Improving University Students' Oral Communicative Competence in French L2 Using a Virtual Environment

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Abstract

Developing students' oral communicative ability is a primary goal of learning a foreign language. However, certain factors specific to the academic field often lead to the prioritization of other skills, such as writing or reading comprehension. Furthermore, some classroom limitations make it difficult to carry out activities or tasks that enhance oral communicative competence. Consequently, the use of virtual environments has increasingly become an advantage. This study aims to present research on the use of virtual tools to develop oral speaking skills among students learning French as a foreign language (FFL) at the Universitat Politècnica de València in Spain. Data were collected through observations, student performance tests, and questionnaires. We also considered previous studies, most of which focused on English as a foreign language, to investigate the effectiveness of virtual speaking activities in online or blended courses. However, research in the context of French as a foreign language remains relatively limited. The focus of this study is on the use of virtual environments to develop oral skills and how they impact and improve students' oral abilities in FFL, exploring new methods to enhance their oral communicative competence. The results suggest that using virtual environments helps build student confidence and promotes interaction, facilitating faster and more autonomous development of oral communication skills. These conclusions may contribute to further advancements in virtual speaking instruction and learning.

Keywords: blended learning, virtual environments, French as a foreign language, oral communicative competence

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Introduction

The use of virtual environments to practice oral expression in foreign languages has gained significant importance in contemporary education, especially with the advancement of digital technologies and the rise of globalization. These environments provide students with opportunities to engage in more dynamic and realistic contexts, allowing them to practice language skills in everyday, authentic situations. From our teaching experience, especially in the last five years, we can advance certain advantages and disadvantages of these environments derived from observation. By eliminating geographic and time barriers, virtual environments promote linguistic and cultural immersion, facilitating language learning and boosting fluency and confidence in oral expression. Moreover, these tools offer instant and personalized feedback, optimizing the learning process. In this sense, the use of virtual environments represents an innovative and accessible solution to overcome the traditional limitations of foreign language teaching, enhancing interaction and active language use beyond the classroom.

A key advantage using virtual environments to practice oral expression in foreign languages offers is time optimization in learning. Unlike traditional methods, which often require coordinating schedules and physical travel, virtual environments allow students to practice anytime and anywhere. This eliminates logistical barriers and facilitates consistent practice, an essential aspect of improving oral fluency. Additionally, virtual environments provide opportunities to interact with native speakers or peers from different parts of the world, enriching the experience and exposing students to a variety of accents and cultural contexts. By being able to practice at any time, students can make the most of their time, dedicating more effective hours to oral expression without location or schedule constraints. In this way, learning becomes more efficient, maximizing the available time to perfect language skills.

Working with large groups of foreign language students in the classroom using virtual environments offers several significant advantages, especially when it comes to developing oral skills. First, virtual environments enable more equitable interaction among students, as technology facilitates active participation from everyone, even in large classes. In a traditional classroom, it can be difficult for each student to get enough opportunity to practice oral expression due to time and space limitations. However, in a virtual environment, activities can be organized in small groups, discussion rooms, or interactive tasks, ensuring that each student has more opportunities to interact and practice the language. Moreover, these environments allow for personalized teaching, adapting activities to the level and pace of each student, resulting in a more inclusive and effective learning experience. By integrating technological tools like conversation simulators or applications that provide instant feedback, students can receive corrections and suggestions without waiting for the teacher's intervention, which accelerates the learning process. In this sense, virtual environments not only enhance the quality of teaching but also optimize the available time, allowing all students to actively participate in developing their oral skills, even in large classes.

However, it also has several disadvantages that can affect the quality of learning. One of the most significant disadvantages is the limited face-to-face interaction. Oral communication in foreign languages benefits greatly from practice in real social contexts, where learners can experience spontaneous conversational situations. This face-to-face interaction with native speakers or classmates creates an additional motivating environment. In the virtual

environment, although interactions are possible, often the lack of a physical personal connection can diminish interest and motivation for further speaking practice.

Also, especially if limited to chats or video calls, it does not replicate the spontaneous and natural situations that occur in a face-to-face context. Lack of non-verbal communication, such as gestures or facial expressions, can hinder understanding and fluency in conversation. In fact, the interaction is often structured, which can limit learners' ability to respond naturally or handle unexpected situations. Moreover, in e-learning, teachers cannot always provide immediate feedback as effectively as in a face-to-face environment. Pronunciation corrections or errors in oral fluency are sometimes not detected in real time, which could delay the learner's progress. On the other hand, Internet connectivity and the quality of devices can interfere with the learning process, and may even be perceived as a barrier by some learners. In addition, there are often distractions from the environment that affect their concentration and ability to practise effectively. In a face-to-face classroom, the environment is often more controlled.

A matter of note in the context of foreign language learning, particularly with regard to speaking proficiency, is the anxiety experienced by some students when using technology. Despite the advantages that technological tools can offer, it has also been identified that some learners experience high levels of anxiety when using them, particularly in spoken interaction activities. In some cases, when learning takes place via technological platforms, this communicative anxiety may be heightened.

In summary, although virtual platforms offer many advantages for foreign language learning, especially in terms of flexibility and access to resources, we think that these disadvantages can impact on the development of speaking if not managed properly. With these premises in mind, we decided to carry out a study on the use of virtual tools to develop oral speaking skills among students learning French as a foreign language (FFL) at the Universitat Politècnica de València in Spain.

The objectives of the research presented here are first, to present the results of an ongoing study on the use of virtual tools to develop oral speaking skills among students learning French as a foreign language (FFL) at the UPV in Spain. Firstly, we review previous studies on the issue that may shed light on our study. In order to analyse the suitability of the use of virtual environments for the development of oral skills and how they have an impact and improve students' oral communicative competence, we consider the convenience of combining these activities with face-to-face activities in order to obtain better results. Finally, the aim is also to share knowledge and experience and provide useful feedback to contribute to further advancements in virtual speaking instruction and learning.

Literature Review

The use of virtual environments for the practice of speaking skills in foreign language learning has been the subject of several studies highlighting their effectiveness and the technological tools employed. These previous studies, mostly focused on English as a foreign language, investigate the effectiveness of virtual speaking activities in online or blended courses. They also highlight how virtual environments offer valuable opportunities for practicing and improving speaking skills in foreign language learning through the use of a variety of technological tools and methodologies adapted to students’ needs. However, research in the context of French as a foreign language remains relatively limited.

Nevertheless, there are some recent studies that address the use of virtual environments in the teaching-learning process, most of them from a global point of view, but including resources for the practice of oral skills.

Among them, we can highlight the work of several authors (such as Grosbois, 2012; Guichon, 2012; Soubrié, 2020) who have recently taken stock of the digital environment and its potential for language learning. Whether it is a tool for learning with digital technology, or an environment for learning in digital technology, digital technology is also seen as a place for exchange and socialization (Trujillo Sáez et al., 2019). Technologies no longer simply support teaching and learning, but also enable learners to immerse themselves in a linguistic and cultural environment (Soubrié, 2020, p. 32).

With regard to studies focused on the field of higher education and the need to train university students (Area Moreira et al., 2010; Gisbert & Esteve, 2011), digital competences prevail, as they must be able to access new information, develop research skills, develop their capacity to construct knowledge through interaction, know how to express themselves and communicate with new languages and tools and, finally, acquire skills for learning in enriched spaces built with technologies. The foreign language classroom thus becomes a learning community in which the development of learners' mutual learning skills is encouraged. In addition, a variety of digital resources and electronic environments are made available to create this community and help it produce linguistic and cultural knowledge (Puren, 2013).

In the case of distance learning, Beacco (2000) and Mangenot (2003) suggest that in order to achieve this it is necessary to adapt teaching materials to the linguistic needs of learners. Moreover, digital resources (videoconferencing platforms, Internet, apps, etc.) favour certain interaction and interpersonal production skills. In addition to learning materials, the guidance of the teacher, who must assist the learner at all times, seems important. This assistance can be provided by the many communication devices available to students in higher education (videoconferencing, chat, phone calls, messaging, etc.). Some authors agree that LMS (Learning Management Systems) platforms, such as WebCT or Moodle, have been an excellent advance in this sense, facilitating access to this material (Lebrun, 2011). Moreover, students highly value these accessible technological supports (Abadía Valle et al., 2015; Guichon, 2012).

The relationship between DLEs (Digital Learning Environments) and the everyday use of digital devices is present in our society. The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (Carretero et al., 2017) defines digital inclusion as one of the digital competences to master the strategies and challenges of online presence in teaching and learning processes. In this sense, the daily use of digital devices fosters changes in students' routines and habits (Soubrié, 2020) and constitutes a form of access to information. These scenarios influence the university system, specifically the rapid development of ICT applied to teaching in general and language teaching in particular.

An important variable that especially affects online teaching is the temporality of communication, as it can be issued between teachers and students synchronously or asynchronously. Synchronous communication allows two or more people to dialogue simultaneously, in real time, through a digital environment (Montero Curiel, 2019). This communicative variable influences the type of learning: work involving reflection or complex information processing will be more facilitated by the asynchronous world, while socio-

affective, interactional aspects and those linked to the development of fluency will be more favoured by the synchronous modality (Guichon, 2012).

In this sense, the issue of anxiety in relation to the use of the Internet or virtual environments in language teaching and learning has been addressed by different authors. Recent previous studies (Bárkányi, 2024) highlight the importance and impact of the affective dimension on the success of foreign language acquisition. They also point to the interrelationship between learners' self-efficacy beliefs, perceptions of the possibilities of technology-mediated speech and anxiety when speaking in a foreign language in asynchronous contexts. According to some studies, the use of asynchronous technologies maximizes the linguistic and cultural benefits of electronic exchanges (Kern, 2006), while others highlight that the use of synchronous technologies encourages learners to collaborate and actively participate, while reducing the anxiety associated with speaking in a foreign language.

Methodology

Research Questions

For the purposes of this study, the following research questions have been posed: What is the learners' previous experience of online French-language learning, and more specifically of activities to improve oral expression? What is their perception of the self-efficacy of these online activities? By using materials adapted to the learners' needs, and combining virtual and face-to-face activities, can we improve the results achieved when working with this type of technology, as well as improve their self-perception?

The Context

The Polytechnic University of Valencia (UPV) is one of Spain’s leading educational institutions, noted for its focus on engineering, architecture, science and technology. It offers a variety of programs in which foreign language learning is a key component, especially in undergraduate degrees. The university recognizes the importance of foreign languages as a fundamental part of the integral formation of its students, especially due to its international focus and the need for language skills in today's global context. As part of the requirements to obtain the university degree, students must demonstrate B2 level language skills in a foreign language, especially in English. The UPV offers foreign language courses within the curricula of several degree programs, with the aim of improving students' language skills in a professional and global environment. In addition to English, students can learn other languages such as French, German or Italian as optional subjects to complete their education. In this case, we are dealing with groups of students from different degrees, and we can affirm that these students are highly motivated to complete their training in foreign languages.

However, since it is a complementary training for students not integrated in their degree programs, it is difficult to adapt the practical characteristics of teaching (class schedule, timetable, evaluation) to all of them. In addition, the availability of students is often limited for any autonomous task they may have to perform. Therefore, in addition to face-to-face classes, the use of the virtual platform is especially necessary to facilitate the completion of tasks and activities for all students. The levels currently offered range from A1 to B2. The number of students per group is around 25 students, with a maximum of 30.

The Study

For this study we have chosen students who are studying at level B1. At this level of learning, the improvement of oral expression is particularly important. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which establishes a series of linguistic competences that students should achieve at different levels, defines several speaking competences for level B1 (independent user, threshold level). Speaking skills focus primarily on the ability to interact, describe, narrate and give opinions in an understandable manner, even if linguistic accuracy is not always perfect. Among them we highlight the control of the language in everyday situations, the construction of a simple but well-organized discourse and the improvement of fluency in interaction with respect to previous levels. Current students, because of their age, have experienced prolonged periods of online teaching in the past and, more recently, shorter periods during their university studies. It is important to note that these periods are linked to difficult life situations such as the Covid or as a result of natural disasters.

Consequently, the study is based on Spanish students of French as a foreign language at level B1. The pilot group consists of 25 students. An oral production activity (interaction) was carried out in a virtual environment (Teams), followed by a face-to-face reinforcement activity. Two questionnaires were carried out: one before and one after the oral production activity. The results must be analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, with the use of observation. This study will be implemented alongside other control groups at the same level, so this will provide conclusive results.

The initial questionnaire aims to get students to reflect on their learning process and on their personal perception when carrying out online speaking activities. First of all, we want to find out how often they have done speaking activities and what their perception of this type of teaching is. Subsequently, in the pilot group class, we propose a learning module in which we include a guided speaking practice or activity using the Teams platform. Students work on the interaction in pairs in different rooms, during the time of the class session. The teacher provides feedback to all of them at different times, without the rest of the students being present. In the following face-to-face session, a similar group activity is proposed as a continuation of the online activity. Subsequently, a questionnaire is used to collect feedback from the students and their opinion on the proposed activity. The activity will be carried out again and at the end of the course a questionnaire similar to the initial one will be proposed in which it will be observed whether the results have changed.

This proposal is intended to response to a twofold purpose: to develop learners' analytical competence towards their own learning and to improve students' oral skills on the basis of the evaluation received, optimising the time available.

Results and Discussion

From the initial questionnaire the following most relevant results are obtained. To question 1: How do you feel about the following skills?, from “very insecure” to “very confident”, oral production is the skill in which students perceived themselves as the most insecure, with a percentage of 72.7% (just ahead of written expression: 68%).

When asked whether in previous French classes, they have done speaking activities online using Teams or another platform, such as interaction exercises, preparing oral presentations

or practising dialogues with other students or with the teacher, the positive and negative answers were evenly balanced at 50%. Among the students who answered in the affirmative, the vast majority (90.8%) only carried them out 3 times at most in their entire learning experience.

As for the perception of these experiences, the rating given is above average: 63.6% rated them with 4 points out of 5, and there are no ratings below 3. The main reasons given are the following statements:

- Speaking French online is always less stressful for me than in person. (22,7%)
- Practising speaking online gives me more stress than in face-to-face mode. (18,2%)
- For me, it's the same for me to practise speaking in French online or in person. (31.2%)
- I prefer face-to-face speaking practice. (50%)

Despite this positive assessment, when comparing these online and face-to-face activities, 50% of students say that they have a preference for face-to-face speaking practice, while 31.2% of students show no preference for one format or the other. On the other hand, while 22.7% say that speaking in French online is always less stressful for them than in person, 18.2% say the opposite (that speaking online is more stressful than face-to-face). As for the general evaluation of face-to-face versus online teaching, the average is 3.00 out of 5 for online teaching, compared to 4.32 for face-to-face teaching.

After having carried out the oral production activity using the Teams platform through different rooms for the students, followed by a face-to-face reinforcement activity, the final survey is a questionnaire including open-ended questions, in which the students assessed the activity and reflected on two aspects.

First, their perception of the effectiveness of the task performed in terms of the learning process itself was assessed, with regard to the acquisition of new competences or the improvement of competences. In this aspect, the majority of students (68%) rated it positively, in terms of: optimisation of time (as they had been able to talk for longer); feedback from the teacher (more personalised); and variation in the type of activity (compared to face-to-face classes).

Secondly, the rating refers to their general evaluation of the activity in relation to other face-to-face speaking activities. In this case there were approximately 58% positive responses compared to 42% negative or very nuanced.

Conclusion

In the absence of extending the research with more objective data, with the other control groups throughout the semester, this initial study offers us results that do not always confirm the statements derived from the previous studies consulted. As we have seen, the results confirm that students value these technological supports for their learning in general, with a score that exceeds that given to face-to-face teaching. However, as far as oral production is concerned, the assessment of both types of teaching is equivalent. In this sense, the students' initial perception was confirmed after the activity. Nevertheless, they rated the online activity positively in terms of effectiveness, time optimisation and feedback from the teacher. We have observed that the use of synchronous technologies encourages students to collaborate and participate actively. Especially in the case of students who are more blocked in their face-

to-face oral participation during lectures, the use of the online platform provides them with an environment in which they feel more confident, reducing their sense of stress.

Therefore, and while awaiting further data, the analysis of these initial results shows the need to incorporate virtual activities of oral expression in the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language, adapted to the needs of the students and with the supervision of the teacher providing the necessary feedback.

In the light of these results, and pending verification within the full study, we believe that we are on the right track as the combination of both modes of teaching, virtual and face-to-face, seems to correspond better to students' needs and their perception of self-efficacy, which at the same time contributes to improving students' confidence in their own learning progress.

We strongly believe that developing oral production competence should be a priority for university students moving in an international environment. Today's multiple teaching and learning methodologies require constant practice and updating in terms of familiarisation with technologies and in the areas of communication and collaboration, digital content production, security and problem solving. Therefore, more research is needed to pave the way and promote the adoption of new solutions to improve virtual education. To ensure the quality of higher education, it is necessary to act quickly and update it to the world in which both teachers and students find themselves. As a consequence, the impetus for online education is opening up, with a critical eye that allows us to reflect on the new challenges that lie ahead.

With this in mind, we would like to conclude by talking about awareness of good practice in teaching and research, which invites us to critically review our ideas about what "good teaching" means, to discuss them and to contrast them with the findings of research. This is necessarily the starting point for updating and improving our shared teaching culture, the basis on which we build our practices.

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