

Virtual interaction through video-web communication: A step towards enriching and internationalizing language learning programs

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Abstract

This paper describes an intercontinental project with the use of interactive tools, both synchronous and asynchronous, which was set up to internationalize academic learning of Spanish language and culture. The objective of this case study was to investigate whether video-web communication tools can contribute to enriching the quality of foreign language curricula, by facilitating a motivating virtual communication environment for purposeful interaction between non native and native speakers of Spanish to accomplish learning tasks. The project was carried out between a class of twenty Spanish as foreign language students from the University of Utrecht, The Netherlands, and a class of twenty Chilean trainee Spanish teachers from the University of Concepción, Chile. Students interacted weekly, over two months, in dyads and small groups making use of a video-web communication tool, *Adobe Connect*.¹ The video-web communication tool enabled synchronous interactions, during which participants could see each other while talking and sharing audiovisual documents on-line. A blog was also used to promote collaboration, reflection and exchange of ideas about issues raised during the synchronous sessions. Qualitative data was collected through a questionnaire, analysis of recordings of learners' interaction sessions and the project blog. Results show a positive impact on motivation and on learning outcomes, particularly regarding understanding of the use of language in given contexts, and of cultural issues.

Keywords: computer mediated communication, video-web communication, blog, collaborative learning, e-learning, intercultural communication

1 Introduction: epistemological and empirical context

An Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) project, in order to be successful within an educational context, has to be embedded in a sound socio-cognitive

1. Until recently called *Breeze* from Macromedia

and pedagogical approach (Lehtinen *et al.*, 1999). Technology is not just an end in itself, but it may become a powerful tool in facilitating, enriching and speeding up learning processes. Our educational approach results from principles embedded in two theoretical and empirical fields: Social Constructivism and Second Language Acquisition Research (SLAR). According to social constructivism, learning takes place when learners engage in social interactions while executing tasks where collaboration is essential (Vygotsky, 1978). Authentic tasks and collaborative learning contribute to construction of knowledge (Crook, 1994). In order to enhance collaboration and stimulate learning, tasks must be carefully designed; they entail *mutual interaction*, *interdependency* and *responsibility* of those carrying them out (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Studies in SLAR also share the concept of interaction, as a crucial factor in promoting acquisition processes. SLAR studies show that certain conditions have to be met in the learning process for SLA to be successful (Ellis, 2005):

1. Learners have to be exposed to comprehensible, rich and varied input (Krashen, 1985).
2. Learners must have opportunities to produce comprehensible pushed-output, correct and adequate to the conversational context (Swain, 1985, 1995).
3. Learners need to have opportunities to negotiate meaning (Long, 1983, 1996) and to use the target language (TL) strategically in a social, authentic context (Lantolf, 2000a/b).
4. Learners must have opportunities to focus on form. A meaning-focused approach is not sufficient to adequately acquire a language. Instances where students have opportunities to focus on form (Doughty, 1998; Long, 1998) have to be included, since attention (Schmidt, 2001) and consciousness rising (Sharwood Smith, 1994) may be relevant in the acquisition process.
5. Language is embedded in a specific cultural and communication context. The target language context might differ from the L1 context and these differences might trigger misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. Intercultural (Byram, 1997) and pragmatic aspects (Rose & Kasper, 2001) have to be addressed in order to make foreign language learners become competent TL users.

Interaction in a language learning context where learners have opportunities for the conditions pointed out above may further accelerate language acquisition processes. Interaction occurs in a given sociocultural environment. In this respect, research findings regarding TL culture show that developing a positive attitude towards the TL culture in the learner's mind, or an integrative orientation focusing on the similarities between L1 and L2 cultures, facilitates language acquisition (Robinson, 1993).

2 ICT for enrichment of the language learning environment

The emergence of computers has changed the way we learn and communicate with others. Whether used for word processing or for communication, computers have had a considerable impact on literacy practices and on foreign language learning (Pennington, 2003; Warschauer, 1997, 2004). ICT, and particularly the internet, may contribute to enriching the learning context. The internet has not only become a

limitless source of textual and audiovisual input in different languages, but it has also enabled the production of output and communication with peers and experts living thousands of kilometres away, facilitating synchronous and asynchronous, distant collaborative work.

Communication in an L2 mediated by computers has been reported to present advantages over learning environments which make no use of ICT tools. Both quantitative and qualitative studies have shown the positive impact of Computer-mediated communication (CMC) in acquiring an L2. CMC contributes to breaking down the barriers and inhibitions that often arise in a classroom setting, when trying to communicate different ideas (Eisenberg & Ely, 1993), helping the L2 learner to become more confident about his/her language use (Kern, 1996). It has been reported that students are more active in the use of the TL (Kelm, 1992; Kern, 1996). They produce more coherent language, better logical linking of ideas, (Felix & Lawson, 1996), present lexically and syntactically more complex structures (Warschauer, 1996; Warschauer & Kern, 2000) and develop intercultural competence (Belz, 2003; O'Dowd, 2003; Liao, 2006; Müller-Hartmann, 2000; Ware & Kramsch, 2005). Researchers have analyzed communication patterns using different asynchronous tools, such as email exchanges (Belz, 2003; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005; O'Dowd, 2003) or discussion boards (Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Basharina, 2007).

Lately, much research has been conducted on synchronous CMC, particularly using text chats as effective communicative tools to enhance language learning at syntactic (Sotillo, 2000), discourse (Warschauer, 1996), grammatical (Pellettieri, 2000), lexical (Smith, 2003) and intercultural levels (Belz & Thorne, 2006; Tudini, 2007). Some scholars have focused on analyzing the negotiation of sequences of meaning at linguistic level that emerge in chat sessions (Blake 2000, Lai & Zhao, 2006; Lee, 2004; Jepson, 2005; Pellettieri, 2000; Salaberry, 2000; Shekary & Tahririan, 2006; Smith, 2004; Toyoda & Harrison, 2002; Tudini, 2003), while others have focused on analyzing intercultural issues emerging in such chat sessions (Toyoda & Harrison, 2002; Tudini, 2007). It has been suggested that synchronous CMC (SCMC) might be superior to asynchronous CMC with respect to negotiation of intercultural meaning, as SCMC offers the possibility of solving instantly, through questioning and clarification, difficulties or misunderstandings that might emerge in cross-cultural communication events. In this sense, Thorne (2003: 48) has reported that students preferred a chat tool over e-mail for "authentic interpersonal relationship building".

A limited number of studies has explored the possibilities offered by audiographic and audio conferencing to stimulate language learning (Hampel & Hauck, 2004; Kötter, 2004; Lamy, 2004) or intercultural competence; even fewer studies have been conducted on describing videoconferencing experiences (O'Dowd, 2000; Wang², 2004, 2006, 2007).

Our case study analyses SCMC using a video-web communication platform where participants can see each other while carrying out communication tasks. We will focus particularly on the participants' experience, as reported by a qualitative evaluation questionnaire and hope that our results will contribute to the body of research on SCMC.

2. Wang describes teacher learner interactions using net-meeting

2.1 Videoconferencing, video chat, video-web communication

A distinction should be established between three interrelated synchronous platforms which enable virtual interaction, that is, the possibility to talk and listen to each other while seeing each other. The first one is videoconferencing, a form of communication in which a dedicated high quality video connection is made through internet or ISDN-lines. The connection is set up using special videoconference equipment which is focused on a video signal only, different from an application running on a desktop personal computer. In this case, the internet is used to establish a direct connection between the participating locations. This system is mainly used for formal meetings such as conferences, lectures, or official work meetings.

Instant messaging is a form of real-time communication between two or more people based on typed text. There are chat applications that also offer one to one audio and video communication (video chats). In addition to a computer and internet connection, video chat users need webcams. Popular communication platforms among young people are Yahoo and MSN Messenger.

Finally, a video-web communication platform is a more sophisticated application favouring distant group collaboration. The video-web communication platform is a personal 'meeting room', where members log in with a username and a password. This system requires a good computer, fast broadband internet connection, webcam and headphone sets. More than ten students, connected through their individual computers, may join a meeting, see each other, chat and share documents (photos, audio/video fragments up to powerpoint presentations) and collaborate in the process of writing texts online. This application also allows sessions to be recorded for later analysis. Adobe Connect, the video-web communication application used in the present project, was provided to us by *Surfnet*, the provider of quality internet services for higher education in the Netherlands.

2.2 Blogs

A blog is a website which facilitates asynchronous communication. A blog may combine text, images, links, audio or/and video fragments. Blogs are frequently used as personal



Fig. 1. Video-web communication tool

online diaries. A project blog was used for students to post their task products and write about issues raised during the video-web communication sessions. The blog was named “Español en Zuecos” <http://espanolenzuecos.blogia.com/> to emphasize its intercultural character, “Zuecos” meaning “clogs”. A wooden clog is a typical Dutch object. With this name we aimed at approximating cultures, starting by breaking down initial stereotypes and gradually seeking to develop a multifaceted understanding of cultures and their complexity.

3 An intercontinental video-web communication project

In 2005 and early 2006, students studying Spanish as a FL at Utrecht University participated in pilot experiences with pre-service native teachers of Spanish as a FL from the Universities of Granada and Barcelona, making use of the same video-web communication tool. Given the fact that the experiences had been encouraging, a new challenge was faced: to set up a pilot project with students from two continents interacting with each other: students from the University of Concepción, in Chile, South America, and students from Utrecht University in the Netherlands, Europe. The main goal of the Chile-Netherlands project was to internationalize and enrich academic curricula at both institutions by creating opportunities for learners to engage in purposeful interaction to accomplish specific tasks, through video-web communication sessions. We were interested in observing the linguistic and intercultural learning situations which would emerge during the interaction sessions and in analyzing learners’ experience with the project.

Table 1 *Project process*

September 2006:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First contacts U. Utrecht & U. of Concepción • Technological tests with video-web communication platform (Utrecht - Concepción) • Selection of course in which the project would be embedded. • Confirmation of students participating at both institutions. • Task design with a focus on negotiating intercultural meaning.
October 2006:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First high resolution videoconference meeting with all participants from Utrecht and Concepción for project description. • Tutorials on how to use the video-web communication platform with students from Utrecht and Chile. • Tests of computer and internet connections of learners’ computers at home. • Creation of dyads and groups for interaction and interaction schedules. • Launch of website with information for interaction sessions: operating instructions for the video-web communication platform, tasks, and schedules.
November 2006:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal on-line trial sessions using the video-web communication platform to get used to the virtual environment and to get to know each other. • Start of official dyadic and group interaction sessions.
December 2006:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative questionnaire to evaluate experiences.

After establishing the first contacts between Utrecht and Concepción, researchers and technical teams shared project views, studied its viability and made the necessary technological tests to make sure the e-platform would work properly (see the project process in Table 1). Then, the courses where the project would be integrated were selected at both universities. Subsequently, tasks for interaction sessions were designed and the students from both institutions, who would participate in the project, were randomly chosen.

An opening videoconference session was held to introduce students from both universities, present the project objectives and tasks and to share students' expectations about the international experience. Later, virtual tutorials were carried out to train participants how to manage the video-web communication platform to be used in the project. After these tutorials, and before the official sessions started, informal small group meetings took place among students from Concepción and Utrecht to get familiar with the environment and to break the ice, getting to know each other to get ready for the interaction sessions. Official sessions started a week later and lasted for five weeks. Mixed dyads, with one student from Chile and one from Utrecht, and small groups were formed and session schedules planned. All information concerning sessions, tasks and schedules was published on the project web site. Additionally, students were informed weekly by e-mail about all relevant issues concerned with the project: tasks, interaction sessions, and schedules. At the end of the project, students were asked to answer a questionnaire and to evaluate their overall experience as a participant in the project.

3.1 Context

For an educational project to be successful, it must be meaningful for learners, address their learning needs and respect their idiosyncrasies. The project was integrated within the courses learners were already taking as part of their study programme. Thus, for the Dutch students, the project was integrated within their Advanced Spanish Language and Culture course, which demands a B2 linguistic competence level, as described in the Common European Framework (CEF). From the 56 second year students of Spanish Language and Culture at Utrecht University, 20 volunteered to participate in the project. As for the Chilean students, the project was integrated within their Introduction to Pragmatics course, in which intercultural communication was a key topic in the syllabus content. The Chilean group comprised twenty prospective teachers of Spanish as first language.

3.2 Tasks

Within this project, students and their learning processes are set in a broad spectrum of social constructivism. Learners join a meeting and collaborate with each other to carry out tasks, where reflection on intercultural similarities and differences is central. Tasks are crucial in shaping interaction processes and promoting learning. We followed criteria proposed by Chapelle (2003: 55-57) and Ellis (2003) to design interaction tasks. Accordingly a task, to be appropriate, should:

1. Have language *learning potential*. Learners do not only need practice with language use, but also opportunities to focus on form (Doughty, 1998) and on

intercultural issues (Byram, 1997).

2. *Fit the learner.* Tasks should meet learners' needs and idiosyncrasies.
3. *Focus on meaning.* Tasks should allow opportunities for interlocutors to communicate, have some new information to exchange and learn from these exchanges.
4. *Be authentic.* Tasks should be similar to those faced in the real world.
5. *Have a positive impact.* Tasks should be motivating (Dörnyei, 2001), encourage a positive attitude and openness towards the TL and culture, and promote opportunities for language use.
6. *Be practical.* This refers to the adequacy of resources to support the task. How easy or difficult it is for learners and teachers to organize and implement the task in a particular educational context.

Task design should have the following components (Ellis, 2003: 21):

1. *Goals:* this refers to the general purpose of the task, e.g. exchange intercultural information; ask for help adequately according to the communicative context.
2. *Input:* this refers to verbal and non-verbal information supplied by the task, e.g. audio fragments, pictures or a written text.
3. *Conditions:* this refers to how the information is presented (split or shared) or should be used (convergent or divergent).
4. *Procedures:* this refers to the methodological procedures to be followed in performing the task (group or pair work, planning time or no planning time).
5. *Predicted outcomes:*
 - a. Products that result from completing the task, for example, the publication of an interview, deciding the literary prize award for a contest.
 - b. Hypothetical linguistic and cognitive processes to be generated by the task.

Applying these criteria, the following four tasks were designed:

Task 1: Breaking stereotypes. The goal of this task was to become familiar with Chilean and Dutch cultures and to get to know each other. Learners were asked to comment on stereotypes and ideas they had about Chilean and Dutch people, discuss differences and similarities in customs and communication patterns, talk about cultural issues both countries portray, and to contribute to the creation of common ground (Clark, 1996). Based on the cultural and personal information exchanged in this first task session, learners were asked to write down questions to deepen understanding about the issues discussed, in the format of an interview, and to write a text, which would be reviewed and commented on in the next interaction session, as part of task 2.

Task 2: Interview review. Learners were asked to peer review the texts they had written the week before, based on the topics they had handled during the session for task 1. They had to upload the text in the video-web communication platform, read it, comment on it and introduce changes where necessary, as a result of online peer discussion. They focused on the content: was it appropriate, comprehensible and relevant? Had they missed anything? Should something be

clarified, added or deleted? As for the negotiation of formal linguistic aspects, the Spanish native speakers were asked to apply strategies for consciousness raising (Sharwood-Smith, 1994). Thus, the Chileans were told that whenever they noticed an inadequate use of a linguistic item, they would have to give hints to their non-native Dutch partners so that they could detect the problem, mobilize knowledge and try to solve it. They were asked to post the reviewed version of the texts in the project blog: <http://espanolenzuecos.blogia.com/>

Task 3: Student life in Concepción and Utrecht. Learners were asked to exchange information about their student life. They had to talk about their universities, academic programme content, the courses they take, how many classes a week, pedagogical viewpoints, and exams. Then they had to imagine they would be spending some time at their partner's university and therefore would need to be prepared for the experience. This entailed asking about personal interests, leisure activities and accommodation. If participants knew an exchange student from the target culture at their university, they were asked to interview them and report their comments about any differences they might have encountered between their own culture and the target one.

Task 4: Literary debate. This task was carried out in groups of two or three Dutch and two or three Chilean students, and was divided into two phases. In the first one, each Dutch student had to make a five minute oral presentation of a book they had just read as part of their course syllabus. During this presentation, learners had to focus on the socio-cultural and communication patterns depicted in the book. The Chilean students were asked to play the role of a jury who would evaluate the Dutch learners' book presentations. They had to choose the best presenter, debate their choice, and announce the winner of the literary award. In the second phase, Chilean and Dutch students held a debate on literary issues: writers and genres they liked or disliked and their favourite books. They were asked to present their national writers and their works.

3.3 Synchronous sessions

One of the most difficult challenges of synchronous collaborative learning is attaining an effective, clear organization of session schedules and a fluid communication among all parties involved. Thus learners were asked to provide a weekly schedule of their availability to take part in the weekly web-communication sessions. Interaction dyads were formed with one student from Utrecht and one from Concepción. A supervisor was assigned for each dyad to help solve problems relating to tasks, or technical problems. Students constituting a dyad had to inform the other party and the session supervisor, through e-mail, whenever, due to specific reasons, they would be unable to attend a session.

3.4 Data collection

Qualitative data was collected from three sources: (1) learners' responses to a questionnaire they were asked to complete after the conclusion of the project, (2) recordings of their interaction sessions, and (3) information posted in the project blog.

Questionnaire

Learners had to complete a 37 item questionnaire, which contained 25 closed questions and 12 open ones (see Appendix). A 5 point scale was used for the closed questions, where 1 indicated a negative or low value and 5 a positive or high one.

The first 13 questions addressed issues concerning participants' use of ICT tools at their university and in their private life. Questions 14 to 19 focused on evaluating the project and the e-platform. Questions 20 to 25 referred to the quality of the tasks. Questions 26 to 29 dealt with the interaction partner. Questions 30 and 31 addressed preferences and differences in communication processes: face-to-face versus e-communication. The last questions (32 to 37) referred to different topics, such as opinions on project organization, learning experience, interest in future participation, recommendations to peers and future students.

Recorded sessions

A sample of interaction sessions was recorded in order to have material for further analysis and research purposes. We were particularly interested in analyzing how participants exchanged and negotiated linguistic and intercultural meaning as they carried out the different tasks.³

Blog postings

Students were asked to publish their products –texts with their questions and answers, and reflections about issues raised during the interaction sessions- in the project blog. It was expected that such postings would provide more information about the project experience.

4 Interaction sessions: an example

Learners had video-web communication sessions once a week, lasting on average one hour. Most sessions had a clear-cut structure, with the first minutes frequently devoted to testing the sound, followed by the session supervisor presenting the task and answering queries about the content. Then, participants would engage in task accomplishment and finally they would close the session, thanking each other and saying goodbye. Interaction sessions were meant to promote communication with each other, understanding of each other's world and perceptions, so as to broaden learners' views on culture, society and social relationships.

The example in Table 2 illustrates how students interacted and negotiated linguistic and cultural meaning. The fragment corresponds to the very beginning of the first official session, where a student from Chile (CH) interacts with a student from Utrecht (UU) for Task 1.

As we can see, the beginning of this fragment is rather like a monologue, with the Chilean student enumerating different issues concerning her country. Her turns are quite dense. There is not much verbal reaction from the student in Utrecht, although she is interested in what her speech partner is telling since, as she claims in her initial turn, she

3. We are currently analyzing interaction patterns. Results will be presented in a future paper

Table 2 Example of interaction session 1, task 1. UU: Utrecht student; CH: Concepción student

UU: Bueno, mi idea de Chile ... no sé mucho de este país	UU: All right, my idea about Chile ... I don't know much of this country.
CH: yo creo que en realidad deberíamos pasar a la segunda pregunta porque no conocemos mucho del país contrario bueno eh... Chile tiene doce regiones más la región metropolitana que es la capital. El tipo de clima varía bastante porque Chile tiene de todo. Tiene desierto, tiene lugares muy lluviosos, tiene...:...en realidad es como si pusieran un poquito de todo el mundo en Chile.	CH: I think we rather take the second question because we don't know much about each other's country right, eh... Chile has twelve regions plus the metropolitan region, which is the capital. The type of climate changes quite a lot because Chile has everything. It has desert, it has very rainy places, it has ... actually it is as if they would place bits of all over the world in Chile.
UU: (sonríe) ¿y dónde vives tú?	UU: (smiles) and where do you live?
CH: yo vivo en San Carlo, en la cuarta región. En cuanto a la gente eh, no sé por ejemplo, aquí casi todo el mundo es católico, pero... hay un catolicismo no muy arraigado. Es más que nada como apariencia. Es genial, la verdad es así.	CH: I live in San Carlo, the fourth region. As for the people eh, I don't know, for instance here almost everybody is catholic... but, here there is a not very deep-rooted Catholicism. It is mainly as appearance.
5) UU: la gente también es muy desconfiada porque..., por los robos.	UU: people are also very distrustful, because of the thefts.
CH: Por ejemplo, para conseguir trabajo tienes que llevar todos los documentos que acrediten que tienes título, más encima tienen que llevar su foto y eso es un poco de discriminación porque si uno no tiene una cara bonita, no te aceptan aunque tengas mucho dato importante en tu currículum. Esa es una parte negativa. También está bien centralizado, todo en Santiago, que es la capital.	CH: for instance, to get a job you have to take over all documents proving that you have a diploma, besides, they have to take their picture, and this is rather discriminatory because if you don't have a nice face, they won't take you, even if you have important information in your curriculum. That's a negative aspect. Everything is also well centralised in Santiago, the capital.
UU: ¿y en el campo no vive mucha gente?	UU: and at the countryside don't there live many people?
CH: no, el campo es súper tranquilo	CH: no, the countryside is very quiet
UU: ¿y hay mucha influencia de Europa y de América?	UU: and is there much influence from Europe, from America?
10) CH: En general yo creo que sí. Hay influencia de todo. De hecho algo chileno que tengamos nosotros, poco. Casi toda influencia es de cualquier otro país.	CH: in general, I think so. There is influence of everything. In fact something Chilean that we may have, little. Almost all influence is from any other country.
UU: ajá.	UU: uhum.
CH: somos muy poco patriotas.	CH: we are very little patriot.
UU: ¿muy poco qué?	UU: very little what?
CH: patriotas.	CH: patriot.
15) UU: ah sí sí sí.	UU: ah yes yes yes.
CH: No sé que más puedo decirte. Pregúntame si quieres.	CH: I don't know what else to tell. Ask me if you want.
UU: Dime algo sobre la cultura...¿qué es típico de chileno o no hay cosas típicas?	UU: tell me something about the culture... what is typical from Chile or aren't there typical things?
CH: ¿típicas chilenas? eh...generalmente se	CH: typical Chilean? Eh... in general you could

Table 2 (cont.)

<i>podría decir que en comida por ejemplo la empanada.</i>	say that the food for instance the “empanada”.
UU: <i>¿el qué?</i>	UU: the what?
20) CH: <i>las empanadas</i>	CH: the “empanadas”.
UU: <i>¿qué son empanadas?</i>	UU: what are the “empanadas”?
CH: <i>las empanadas están hechas de masa. Tienen cebolla, carne, huevo y todas esas cosas van dentro de la masa, como que se envuelve. (Risas) También hay juegos típicos como el trompo, el volantín,</i>	CH: the “empanadas” are made of dough. They have onion, meat, egg and all these things go inside the dough, like wrapped (laughter). There are also typical games like “el trompo”, “el volantín”.
23) UU: <i>¿y qué son esos?</i>	UU: and what are those?

does not know much about Chile. The monologue structure changes in turn 7. The student in Utrecht starts taking the initiative by asking questions about different topics: life in the countryside (turn 7) and the influence of the western world (turn 9). In turns 12 to 15, there is an instance of negotiation of lexical meaning triggered by the word “patriotas”, which the Dutch student does not seem to recognize in the discourse. After the native speaker’s repetition of the word in isolation, the Dutch student recalls the lexical item and is able to reconstruct appropriately her speech partner’s message. In turns 18-22 speech partners initiate a new negotiation sequence, this time of a cultural meaning: “empanadas”. In her response the Chilean native speaker explains how “empanadas” are made and what the ingredients are. During the whole session, interaction remained fluid with partners exchanging much cultural information and negotiating cultural and lexical meaning. Notice that the general atmosphere during the exchange was friendly, with frequent laughter.

During interaction sessions, Dutch and Chilean students engaged in real communication. They talked about their studies, student life, hobbies, popular fiesta, dance, music, politics, literature, geography, food customs, history, democracy, religion, even private issues such as relationships and getting married. Moreover, conversations were spontaneous. Students knew the objectives of the task, but did not know exactly what their speech partner was going to say. Speech partners had to learn to cope with information gaps and the unpredictability of communication and together shared the responsibility to co-construct discourse meaning by exchanging turns as they talked.

An important aspect of these interactions was the quality of the TL input foreign language learners received. They were exposed to rich linguistic and cultural samples. As seen in the previous example, interaction sequences of meaning negotiations emerged frequently. Another interesting aspect was discourse management. Although the Chilean students might be expected to play a dominant role in the interactions, given the fact that they are fluent in Spanish and the Dutch students are not (c.f. “language is power” from Fairclough, 2001), Dutch students often led the conversation by taking initiative, asking questions and introducing and changing topics. Non- native speakers

adopted a more active role during interactions, although Chilean students talked more in terms of quantity of words.

5 Analysis and results

Preliminary results of the experience are presented below, concerning the learners' ICT background, the tasks used, the interaction format, the speech partner, motivational issues and learning outcomes.

5.1 Learners' ICT background

Both groups reported making frequent use of ICT tools to communicate (e-mail, chat, video chat). Results showed similar high values for both groups. Chilean students had an overall mean value (M) of 4.0, while Dutch students had 3.9. It is interesting to notice that the divergence in both groups was quite high, as shown by the standard deviation values (SD Concepción: 1.2; SD Utrecht: 1.0). This means that while some students considered themselves to be very frequent users of ICT communication tools (giving the maximal punctuation of 5), others were sporadic users (lowest punctuation 2). The most frequently used communication tool (see Table 3) in both groups was e-mail (Concepción M 4.3 // SD 0.8; Utrecht M 4.6 // SD: 0.7), followed by chat (Concepción M 4.0 // SD 1.1; Utrecht M 3.0 // SD 1.6) and finally video chat (Concepción M 3.2 // SD 1.7; Utrecht M 2.9 // SD 1.5). Notice that Chilean students report that they make more frequent use of chat and video chats than the Dutch students.

5.2 Project evaluation

Students valued the international project positively, as can be seen in Table 4, question 15. It is interesting to notice that Chilean students valued the experience more positively

Table 3 Mean and standard deviation values for participants' ICT background

	Question item	Concepción		Utrecht	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
11	Do you communicate through e-mail in your private life?	4,3	0,8	4,6	0,7
12	Do you communicate through chat in your private life?	4,0	1,1	3,0	1,6
14	Do you use video-chats as communication tool in your private life?	3,2	1,7	2,9	1,5

Table 4 Mean and standard deviation values for evaluation of project and video-web communication platform project and video-web communication platform

	Question item	Concepción		Utrecht	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
15	How do you value the video-web communication project in which you have participated?	4,8	0,4	3,2	0,9
18	How do you value the virtual environment?	3,8	0,8	3,8	0,8
19	How has the virtual environment functioned?	3,0	0,6	3,2	1,0

than Utrecht students (M values Chile 4.8 versus Utrecht 3.2). The standard deviation value of Utrecht (SD 0.9) suggests that, although being positive, there was quite a large divergence among Dutch student valuations. Most of the Dutch students were very positive but 8 students (40%), out of 20, reported to have experienced quite a few problems with their Chilean peers, which might have influenced the overall valuation of the experience. They reported that their interaction partners did not arrive at the sessions on time, that they cancelled sessions without previously notifying them, and even that some of them did not respond to the mails Utrecht students had sent in order to catch up cancelled sessions. One Dutch student even reported that:

Durante la entrevista le hacía preguntas y él sólo se limitaba a contestar. No mostraba interés por la conversación ni nada. Se notaba que solamente quería irse (Utrecht student).

[During the interview I asked questions, and he just answered. He didn't show much interest in the conversation. It was noticeable that he just wanted to leave (Utrecht student).]

On the other hand, 60% of the students in Utrecht had positive comments like the following:

He hablado con un estudiante muy espontáneo y alegre. Se interesaba mucho en nuestro país, estudios etc. (Utrecht student).

[I've talked to a very spontaneous and happy student. He was very interested in our country, studies, etc. (Utrecht student).]

Chilean students reported that the experience was very positive:

Excelente experiencia de aprendizaje sobre otro país, su idioma y cultura. Conocer a estudiantes extranjeros nos acerca a una realidad interesante y rica en aprendizaje. He aprendido que – a pesar de la distancia – los jóvenes de Holanda y

Table 5 Mean and standard deviation values for interaction tasks

	Question item	Concepción		Utrecht	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
20	Task 1: Breaking stereotypes. Getting to know each other.	4,7	0,5	4,4	0,7
21	Task 3: Students' life in Concepción and Utrecht.	4,7	0,5	3,7	0,8
22	Task 4: Literary debate.	4,3	0,8	3,9	0,8
23	Were tasks relevant for your study?	3,7	0,5	4,0	0,9

Chile tenemos cosas en común, así como cosas un tanto diferentes, originadas lógicamente por la cultura de cada país (Concepción student).

[Excellent learning experience about the other country, its language and culture. Meeting foreign students brings us to an interesting reality and a rich learning experience. I have learned that, in spite of the distance, young people from the Netherlands and from Chile have things in common, as well as differences, due to the culture of each country (Concepción student).]

5.3 Video-web communication environment

Both Chilean and Dutch students were positive about the video-web communication environment, as shown in Table 4 question 18, mean values being up to 3.8 for both groups. Question 19, about how the virtual environment had functioned, got lower mean scores from both groups (Concepción M 3.0 // Utrecht M 3.2). Differences in the Dutch group were quite high, as shown by the standard deviation value (SD Utrecht 1.2). Participants experienced technical problems, such as the sound not working properly, or communication delays which ranged between a few seconds and half a minute. These delays hindered fluent communication processes and were experienced as unpleasant.

5.4. Tasks

All of the tasks were positively valued (see Table 5). Task 1, Breaking stereotypes, received the highest value of all: (Utrecht M 4,4; SD 0,7 // Concepción M 4,7; SD 0,5). As for the relevance of the tasks for their study programme, Utrecht students valued them higher than students at Concepción (Utrecht M 4,0; SD 0,9 // Concepción M 3,7; SD 0,5).

5.5. Interaction partner

As can be seen in Table 6, when learners were asked to grade the experience of interacting with a peer of the other culture, they all responded positively with the highest possible value (Concepción, M: 5; Utrecht, M: 4.9). We also enquired about the experience of having a constant interaction partner. This was valued positively by both groups (Concepción, M 4.8; Utrecht, M 4.5). When asked whether they would have preferred to change partners per session, they responded by refusing this option (Concepción, M 1.5; Utrecht, M 2.2). Only those students in Utrecht who had experienced problems with their speech partners were in favour of changing partners periodically.

5.6. Face-to-face versus video-web communication

The results show a clear discrepancy between Chilean and Dutch students regarding their preference of interaction format (see Table 6). Chilean students clearly prefer to interact face-to-face (M: 4.2), rather than through a digital environment, while for Dutch students this preference is not so clear (M: 3.2). Notice that the standard deviation value is quite high in both groups (SD: 1.2 / 1.3), the individual discrepancy within each group being quite large. Dutch students reported that they experienced the communication through Breeze (Adobe Connect) as less threatening than a face-to-face encounter:

Es más fácil a través de Breeze, la gente es menos tímida creo. (Utrecht student).

[It is easier through Breeze, people are less shy, I think. (Utrecht student).]

Cuando hablo cara a cara soy más nerviosa y a veces puedes buscar en el diccionario digital algunas palabras. (Utrecht student).

[When I interact face-to-face I feel more anxious, and (when using Breeze) you can look up words in a digital dictionary (Utrecht student).]

Two Dutch students commented that there is not such a difference between the two modalities:

Creo que no hay una diferencia, porque en los dos casos estarías viendo a la persona y hablando con él/ella (Utrecht student).

[I think that there is no difference, because in both cases you would be seeing the person and talking to him/her (Utrecht student).]

Even one student who preferred face-to-face interaction commented on the positive aspects of video-web communication:

Aunque en general a mí me gusta más hablar con una persona cara a cara, de todas las nuevas tecnologías, la videoconferencia lo acerca más y además creo que es útil tener al alcance de la mano el ordenador con las tareas y diccionarios. Y por supuesto sin videoconferencia nunca sería posible hablar con gente de otros países, y menos de otro continente. (Utrecht student).

[Although, generally speaking, I prefer to speak face-to-face with a person, from all ICT tools, the video-web communication is the closest one to this and I think that it

Table 6 Mean and standard deviation values for speech partner and interaction format

	Question item	Concepción		Utrecht	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
26	Was it easy for you to communicate with a foreign student?	3,5	0,5	3,4	1,1
27	Was it interesting and enriching for you to communicate with a foreign student?	5,0	0,0	4,5	0,8
28	Please value the fact of having had the same a speech partner during the project.	4,8	0,4	4,5	0,6
29	Would you have preferred to change speech partner in each session? (1: no – 5: yes)	1,5	0,5	2,2	1,4
30	If you had had the possibility to carry out the tasks face to face with a native speaker, would you had preferred this option to using the virtual platform? (1: no ; 5: yes)	4,2	1,2	3,2	1,3

is useful to have at hand a computer with the tasks and dictionaries. And of course, without the video-web communication tool, it wouldn't be possible to speak with people from other countries, and even less from another continent. (Utrecht student).]

Chilean students reported to prefer face-to-face interaction. In this respect, technical problems experienced during the virtual meetings may have played an important part. Nevertheless, they realized that the video-web communication platform made it possible for them to emulate face-to-face interaction settings, and to live an experience which would have not been possible otherwise.

Claramente, la comunicación cara a cara es más eficaz, en el sentido de que allí no existirían los problemas técnicos que surgen el área virtual. El medio es decisivo para lograr una buena comunicación. Si bien el medio virtual nos aproxima bastante a nuestro interlocutor nada se compara al “cara a cara” donde podemos establecer relaciones comunicativas mucho más sólidas y enriquecedoras (Concepción student).

[Clearly, face-to-face communication is more effective in the sense that there aren't the technical problems that arise in the virtual environment. The environment is a

key issue in achieving good communication. Even though the virtual environment brings us close to our interlocutor, nothing compares to face-to-face communication, where we can establish more solid and rich communicative relationships. (Concepción student).]

... En este caso no era posible la comunicación cara a cara, por lo que la videoconferencia sirvió muchísimo para hacer algo más humana y más expedita la comunicación (Concepción student).

[... In this case face-to-face communication was not possible, therefore the videoconference was very useful to achieve a more human and free communication (Concepción student).]

5.7 Motivational concerns

For the last three questions, related to project integration in learners' study programmes, interest in continuing participation in similar projects and recommending the experience to other students, we noticed that, although both groups were positive, Chilean students valued the experience more positively than the Dutch students (see Table 7). The individual divergence within the Dutch group was quite considerable, with standard deviation values varying between 1.2 and 1.3. These values reflect the degree of success of the experience for the students. There was a group of twelve students whose encounters were very positive and eight who reported having experienced quite a few communication problems with their peers. However, they all agreed that they would like to continue participating and would recommend participation to study mates, on condition that their peers would take the project seriously and respond with enthusiasm to emails.

Si me pudieran asegurar que mi compañero respetase los horarios (y que me dejara saber si no podría venir), me gustaría mucho "recuperar" este proyecto, porque creo que puede ser muy instructivo, en muchos aspectos. (Utrecht student).

[If somebody could guarantee that my peer would respect schedules (and contact me to let me know that s/he wouldn't attend a meeting), I would like very much continue this project, because I think it can be very instructive in several aspects. (Utrecht student).]

Chilean students' responses reflect a high motivation to continue in the project, in spite of the fact that they encountered many problems during the meetings, related to lack of technical resources and technical issues, such as firewall protection at the university campus, which prevented them from communicating as effectively as they would have wished. Chilean students commented:

Es una experiencia enriquecedora, siempre y cuando los recursos estén dispuestos como corresponde.

[It is a rich experience if resources are adequately available.]

El proyecto me parece muy interesante y creo que los problemas son parte de la génesis de todas las cosas, es normal.

[I find the project very interesting and believe that the problems are just normal]

Table 7 Mean and standard deviation values for motivational issues

	Question item	Concepción		Utrecht	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
32	Do you think that the video-web communication project should be integrated in the course you are following? (1. No // 5. Yes)	4,2	0,8	3,8	1,2
35	Would you like to go on participating in such projects?	4,2	0,4	3,7	1,0
36	Would you recommend peers and future students to participate in the video- web communication project?	4,7	0,5	4,1	1,0

difficulties experienced with any new project.]

Me parece un excelente proyecto que debe seguirse trabajando.

[I find this an excellent project, which should continue being done.]

5.8 Learning outcomes

Regarding the positive aspects of the project, Chilean and Dutch students emphasized the richness of the encounters in which they exchanged intercultural information and learned about many aspects of each other's cultures. Utrecht students valued the opportunity to engage in spontaneous and authentic communication.

Lo positivo de participar en el proyecto ha sido conocer a un hispanohablante de mi edad, oír qué versión del español habla, aprender sobre su cultura y cómo difiere de la mía. (Utrecht student).

[The positive aspect of participating in the project was the opportunity to get to know a Spanish native speaker of my age, listen to his/her Spanish language variant, and learn about his/her culture and how it differs from mine. (Utrecht student).]

Lo positivo del proyecto es que podemos interactuar con hablantes nativos como y cuando queremos. Y que podemos interactuar con hablantes nativos españoles y latino americanos. Esto nunca lo hubiéramos podido hacer si la videoconferencia no habría existido. (Utrecht student).

[The positive aspect of the project is that we are able to interact with native speakers the way we like and whenever we want. We are able to interact with Spanish and Latin American native speakers. This would have been impossible if video- web communication hadn't existed. (Utrecht student).]

Chilean students commented:

Personalmente, el proyecto me gustó bastante. Encuentro interesante el hecho de poder contactarme con alguien que viene de un entorno tan distinto. Conversar e intercambiar experiencias sobre temas comunes (estudios, familia, amigos) nos acerca y conecta con una realidad distinta e interesante. (Concepción student).

[Personally, I liked the project very much. I find very interesting the fact of being able to contact people from such a different environment. To talk and exchange experiences about common subjects (studies, family, friends) brings us closer and connects us with a different interesting reality. (Concepción student).]

...He aprendido lo equivocado de las concepciones que podemos tener de otras culturas. (Concepción student).

[...I have learned how wrong the stereotypes that we may have about other cultures can be. (Concepción student).]

...Tener contacto con gente muy distinta a uno, conocer un poco más el medio en que se mueven, poder entrar en contacto con gente del extranjero como parte de una clase. (Concepción student).

[...Getting in touch with people very different from oneself, getting to know a little bit more about their environment and keeping in touch with foreign people as part of a class. (Concepción student).]

They all agreed about the importance of seeing each other which, as participants reported, contributes to avoiding anonymity, and favours proximity and familiarity, making the communicative event more pleasant.

6 Conclusions

The experience of this intercontinental project has contributed to published evidence about the positive aspects of using interactive computer videoconferencing tools to bring people together for academic purposes. The use of video-web technology enabled teachers and learners to create a pleasant virtual environment for learning a language collaboratively, together with features of its culture. Students liked it and this contributed to increasing their motivation to communicate and learn the language, the culture and pragmatic issues in a real sociocultural context.

The project allowed us to create opportunities for students to build positive bonds and bridges between two different cultures, giving rise to an authentic learning experience carried out in a spirit of cooperation and enthusiasm. Both groups of students benefited from talking about Spanish language use in Chile, exchanging information about their respective cultures, and discussing their commonalities and differences. Chilean learners became more aware of their own language features, as they engaged in explaining the uses of the Spanish language in Chile to Dutch speakers of Spanish as a foreign language. They were able to view their native language and culture from another perspective: through the eyes of foreign students interested in learning Spanish. This contributed to making them reflect about and value more their national language and culture.

With respect to the tasks learners had to accomplish, they proved to be appropriate to meet the project goals. They met the criteria (Chapelle, 2003; Ellis, 2003) of having language learning potential, as they allowed opportunity for beneficial focus on form. Tasks were learner fit, since they dealt with topics and activities adequate to the learners' characteristics and interests. They were meaning focused, as learners used the Spanish language to achieve the communication goals of each of the four activities encompassed in the project. They were authentic, in the sense that learners were able to see a connection between the tasks they had to carry out and the ones in their real academic world. The tasks had a positive impact on learners, they became interested in learning about the culture of both languages and were willing to seek opportunities to continue participating in this kind of project. Learners gained in pragmatic skills, knowledge about Spanish language use and Chilean/Dutch cultural features. The tasks gave them opportunities to break down stereotypes that learners had about each other's cultures, exchanging points of view and experiences to discover the "real" Chilean and Dutch. The criterion that was not met satisfactorily was practicality, due to technical issues and resources to support the task. The synchronous communication was sometimes difficult because of breaks in the vision-sound connection, a lack of webcams and microphones for every Chilean student at every time they needed them, and firewall problems. Nevertheless, all students felt highly motivated and willing to continue participating in a new version of the project.

This project contributes to positive evidence for the use of video-web communication technology to empower language learning programmes. It can enrich and internationalize the teaching and learning experience of language and culture, placing it in a real sociocultural context where learners can see each other face-to-face as they communicate and share experiences.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Omar Salazar from Universidad de Concepción for coordinating and supporting this experience in Concepción, Chile; we are very grateful to Utrecht colleagues Silvia Canto, David Sanz and Patricia Valdivia for their excellent creative ideas in designing interaction tasks.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Video-web communication project U. Concepción & U. Utrecht, November-December 2006

1	Name (optional)	
2	Age:	
3	What do you study?	
4	You and ICT	A little/ a lot
	Are you familiar with ICT tools?	1 2 3 4 5
5	Do you use virtual environments for your study?	A little/ a lot
		1 2 3 4 5
6	Do you use Internet for your study?	A little/ a lot
		1 2 3 4 5
7	Do you make use of e-mail to communicate with peers and teachers at your university?	A little/ a lot
		1 2 3 4 5
8	Do you use chat communication tools at your university?	A little/ a lot
		1 2 3 4 5
9	Are ICT tools used for the study at your university?	A little/ a lot
		1 2 3 4 5
10	Do you use Internet in your private life?	A little/ a lot
		1 2 3 4 5
11	Do you communicate with e-mail in your private life?	A little/ a lot
		1 2 3 4 5
12	Do you chat in your private life?	A little/ a lot
		1 2 3 4 5
14	Do you use video chats to communicate in your private life?	A little/ a lot
		1 2 3 4 5
15	How do you value the video- web communication project in which you have participated?	A little/ a lot
		1 2 3 4 5
16	What has been the positive aspect of the project ?	
17	Have there been negative aspects?	
18	How do you value the virtual environment?	Bad /good
		1 2 3 4 5
19	How has the virtual environment functioned?	Bad /good
		1 2 3 4 5
20	Tasks: Did you find tasks interesting/useful? Why?	Bad /good
		1 2 3 4 5
	Task 1: Breaking stereotypes. Getting to know each other.	Bad /good
		1 2 3 4 5
21	Task 3: Students' life in Concepción and Utrecht	Bad /good
		1 2 3 4 5
22	Task 4: Literary debate	Bad /good
		1 2 3 4 5
23	Were tasks relevant for your study?	Bad /good
		1 2 3 4 5
24	Would you have preferred to have had other kind of tasks? Please specify.	
25	How did you prepare for the tasks?	
26	Was it easy for you to communicate with a foreign student?	no/yes
		1 2 3 4 5
27	Was it interesting and enriching for you to communicate with a foreign student?	no/yes
		1 2 3 4 5
28	Please value the fact of having had the same interaction partner during the project.	negative/positive
		1 2 3 4 5
29	Would you have preferred to change interaction partner in each session? Why?	no/yes
		1 2 3 4 5

- 30 If you had had the possibility to carry out the tasks face-to-face with a native speaker, would you have preferred this option to using the virtual platform? no/yes 1 2 3 4 5
- 31 How do you think the environment influences communication processes? (Compare face-to-face communication to the type of communication in the virtual platform)
- 32 Do you think that the video web communication project should be integrated in the course you are following? Why? no/yes 1 2 3 4 5
- 33 How do you think the project organization could be improved?
- 34 What have you learned during the sessions?
- 35 Would you like to go on participating in such projects? no/yes 1 2 3 4 5
- 36 Would you recommend peers and future students to participate in the video web communication? no/yes 1 2 3 4 5
- 37 Commentaries