

IMPROVING SPOKEN COMPETENCE BY MEANS OF MULTIMODAL ENVIRONMENTS IN A DISTANCE CONTEXT

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Abstract: *The outline below describes the implementation of a task-based project based on the collaborative work of students and teachers in four different countries with others studying tourism in an international distance university. By means of a mainly qualitative study, we will attempt to show if occasional written and spoken encounters with people with different L1 (either English or any other) and different culture can help learners to improve different aspects of their spoken competence, such as fluency, pronunciation accuracy and cultural awareness, in the context of the European Space for Higher Education (ESHE).*

Key words: *SCMC; distance language learning; ESP; Spoken Language; Task Based Learning; ESHE.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Working and studying in a distance education context implies many more issues than mere *distance*. Since we all depend on a fairly complex organization, derived from an institution spread all over the world, any change or innovation proposed implies more than simply online teaching. The study proposed here is the result of an effort to bring together students of different ages, interests, levels of English and of ICT (Instructional Communication Technology) and with different time commitments.

Spoken competence was a sorely neglected skill at the beginning of the development of the Distance Learning of Languages (DLL). Now, however, thanks to the work of its fourth generation (Jordano de la Torre, 2010; Jung, 2005; Thorpe, 1998; Wang & Sun, 2001) and the continuous development of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) tools, practising and assessing spoken skills at a distance is now possible. Due to this technological revolution, not only in DLL but in English Language Teaching (ELT) in general, the current trend of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has also experienced a change of direction, moving into Computer Communication Studies (CMC) studies.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES

Since the emergence of CMC in applied linguistics studies, there have been many attempts to find the best way to carry out quality research on this topic, either from a methodological or a linguistic perspective. Among the first attempts we find authors like Belz (2002); González Lloret (2003); Mark Peterson (2009); O'Dowd & Waire (2009); Wang & Chen (2009) and Warschauer (1996). With regard to the development of studies from a discourse and conversational analysis perspective, it would be crucial to mention the work of linguists such as Bower & Hedberg (2010); Enriquez (2009); O'Rourke (2008); Sauro (2004); Skehan (2003) and Tudini (2005). During the mid-1990s, a new acronym was coined to name this emerging concern with form in CMC projects, namely CMCL, the final L standing for language (Lamy & Hampel, 2007).

3. SCMC: SPOKEN OR WRITTEN DISCOURSE?

Much has been said about the spoken or written nature of language used on the Internet. Several studies on the discourse generated by CMC show that spoken and written language share many features (Sauro, 2004). David Crystal describes Netspeak (2001) by enumerating several differences between face-to-face interaction and spoken language. According to Crystal, the first difference is the lack of simultaneous feedback in non face-to-face interaction. This means that when you begin to type a message, the recipient will not read it until the finished message has been sent from the writer's computer. The second difference is conversation speed. Although chat might appear synchronous, it cannot be as spontaneous as face-to-face speech and speed is precisely one of the defining characteristics of spoken language (Wray, 2000). Nevertheless, there is some evidence based on discourse analysis that locates chat language closer to spoken than written language (Wilkins, 1991; Yates, 1996).

Technology advances so quickly that language generated in a voice chat ten years ago cannot not be compared with that generated today without bearing in mind certain factors. Egbert (2005) mentions six different elements to take into account when doing research into CALL, also crucial when dealing with CMC:

Learners. In our case, adult students with very special circumstances. Most of them are only part-time students because they have other commitments.

- Language level, which ranges from very low levels in some cases to very high in others.
- Context. Having to struggle with distance could be an obstacle on many occasions.
- Tools. Students will use completely new ICT tools in order to perform the tasks proposed during this study.
- Tasks/activities, which have been proposed to work in collaboration according to Bologna premises and the Common European Framework of reference for Languages (CEFR).
- Peers and teachers, who are of course represented by the tutors of the course.
- Fluency vs. Accuracy

Ellis (2005) describes fluency "as the production of language in real time without undue pausing or hesitation". It is mainly achieved when learners prioritize communication over accuracy in a short period of time. This phenomenon could be more related to chat than to electronic mail (Sotillo, 2000), even if the chat is text based, since the interlocutors have less time to think before producing a sentence. Adult students, trained in a structural-cognitive way, have been gathering grammatical input and vocabulary for years. However, the little English they may have practised had been forgotten for some years until they arrived at the distance university where they are now enrolled. Interaction with other English learners, either using text or voice, could be a good way to recuperate their English language competence.

Ellis (2005) synthesizes very well different ways of measuring the level of fluency in a language. This author divides the different perspectives studied by other authors into five categories: Interactional (number of turns, mean turn length), propositional (number of idea units encoded), functional (frequency of some specific language functions), grammatical (amount of subordination, use of some specific linguistic features, mean number of verb agreements) and lexical (type-token ratio). In addition to these elements, other kinds of data, dealing with sociolinguis-

tics, ethnolinguistics or metacognition need to be integrated into fluency studies (Luoma, 2004; Young, 2008). This means that it is not enough for a non-native speaker to know the minimum amount of L2 language needed to maintain a conversation, but sociolinguistic skills are also needed in order to speak with someone they perhaps do not know, as is the case here.

Fluency and interaction in general could be seen to be affected by *artificial* turn taking in SCMC contexts, making this kind of communication different from traditional face-to-face interaction. Some of the features inherent in written and spoken chat are described in the table below, which compiles the work of different authors (Wilkins, 1991):

Features	Written chat	Spoken chat
Interruption among interlocutors	No	Depending on the tool
Physical gestures	Not, but use of smileys	If the system supports a webcam yes, but with difficulties
Chronological order of entries	It depends on the length of the sentence and the typing speed of the interlocutors	yes
Several conversational topics dealt with at the same time	yes	no
Identification of the interlocutor and time	yes	No, although it could be added with transcriptions
Self-correction	yes	Not so easy

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Could written SCMC become so close to spoken discourse that learners could improve their oral competence by communicating in writing? Is this kind of experience sufficiently productive to improve the spoken competence of the students in terms of fluency and accuracy? Is three months enough for an L2 learner to improve his/her linguistic competence? Will it be possible for students to work on their cultural awareness? Will it be possible to teach English for Tourism based on competences defined by Bologna? To what extent is the factor of motivation important to the success of distance language environments in achieving the objectives pursued?

5. METHODOLOGY

One of the aims of this project was to give distance students the opportunity to practice and improve their oral skills. This could only be achieved if they can be in contact with other students on the same course so that they can communicate in the L2 using all the input acquired in the course content. In order to make a more authentic and natural environment, closer to the context of tourism, the students kept in touch with either native (NS) or non-native students (NNS) of English. In opposition to TANDEM theories (Kötter, 2001; Schwienhorst, 2002; Vinagre, 2005), the partners abroad remained passive participants in this experience. They constituted simple sources of information for the Spanish students, achieved by means of synchronous encounters motivated by object-oriented tasks. Two main web applications were used in this study: a webinar, and an instant messaging tool:

(Ciekanski & Chanier, 2008) distinguishes three different SCMC systems (webinars):

- Audio-synchronous environment (that integrates audio and text chat)
- Video-conferencing (adding images of the participants to the webinar)
- Audio-graphic environment, which, in addition to the previous elements, also include a whiteboard and the possibility of sharing graphics in real time.

The application selected on this occasion belongs to the first group. It was called Alado¹ and at the time of the project implementation it was the best option because of its sound quality, friendly interface, and the possibility of synchronizing a presentation at the same time as speaking. Turn-taking could be requested in order to speak, which would be appropriate for giving an oral presentation, although it might represent an obstacle when studying network discourse. These days, voice systems are developing so rapidly that you no longer need to interrupt communication to speak. This was the tool used for the fifth stage.

Since SCMC tools require the fixing of a date and an exact hour to interact at the same time, and the participants in the experiment shared very different time zones, it was also necessary to use an instant messaging tool so that they could be connected via text and voice most of the time. Yahoo TM² was the company chosen because of the quality of the sound and recording settings that it included at that time. This was the tool used in the second stage (mostly text) and third (mostly voice).

5.1. Description of the participants

A total of 16 participants were selected out of more than 2000 students enrolled in the same subject bearing in mind some minimum IT-skill requirements. While students abroad were contacted through spreading the word in different reliable teaching communities, Spanish students had the possibility to choose the country they would like to work with later. They were first informed of the level of language spoken by the partner students, so that they could freely choose their preferred environment.

	UNED students	English level	Nationality/IT level of foreign instructor	Abroad students
Group 1 Hawaii (NS)	G1.1 (Female) G1.2 (Female) G1.3 (Female) G1.4 (Male)	B2 B1+ C1 B1	NN, advanced user of ICT	G1.1 (Female) G1.2 (Female) G1.3 (Female) G1.4 (Male)
Group 2 Kuwait (ESL)	G2.1 (Female) G2.2 (Female) G2.3 (Male) G2.4 (Female)	A2 B1+ B1 A2	NN, advanced user of ICT	G2.1 (Female) G2.2 (Female) G2.3 (Male) G2.4 (Female)
Group 3 Japan (NNS)	G3.1 (Female) G3.2 (Female) G3.3 (Female) G3.4 (Male)	B1 B1 A2+ A2	N (British acc.)	G3.1 (Female) G3.2 (Male) G3.3 (Female) G3.4 (Female)
Group 4 United Arab Emirates (EFL)	G4.1 (Female) G4.2 (Male) G4.3 (Male) G4.4 (Female)	A2 B1 A2 A2+	N (North-American acc.)	G4.1X (Male) G4.2X (Female) G4.3 (Male)

As can be observed, there are a great variety of English levels among the Spanish students, a common feature of students enrolled in the same subject and one of the handicaps to managing

¹ <http://www.alado.net/webheads>

² <http://es.messenger.yahoo.com/>

this type of course. Since the study presented here has been based on qualitative methods, the results obtained with this sample do not attempt to generalize in any way.

5.2. Tasks

Authors divide tasks into two types, depending whether their intention is work on meaning or on form, the first one chosen for improving and assessing fluency and the second one preferred for measuring complexity and accuracy (Derwing et alii., 2004; Skehan, 2003). This does not mean that fluency could only be evaluated in one type of task. However, it is in this type of task that it is best measured, in isolation from other aspects. There were mainly two different tasks to be developed during the whole project, being the first one centred on meaning and the other on form:

5.2.1. Interaction-based tasks

Some studies have already demonstrated that interaction (either web-based or face-to-face) helps students to improve their linguistic competence (Gass, 2003; Tarone, 2007). Students were asked to be online as much as they could in order to communicate using their instant messaging tool, so that they could speak to foreign students. Due to the nature of the information they had to gather, they were obliged to interact several times a week in order to complete their work without difficulty.

5.2.2. Production-based tasks

If oral exchanges are perhaps one of the best ways to practice and assess interaction, presentations have been described by others as the best way to test a learner's L2 oral production (Council of Europe, 2001; Luoma, 2004). Through this method, it has been possible to study student oral production, in addition to defining what it means to be competent in spoken English for Tourism: dealing with specific language, being prepared to respond to questions coming from the audience in an accent different to the speaker's, having good pronunciation/intonation, fluency, etc.

5.3. Compilation, coding and analysis of data

Data was compiled by taking samples of discourse generated at different occasions throughout the duration of the experiment. This means that every little occasion was an opportunity to collect and analyse language: interviews, surveys, emails, chat logs, oral encounters, etc. Apart from recording all the data, as suggested by some authors, many annotations were made in real time so that they could be studied later in detail (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Since this is a qualitative study, we have only selected the most relevant conversation extracts to be studied following some narrative enquiry theories (Murray, 2009).

5.3.1. Data

The data gathered has different formats, and is thus coded and analyzed in a way that reflects this. As there is such a great quantity of data, only the most representative samples have been studied here, as suggested by many qualitative researchers (Dörnyei, 2007; Freeman, 2009; Silverman, 2006).

5.3.1.1. Pre-test

The pre-test was performed through different interviews with all the students that took part in the experience. This source gave us deep qualitative feedback about the level and expectations of the students. It was supplemented with some other, mostly quantitative, data from previous surveys and the students' performance in the first term of the course.

5.3.1.2 Intermediate communication

This source helped to collect information about the interactive skills of participants, either through observation or in more *natural* context, since they were encouraged to speak in the L2 with speakers with different L1s. The annotations were made both during the conversations, and after them, using recordings. Although combining both techniques has been proven to be one of the most valid methods by most studies (O’Loughlin, 2001), the second option was preferred for testing the competence of the speaker without the pressure of being observed. The compilation of this kind of data was made possible by the instructor and by the students themselves, who recorded their own dialogues (text and voice based), to be uploaded later to the synchronic platform. Since this process required more advanced knowledge of IT, some of the dialogues are still missing because of the students IT-skill level. However, most of this data has been saved and coded.

5.3.1.3 Post test

The final test corresponds with the final product that the students were required to produce. The whole test was recorded, either in voice or text format, in a completely multimodal environment, using text, voice and a blackboard at the same time. Its analysis was also contrasted with the students’ marks for the second term, paying special attention to the production part of the final exam, where fluency is one of the key elements evaluated.

5.3.2. Coding

In order to analyse the language generated during the whole experiment, we needed to base our coding on the analysis of multimodal discourse (Bateman, 2008; Ciekanski & Chanier, 2008; Norris, 2004).

Once transcribed, the oral archives were coded attending to different aspects related to the objectives of this experiment (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Silverman, 2006). They have been categorized as follows:

Language Use: use of specific language [ESP], grammatical errors [GE], miscollocations [M], wrong word [WW], Word Order [WO], Spelling [SP], Interlanguage Mistakes [IM]

- Spoken language: intonation [I], fluency [F], pronunciation [P], negotiation of meaning [NM], Spanish Words [SW]
- Metalanguage: typing speed [S], Instructor Feedback [F], Channel [Ch],
- Motivation: up [U], down [D], affect [A], Confidence [CF]
- Topics: Introductions [I], time to meet [T], project topics [PT], off topics [OT]
- Cultural and Learning awareness: time [T], customs [C], Language Varieties [LV], Learning Strategies [LT],
- EEES aspects: ICT, collaborative work [CW], responsibility [R], autonomous learning [AL],

5.3.3. Analysis

After coding the data generated by the students, we decided to analyze it following inductive research methods, which imply working directly on the text to achieve results (Fortune, 2007). This bottom-up approach to doing research does not mean that we that we could not also make use of top-down deductive methods, since this whole task is based on a hypothesis.

The data was analyzed in terms of multimodal discourse, involving discourse and interaction analysis at the same time, as well as analysis of metalinguistic factors such as motivation, affect and autonomous learning strategies.

Initiation stage

These first stage conversation topics were mainly focussed on the channel used. As mentioned previously, fluency in internet environments can be conditioned at all times by technology and the computer-literacy of its users. As can be seen from what follows, these students were relatively fluent students when using voice but very slow to answer using text chat, and this is a factor which may cause anxiety in the communication flow. There was strong evidence of demotivation and despair on the part of the Spanish students after unsuccessful attempts to communicate with their overseas partners. They even began to question whether or not the work they were doing was worthwhile (written conversation):

22:53:45 [G3.2] the problem I think that we read more than speak and the improvement not appear with two hour of conversations I think [LT] [SP]
 22:53:59 [G4.4] I not sure
 22:54:08 [G4.4] but I think
 22:54:11 [G4.4] so
 22:54:36 [R] yes,G3.2
 22:54:44 [R] thank you
 22:55:17 [G4.4] yes I think the same that G3.2 [SP] [GE]
 22:56:01 [G4.4] but it is bad for you too because you have not conversation about us [GE] [WR]
 22:56:22 [G4.4] yes, that is
 22:56:53 [G4.4] yes, G3.2
 22:56:57 [G4.4] I am agree [GE]
 22:57:34 [G4.4] I guess [WW]

This conversation extract has been taken from one of the general chats at the end of the initial stage. It was performed by G4.4, one of the most active students in the whole project. She was fairly fluent, even when writing, but her grammar was not very accurate. She also had serious difficulties choosing the right word, although she always managed to make herself understood. It is important to bear in mind that she was the only participant living in a Scandinavian country for a year, so she had more exposure to the English language than the rest of the participants.

Interaction stage

This part was meant to be the core of the whole project. Some of the conversations were partially observed and recorded by the researcher. On other occasions, it was the student who gathered and uploaded all the data to the platform. This material was of great value to later study since the interlocutors could speak in a more natural way. The following extract shows the beginning of a spoken conversation between one of the Kuwaiti boys and two Spanish students:

Ali: Do you have any question for me?
 [Long silence]. (Ali is reading what the others are writing in the text chat)
 G2.1: Can you help me?
 G2.3: Hello everybody, Can you hear me?
 G2.1: And you?
 G2.3: G2.1, I can hear you very beautiful voice [P] /v/ is pronounced as /b/
 G2.1: Thank you, thank you. Very kind.... And you Ali, what about you? [P] / u:/

Ali: talking or write? Very good... Do you have any question? Any, anything...Or just one listen me? Yes... ok (reading what they are writing)

G2.1: For you! Ehhh...Could you help we? ^P* Very strong Spanish accent [GE]

G2.3: Ali... Ali! What are you doing in your freetime? [GE] [P]YOUR Do you do cimena? Do go go to disco? What are you doing? [GE] [OT] [C]

G2.1: This question is for Ali or for G2.1?

G2.3: For Ali

Ali: I go to cinema maybe once in a week. Sometimes twice in a week. If I find any good film ... I go trice. Why not?

G2.1: I have a question for you. What is the main /m'in/ city in your country? The business city (Z), the main city! [F]

Ali: Excuse me. Again. Say your question again please. [NM]

G2.1: The main city in your country, what is the big (G) city, the /de/ main /mein/ business city and the tourism in the city. [Proj] Asking about her part

Ali: We have very kinds of city..umm. We have business city but not a city just for business of a city just for something. ... have one for everything

G2.3: G2.1X, errr...What are [ARE] the most important events in your country? [Proj] asking about his topic

...

G2.3: G2.1X, have you see a photo of G2.1?

G2.1X: What? Repeat, please?

G2.3: Yes. Have you seen a photo of G2.1? [P]

G2.1X: Why? Have you see you? [GE]

G2.3: Yea, yeas. I see, I see a photo. And G2.1 is very beautiful, yeah.

G2.3: If you don't see a photo, speak to him and send to him a photo.

G2.1X: Yes, I see, very beautiful. I think you. No I think, I am sure. (laughs) hehe

G2.3: G2.1 is a very typical Spanish girl with a black hair. Is the most beautiful in Spain. [GE]

G2.1: hahaha One moment please, one moment. We are talking about the project. My face is not important now. Ok? [F]

G2.3: Don't "ray" me. [WW]

G2.1: Is a smile with he he he. Could you question for G2.1X? [WW]

The way of beginning the conversation shows how the higher English level of G2.1X led him to use the voice tool even earlier than the two Spanish students. Whilst it was a man who broke the ice by asking off-topic questions, it was a woman who began to ask questions directly related to the project. It is also interesting to observe the way in which she negotiates meaning with the Kuwaiti student in order to ask "what's the capital of Kuwait"? He has problems with her Spanish strong accent and needs to ask her again and again to repeat questions. Repeated actions like this make Spanish students realize the effect of certain pronunciation errors on communication, so that they try to make an extra effort to understand and be understood by the person with a different L1. It is the man again who tries to deviate the conversation into the off-topic of sex, with the implications that this kind of comment can have in cultures different from our own. He has serious problems with the use of pronouns and possessives, but both men managed to make themselves understood quite well. Although eventually the woman managed to steer the conversation back onto the project topic, all of them increased their linguistic confidence, enabling the conversation to become more fluent.

Some of the instructors of the students abroad seized on the experiment as an opportunity to set up little cultural activities focused on Spanish culture. One these interviews was recorded and studied in detail, with the aim of finding out if similar cultural and linguistic findings were given in both directions: the students abroad as a source of information (initial project) vs. Spanish students (alternative derived options). This excerpt has been taken from one of these situations,

between G4.1X, a woman from the United Arab Emirates, and G4.4, a Spanish woman living in Denmark:

G4.1X: Mention some of your traditional food in Spain

G4.4: Ok! About food we have got a [P] /w/ lot of things but ehh I can explain you [GE] some special and typical things ehh about food in Spain so it is difficult to to.. explain you [GE] because If you don't know I'm going to tell you the name and I am going to explain how you can make and at the same time I am going to you because maybe you don't know how to understand my Spanish words. You say? [WW] You know? (self-correction) Sorry... So we have for example "tortilla de patata". I am going to write you, one moment... (silent while typing).

G4.1X: No, It's ok. Don't worry.

G4.4: Tortilla de patata is with potatoes [GE] [ESP]. You fridge [IM], you fry the potatoes, and then you put (self-correction) the eggs in the potatoes and it is like a cake with the potatoes [NM] and eggs but it is not for the dessert [GE] it is for the principal lunch [IM] [WW]

G4.1X: It sounds nice, I have to try it Sandra.

G4.4: Maybe If you are going to Spain you are going to try. I am sure because all the Spanish people know. To make it is the most typical thing. Ok, sorry, sorry (G4.1X is typing something)

As can be observed, this sample is full of cultural implications which lead to several opportunities for negotiation of meaning in order to be understood. Although the foreign student speaks less, it is easy to observe how her English is much more accurate than that of the Spanish woman. G4.4's English is characterized by many inter-language mistakes, as a product perhaps of not having acquired some structures and words studied during the course, such as those used when giving instructions for recipes. This could be one of the results of not having enough practice in a common classroom context. Apart from all the grammatical errors and mistakes made by G4.4, however, she managed to make herself understand, and that is one of the aims of this project, improving communication skills in the L2.

Production stage

Group 1, the Hawaiian students, devoted less time to communicating. As they were very confident about their English level, they appeared to be more worried about meaning than form throughout the presentation. At the same time, others concentrated so much on the content of the presentation that they completely neglected their pronunciation. They seemed to be fluent but they concentrated so much on the presentation that some of them even read all the time, making it difficult to assess their spoken competence. On some occasions, serious pronunciation mistakes were made, which could have been a product of the clear nervousness of some participants, due to lack of experience of this sort of environment.

Group 2 presented their work in a more fluent way than group 1, although their English level and IT skills were infinitely worse than those of group 1. Their use of specific vocabulary improved, although some of them continue to have serious problems with pronunciation. Their level of motivation also increased exponentially over the course of the project. One of the Kuwaiti students even participated actively at the end of the presentation, along with other participants in the project invited to the assessment of this group.

The four members of group 4 were present the final day, in the same way as group 1. Two of the UAE students had been collaborating with the Spanish students to help them to finish their task successfully. The students in this group showed a great degree of involvement in learning about and collecting as much material as possible about the other country. The following extract shows one of the interventions of one of the most active women in this group:

Researcher: What about the language? Did you try to learn more about it? What do you think about this language and the English they speak? Do you think they speak better than you? Did you have any problems understanding their English? Did you have any difficulties being understood by them?

G4.4: Well, I.. ok (laughs), I am going to start. I don't think, I think ahhh I understood very good to Amal and Miriam. Some words I didn't understand, because, you know? I don't know all the words. But I think we could have a good conversations [GE], very long [P], not very much but very long and very full of ... eh, of eh... information. You know what I mean? I know their English is better [P] /beðer/ than me and I don't know why but it's true, it's true. They accent [GE] is not like my accent. I don't know, I don't know how can I improve my accent, but... anyway, I could understand, I could understand and they could understand me so it's enough for me and.. yeahh, I am not sure if it more difficult for them to understand because their alphabet is different..... Ah, No. No, Maria, it is not the first time that I speak with Arabian people.. Here, where I am leaving now, I am speaking with all the world, you know? And it was not the first time but I think that Amal and Miriam has have more, more... ammm, no more, better answer, accent than the people who lives here. I don't know it is because they are with ahhh an American teacher and they need to be one year only with English, maybe is that. I don't know, but, they speak very very good. And what I was impressive because they knows a lot of words, they have a lot of vocabulary [...]

As can be observed, this is part of a long reply to one of the questions asked after the final presentation and it is once again full of cultural allusions. It is of interest to see how G4 has become aware of her own learning process, how to encourage herself and take responsibility for her own improvement, different customs, accents and language users, and this is completely new to most of students involved in distance language courses. The length of the extract, as well as the length of other text and voice encounters with other foreign students, shows a degree of improvement on the fluency and complexity of the L2 generated by the participants in this experiment. It is also remarkable, the way in which this student has been able to memorize all the questions asked by the researcher and the way in which she has been able to reply all of them. This had been almost impossible at the beginning of the project.

5.4. Results

The results shown by this study are the product of the analysis of the language produced, in addition to other kinds of metacognitive factors involved in the experiment, according to the categories defined at the beginning. With regard to language, as mentioned previously, researching spoken discourse using multimodal environments implies the consideration of many other factors related to the channel used (Wang & Chen, 2009). The study has shown how all the participants felt the need to use text-based chat to communicate before using voice to do it. This permitted adult participants who had not spoken English for years to gain sufficient confidence and fluency to maintain longer conversations with interlocutors with a different L1. At the end of the project they were able to use only voice to gather all the information they needed to carry out the final presentation. Although this practice has permitted us to observe small improvements in the fluency and other aspects of spoken language, more time would be needed to achieve better results. It is important to highlight the role of the channel in this kind of communication, since its good management can influence the rhythm of the whole project.

As far as metacognitive results are concerned, it is obvious that the more motivated a student/group is, the better results they will achieve. There is a huge gap in studies like this, but there are some authors, such as Stella Hurd (2007) or Cynthia White; (White, 2007), who have been researching the special situation of studying languages within distance institutions. There are many other implicit factors, crucial to a study of this nature, which need to be looked at in more detail, including motivation, distance innovation, language confidence, distance self-learning and affect. If we ask whether this experiment has been able to teach language though

competences, the answer is yes. In this sense, students have been able to work in groups that are mature enough to solve their own problems in an autonomous way, bearing in mind the difficulties created by time constraints, distance and instances of misunderstanding.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has provided evidence that it is possible to practise and improve the spoken competence of distance learning students using multimodal environments. Not only were voice SCMC effective in improving the oral interaction abilities of the students, but the first stage of text-based chat also helped them to retrieve the passive L2 knowledge stored in their heads. Although this form of communication cannot yet be compared to face-to-face communication, technology and students' IT literacy advances so quickly that studies like this could soon substitute more traditional research into spoken discourse, without having to take into account so many variables with regard to the means of communication. However, more exposure to L2 input on the part of the participants would be needed prior to such studies in order to achieve better results.

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