication were assessed in both the control and experimental groups. In the experimental group, as shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3, all the participants had improved their scores, with a difference of 0.5-1 between the pre- and post- tests for all three criteria, which

supports the claims (Table 2, statements 6 (mean = 4.05, median =4); and 8(mean = 4.02, median = 4)) that they had improved their speaking skills. This progress could be attributed to the fact that the students were afforded the opportunity to prepare their questions carefully (table 2, statement 5, mean = 3.16, median = 3) prior to task performance online; also that they had familiarised themselves with the lexical items they had acquired through reading the articles (Table 2, statement 3, mean = 3.88, median = 4) in their own time, whilst reflecting on how to conduct their interactions, that is, initiating, responding and turn-taking. However, when examining the progress of the control group, the improvement in the students' speaking skills is significantly less than in the experimental group, as illustrated in Figures 4, 5 and 6. What is noticeable is the fact that the scores for lexical resource (Figure 5) between the pre- and post- tests showed no change. This finding suggests that the students did not have sufficient time to acquire new vocabulary since task completion, that is reading their articles, doing their vocabulary exercises and interacting with their peers, took place during their one hour face-to-face classes. On the other hand, in the experimental group the students had plenty of time to review their lexical items and ponder accurate usage in different contexts whilst preparing for their interactions. In this regard Nation (2005) states that lexical resource is enriched through exposure of the learner to the target word in different contexts through reading, listening, speaking and writing activities. This concurs with other studies in which contextual vocabulary acquisition was found to be more meaningful than memorising words out of context (Agca & Özdemir, 2013; Thornbury, 2004; Vurdien, 2017). Notwithstanding, Webb and Chang's (2014) study reports that the relationship between vocabulary learning and frequency is not significant. To support this finding, the control group in the present study were unable to acquire new vocabulary despite their regular exposure to new lexical items through reading and vocabulary exercises.

Furthermore, there is a clear indication that in spite of the general improvement noted, the more proficient students in the pre-test would be likely to score

higher marks in the post-test, whilst the low-achievers in the pre-test would be likely to score lower marks in the post-test, a finding that emerged in another study (Canto *et al.*, 2013). Based on the students' scores in the pre- and post-tests, videoconferencing can be viewed as being more effective in students' development and enhancement of speaking skills than traditional face-to- face classes.
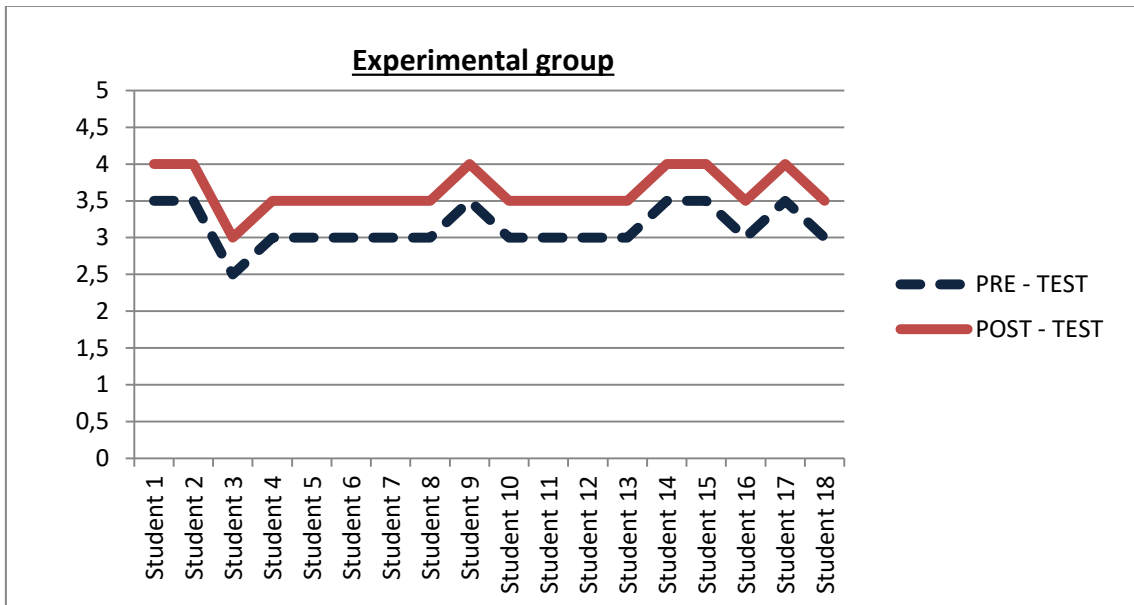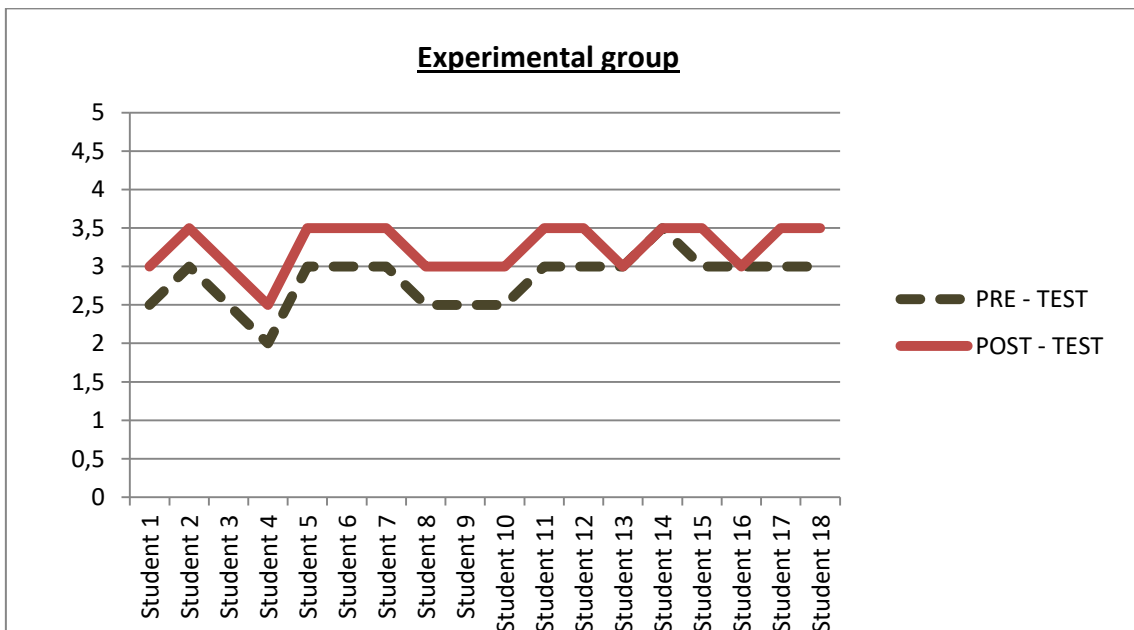

Figure 1. Discourse Management.
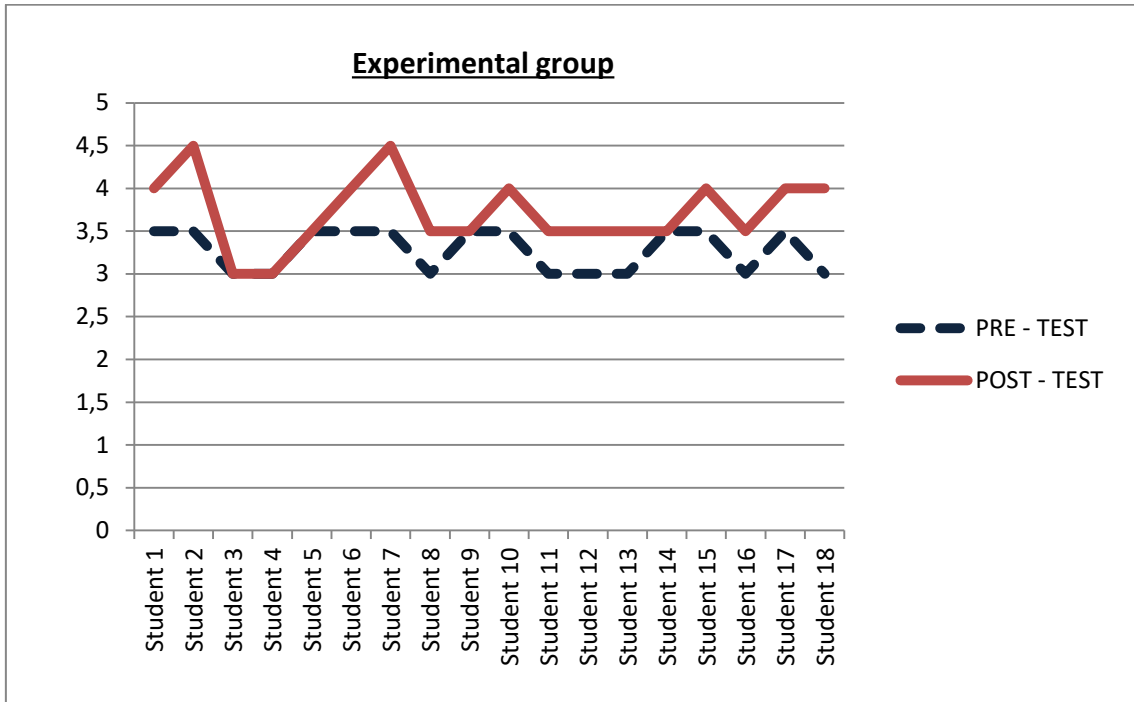

Figure 2. Lexical Resource (Experimental group).

Figure 3. Interactive Communication.
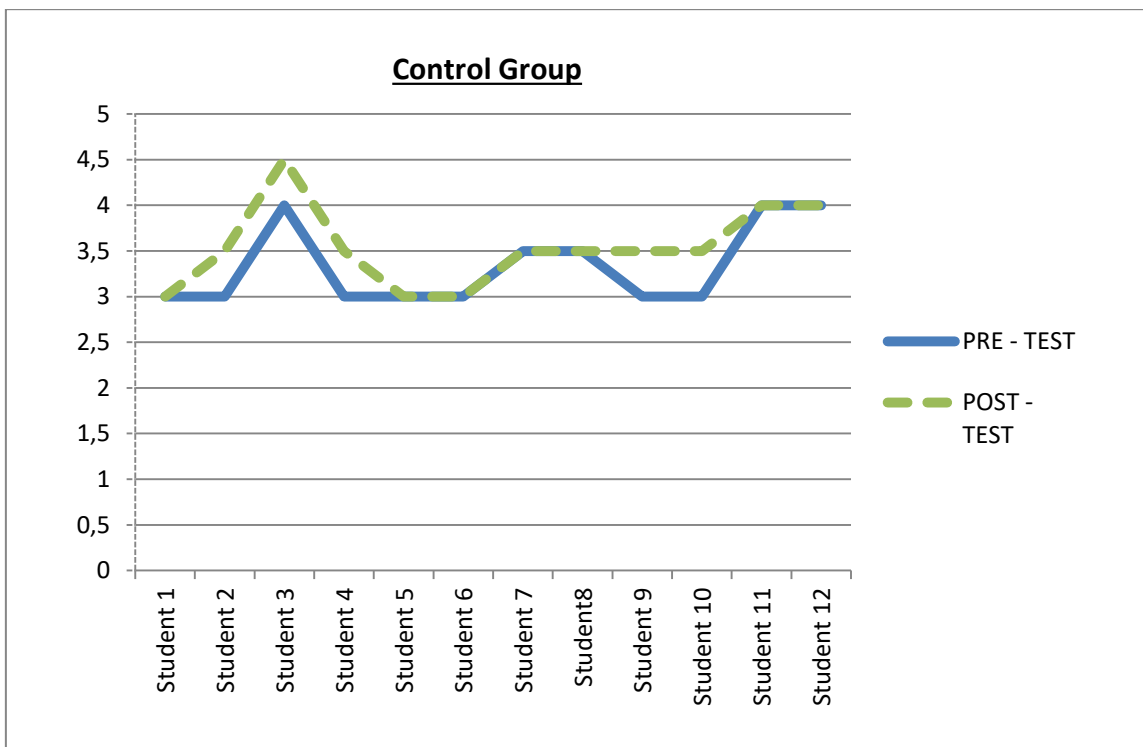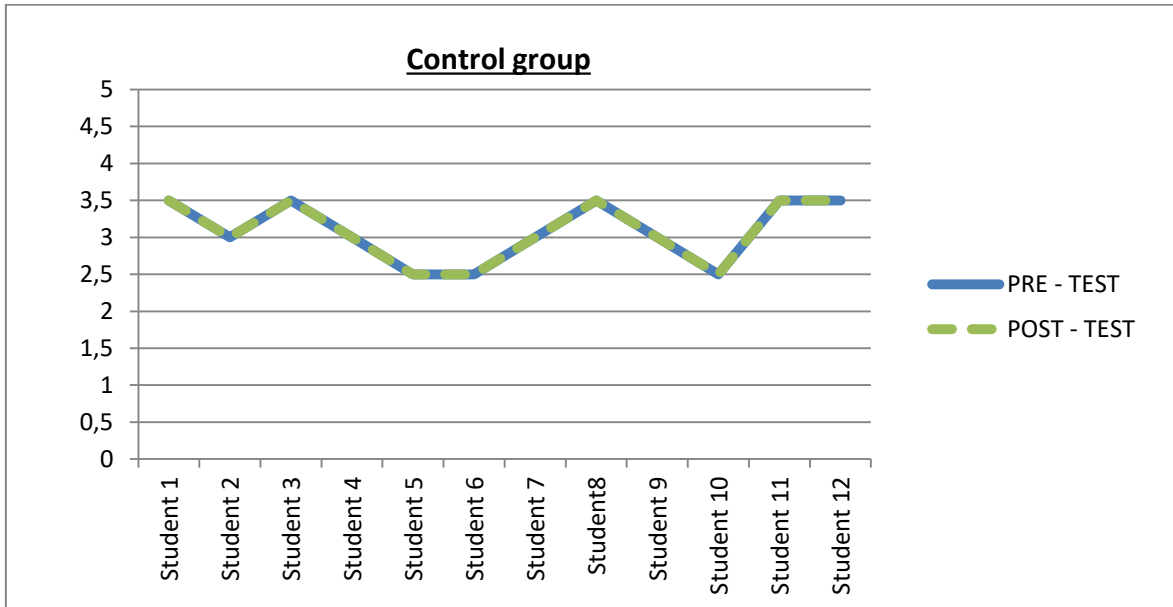

Figure 4. Discourse management.
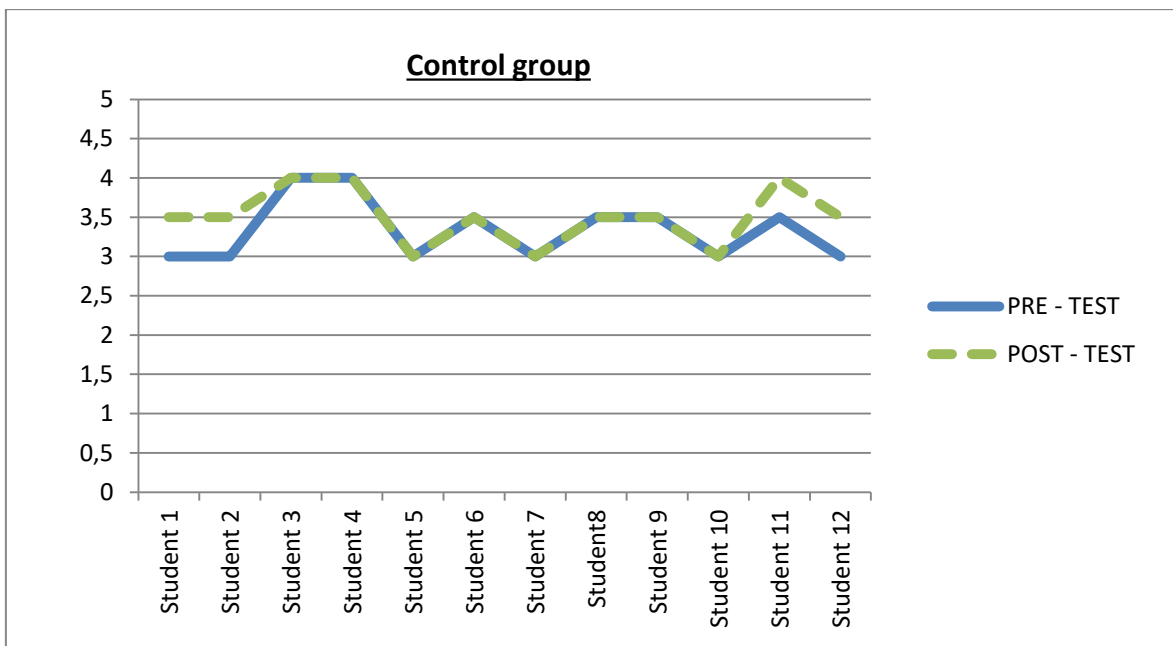
Figure 5. Lexical resource.

Figure 6. Interactive communication.

The most important outcomes of students' learning experience

The findings show that the students had improved their speaking skills via their interactions through videoconferencing (Table 2, statement 8, mean = 4.02, median = 4). The preparatory period prior to their online sessions might have had a beneficial effect on their improvement. Furthermore, their constant

practice online led to confidence building and fluency development, a finding which was apparent in Loranc-Paszylk's (2015) study; in contrast, in the control group little progress was noticed. The following statements from students' interviews and questionnaires support this, "I feel more confident after practising on VC"; "I no longer feel afraid to interact in my F-2-F classes after interacting online"; "I think I speak more fluently now". Differences, such as motivation, language proficiency and learning styles may affect speech production and learning. According to Dörnyei, (2009), interaction between the learner and the environment also plays a significant role. The videoconferencing setting might have fostered a more relaxing atmosphere conducive to enhanced interaction.

Interestingly, in both the experimental and control groups the students learned how to communicate with their peers by using strategies, such as initiating, responding and turn-taking, which are deemed important for effective communication to take place. Such strategies were considered vital for the students to learn since they would have to use them in their Cambridge English speaking test to show their interactive communicative competence. The control group felt that they had an advantage when interacting in their face-to-face groups since their partners' response was instantaneous, which facilitated a rapid and seamless conversation. Despite the fact that videoconferencing offers paralinguistic cues for turn-taking, there were occasional overlaps in the participants' delivery due to video delay in transmission, which was apparent in other studies (Giuchon & Cohen, 2014; Satar, 2016). Some claimed in their interview that they needed time to construct their language output, which could have accounted for the longer periods of silence between turns, producing such overlaps, as pointed out by Satar (2016). This was more common among the students with low proficiency language skills. As a result, it might be advisable to inform students of the possible delays during videoconferencing interactions to alert them to this drawback prior to their interactions; they can then tolerate the silence between their exchange of views

(Stickler *et al*, 2007), more than when they communicate in face-to-face classroom contexts. For those who are less proficient in the language, they might be encouraged to prepare their debates thoroughly preceding their online interactions to avoid periods of silence that may affect communication flow.

Broadly speaking, both control and experimental groups admitted that observing each other's body language, such as nodding, hand gestures or facial expressions, assisted them in understanding the message being conveyed. One student said in the questionnaire, "My partners' body language helped me to understand what he wanted to say, especially when the sound quality was bad". Another one commented in an interview that "It was easy for me to follow my partners' speech by looking at their faces and gestures during the video conference". With reference to this, Singelis (1994) posits that speakers of the same language rely largely on non-verbal communication to negotiate meaning, however, regarding foreign language learners, "the reliance on the non-verbal communication may be even greater than normal" (p. 275). Hence, and in line with Wang's (2007) view, videoconferencing can be regarded as a suitable tool for fostering meaning-making through the use of facial expressions and gestures.

Although the participants expressed a positive attitude towards their novel learning experience to develop their communicative competence, when asked about their preferred learning style (Table 2, statement 11, mean = 2.55, median = 3) they unanimously stated in their interview that they would rather communicate in face-to-face settings than via videoconferencing. Some explained that they usually feel more motivated by being in a classroom surrounded by their peers who can provide instantaneous support should they need it. Others reported that the atmosphere, albeit unthreatening due to lack of peer pressure, appeared somewhat cold because they were communicating virtually, with the corresponding absence of personal contact. In addition, two participants mentioned that certain technical issues arose during their online

interactions, which disrupted task completion. On average, they perceived videoconferencing interactions as a scaffold which allows for an enhancement of their speaking performance in their face-to-face interactions in the classroom. For them the latter situation seems to be more natural. This might suggest that these students are more acquainted to learning from one technique, that is face-to-face, and that consequently, they cannot fully appreciate the benefits of the new learning tool. This corresponds to Robinson's (2005) view that there are learners who will adapt better to certain learning styles than others. Hence, it might be convenient to permit students to select the learning technique they seem better suited to so that task completion can be more accurate.

Conclusion

Videoconferencing can provide students with a learning context outside of the traditional setting, which can stimulate them to adopt a self-learning approach and collaborate with each other so as to develop their communicative competence. The current study examined the ways in which videoconferencing can assist in students' development of their speaking skills as well as in the most important outcomes of their learning experience. Videoconferencing has been viewed as a synchronous tool that can be effective to enhance discourse (Warschauer, 1996) and lexical resource (Smith, 2003). Additionally, paralinguistic resources, as argued by Satar (2016), play a significant role in communication and this can be fostered via videoconferencing, whilst Wang (2007) concludes that the use of facial expressions and gestures can aid in task completion. The fact that the participants admitted that they had improved their oral skills supports Lu *et al.*'s (2014) confirmation that videoconferencing interactions have a positive effect on students' oral proficiency. However, as pointed out by some students in the present research, technical issues may affect task performance, whilst lack of personal contact was mentioned as another drawback.

Despite the length of the project being only a semester, some progress was noted in the students' discourse, lexical resource and interactive communication, thereby contributing towards the development and enhancement of their communicative competence. Constant practice appears to be crucial in building up students' confidence and developing their oral proficiency (Loranc-Paszylk, 2015). However, a drawback affecting students' task performance is associated with the long periods of silence that sometimes occurred during interactions. Guidance could be given to students prior to their videoconference interactions to raise their awareness of such occurrence so that they can manage the situation better and allow their partners to take their time to produce language in agreement with Stickler *et al.*'s (2007) claim.

Since all the participants expressed their preference for a traditional classroom setting rather than synchronous communication via videoconferencing, it might be better to permit students to choose what they consider to be suitable learning strategies that will help them with speech production. According to Robinson (2005), individual differences, for example, motivation, language competence and learning styles influence students' language performance.

However, there are certain limitations that should be taken into consideration in future research. Firstly, due to its small scale, the data cannot be generalised. Secondly, the length of the project has an effect on the results, which tend to be short term. As a consequence, it might be advisable to study the outcomes on a long term basis to compare the results. Thirdly, only one type of task was assigned, that is, reading newspaper articles, which created the context of their online debates followed by questions to assist them in preparing for their interactions; in addition, task design might involve listening activities or watching videos to spark online debates. Fourthly, the participants worked in the same groups throughout the project; it might be interesting here to study how participants react to each other when groups are reassigned for each task. Finally, the participants interacted with their own peers, with the result that

they were acquainted with each other; the data might vary should they be given the opportunity to interact with unknown counterparts.

All in all, this study has given an insight into the use of videoconferencing as a learning tool to benefit students in the development of their communicative competence. The findings have indicated that the students who interacted virtually via videoconferencing outperformed those who interacted in their face-to-face classes, which is in line with Canto *et al.*'s (2013) study. Videoconferencing allows for negotiation of meaning and knowledge construction between students to enhance their communicative competence. Accordingly, teachers should be encouraged to exploit its potential in their classroom setting for the benefit of their students' learning experience.

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