

Student Perceptions of Virtual Exchanges for L2 Practice

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Abstract

While comprehensible input is the focus of most current approaches to language acquisition, gradually aiding the students to push themselves to produce oral language is also critical. Whereas children learning their first language and learners in immersion settings have constant opportunities to test their hypotheses about the language via output, students in a second language (L2) classroom have very limited exposure to input and even more limited oral practice opportunities. In addition, many oral activities, even those that supposedly require creative speech and a negotiation of meaning, fail to provide learners with authentic, spontaneous, and extended speaking practice. This study will compare two of the more popular conversation services, discuss the advantages of using them for a variety of classes and levels, share specific pre and post speaking assignments designed to target all 5 Cs, and report findings from class surveys on student perceptions regarding the benefits of using partner chat services for improving oral proficiency and overall communicative competence.

Student Perceptions of Virtual Exchanges for L2 Practice

One of the more challenging issues foreign language faculty may face is getting students enough speaking practice, particularly outside of the classroom. Aside from students who have an immersion experience, or students who are Heritage speakers, oral language output is often not spontaneous, authentic, or consistent. Over the last several years, many language teachers have gotten a steady stream of offers to participate in virtual partner chats to help enhance students' second language speaking abilities. These services, which pair L2 learners with native speakers, have become increasingly popular and provide a convenient way for students to increase their speaking time outside of the classroom. This pilot study was designed to gauge students' perceptions of this mode of practice based on six virtual conversations throughout the Fall 2023 semester, each with a different theme. The topics were easier at the beginning and gradually required higher-level communicative functions. Tasks were crafted and designed to afford students practice with a variety of communicative strategies, such as initiating a conversation, changing topics, expressing agreement or disagreement, reacting appropriately, and expanding on a topic. These pre- and post-conversation assignments were created to target the 5 C's of communication: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities (ACTFL, 2011).

Two popular virtual exchange platforms were used in this study, TalkAbroad and Conversifi. One of the authors had already been using TalkAbroad in her Spanish conversation course for a couple of semesters. The other author decided to incorporate virtual exchanges in a Spanish composition class, as well as a 4th semester language course, since the proficiency levels among all three classes would not differ greatly. Two surveys and student reflections were analyzed to gather information on the students' perceptions of the benefits of virtual exchanges on their self-efficacy when speaking, on different aspects of their L2 development, and on the specific features of the conversational platform used. Students reported that the conversations helped their overall speaking ability, particularly their pronunciation, comprehension,

and cultural knowledge. Comments on the homework assignments and surveys revealed rich cultural exchanges and comparisons, as well as their increasing ability to analyze their own speech. Students found little difference between the two conversation services except that Talk Abroad proved easier to set up and use.

Literature Review

Research shows the great variety of computer-mediated communication (CMC) methods that have been used to enhance second language acquisition. Before the invention of video communication, researchers studied social networking sites (SNS) for improved L2 output. These primarily involved textual exchanges in real time and using apps to practice communication in the target language (Blake 2009, Dao, et al. 2021, Jin 2017, Liu, et al. 2015). The use of SNSs helped with informal communication, lowering learner anxiety and showed an increase in willingness to communicate on the part of L2 learners. One of the reasons for this was that, since communication took place on SNS, learners could post a steady stream of communication without waiting for their interlocutor to respond as in a typical conversation. It proved easier for students to negotiate real, authentic communication without “thinking too much,” or expressing themselves without having to worry about responses from their interlocutors. This was particularly evident in Jin’s (2017) study of affordances with WeChat, where a novice L2 student of Chinese used the platform very frequently to interact with new Chinese friends and build his communication skills. This also led to greater enthusiasm when he had success in communicating in Mandarin Chinese. By contrast, an intermediate L2 student used the platform only sporadically, and mainly for advice on vocabulary. Malerba (2015) studied the relationship between affordances and engagement when students used specific language-learning communities in a less formal context. She, too, found that engaged learners became more autonomous, since they interacted with other language learners outside of a formal classroom setting. However, there was a decrease in engagement over time due to partner availability. In both Jin (2017) and Malerba (2015), the use of the SNSs led to increased autonomy and engagement from novice L2 students.

With the advancement of video communication technology, students could now have live conversations with native speaker partners. Cziko (2004) detailed the history of tandem language learning (involving video chats with a partner) as a means for more effective oral proficiency development. He specified that this format involves “language-based communication between two learners who are native speakers of different languages and who are learning each other’s language as a L2” (p. 26-27). This type of exchange allowed each person to experience the role of native language expert and language learner. Conversifi, one of the platforms examined in this current study, conforms to tandem language learning, where students can be both an expert speaker in one language and a learner of another language, thus contributing to the collaborative nature that video chats afford L2 learners. This could also lead to increased self-efficacy, since students in tandem language learning see others going through the same experience they are at learning L2. For Bandura (1977), a key concept of self-efficacy is performance accomplishments. So being in the role of L2 learner and expert speaker can increase student perception of progress in learning the L2 as they see their language partner experience the same struggles in L2 learning.

One area that has developed from video communication is the study of student engagement in L2 video exchanges. Dao et al. (2021) found students to be more engaged in the tasks and more responsive when they communicated via video chat than when they communicated via text chat. However, the subjects did say that text chat allowed for better articulation of ideas than video chat. Dao et al. (2021) recorded the data of partners whose L1 was the same, so there were no expert speakers. Working together, the students had to create a narrative in the target language (English) by sequencing ten pictures. Some of the partners knew each other from work or they were friends or classmates already, while another section of the students was composed of unfamiliar partners. The researchers found that their subjects were more engaged and had more positive feelings when paired with a familiar partner as opposed to an unfamiliar partner.

Lee’s (2007) study of student engagement in video interactions did not involve text chat, and she noted that students “feel more pressure to process input and output” and that “they may not be able to pay attention to certain aspects of discourse due

to the absence of written discourse displayed on the screen” (p. 637). However, Lee (2007) noted that the benefits of a video-only interchange allowed students to enhance other social aspects of interaction, such as non-verbal cues and situational clues, in addition to L2 improvement. In her study, Lee (2017) paired 18 students in a 5th semester Spanish class with expert speakers in an online setting for specific task completion, which stimulated spontaneous conversation. The students were pushed to speak and respond to the expert speakers in a rapid and spontaneous manner, as opposed to relying on supplemental tools such as a chat function. Lee found that the more outgoing and engaged students progressed further in speaking skills than the shyer students. The task-based nature of the study shows a possible link to motivation as a factor in L2 learning. In general, there was greater motivation when students were assigned a task to complete with their partners. While Dao et al. (2021) and Malerba (2015) noted greater motivation when the partners were somewhat familiar to the L2 learners, Malerba (2015) also noticed a decrease in motivation the longer students interacted on SNS, which could suggest that familiarity with partners is not enough to maintain a more long-lasting engagement of students.

Other research has examined the type of conversation involved in the partner chats. Frequently, students engaged in open-ended conversations, collaborative task solving, and information gathering. Those students who engaged in information gathering or open-ended conversations did not report as great a level of oral proficiency as those who engaged in collaborative tasks. O’Dowd (2021) found that students involved in telecollaborative exchanges not only improved their linguistic skills, but they also increased their awareness of the L2 culture. Canals (2020) reported higher levels of proficiency after a second virtual interaction in an experimental group as opposed to the control group. They engaged in collaborative activities and reported having greater motivation to learn L2. The same was shown in Lin (2014), especially in an activity such as information gap. Success in comprehending the expert speaker was a significant factor in confidence in speaking among L2 learners. Kessler et al. (2020) observed that students recorded overall enjoyment in the partner conversations, and higher confidence levels after the first of two surveys they completed, in which they wrote down grammatical, pronunciation, or lexical differences between

their speech and what the expert speakers said. However, that confidence level decreased when students were asked to transcribe a portion of the recorded conversation and noticed the number of errors that they did commit. This corresponds to several studies that noted that virtual partner chats did not necessarily help with linguistic accuracy (Lee, 2007; Kessler, et al., 2020; Lin, 2014). By contrast, in several studies where students prepared for the tasks ahead of time, there was enhanced vocabulary usage and distinction of regional dialects as a result of the partner chat (Fernández Cuenca and Mueller, 2021; Jin, 2017; Lee, 2007).

The present study provides additional insight into the practice of incorporating virtual exchanges in the L2 classroom by examining student perceptions on the effectiveness of using two popular virtual conversation platforms to enhance different aspects of proficiency and self-efficacy in Spanish. The following questions motivated the study:

- 1) Do students perceive virtual exchanges as beneficial practice for improving their proficiency in Spanish?
- 2) Is the self-efficacy of students' oral expression in L2 positively affected by virtual exchanges with native speakers?
- 3) Will students show a preference for one virtual chat platform versus the other?

Method

Participants

During a fifteen-week fall semester, university students in three sections of intermediate Spanish participated in this study: a fourth-semester Spanish language bridge course, a Spanish conversation course, and a Spanish composition course. Prior to conducting the study, the project was approved by Bradley University's Institutional Review Board. Thirty students from the three sections agreed to participate in the study. The participants were divided into two groups to compare the two conversation platforms. By the end of the semester, the total number was reduced to 27, with 12 assigned to the virtual exchange platform Conversifi and 15 assigned to the TalkAbroad platform. At the beginning of the course, students completed a background survey that included questions regarding their previous experiences learning

Spanish, their exposure to Spanish outside of the classroom, and their attitudes toward learning Spanish (Table 1).

Table 1
Student Background Questionnaire

	N	%
Number of years of Spanish study		
>6	16	59
4-6	4	15
1-3	7	26
Opportunities to speak Spanish at home		
Yes	7	26
No	20	75
Previous experience with a conversation platform		
Yes	5	19
No	22	81
Anxious about engaging in partner chats		
Yes	20	74
No	7	26
Primary goal in this course		
oral proficiency	13	48
writing proficiency	9	33
vocabulary	3	11
culture	1	4
comprehension	1	4

All participants had taken a Spanish placement exam and had placed at the intermediate level. Four were Heritage learners of Spanish. All students were between the ages of 18 and 21. All but five participants reported having no opportunities to speak Spanish outside the classroom, nor had they previously participated in virtual chats to practice Spanish. While most students reported feeling nervous about engaging in virtual conversations with native speakers of Spanish, most students also cited oral proficiency as their primary goal for the class.

Procedures

Students in each class were divided and randomly assigned to one of the two chat platforms. Instructors provided detailed instructions on enrolling in their specific platform, accessing their assigned chats, and setting up appointments. Students were assigned six fifteen-minute conversations during the semester. Each conversation assignment had a specific topic, which was related to chapter themes. The topics assigned were: family, leisure activities, food and culture, immigration, the environment, and current events. Engaging in the topics and completing the assigned tasks required intermediate-level functions, including asking and answering questions, creating with the language, description, and narration. Participants were informed that the conversations and related homework would be graded only for completion and would not factor into their course grade. A series of questions was included in an informational handout to help students direct their attention to different aspects of their speech, such as general expression and comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary, and fluency. Students were free to choose the same partner for each conversation or to speak with various native speakers from different countries. Most students chose to vary their partner for each assignment; only three decided to talk to the same conversational partner for all six assignments.

For each of the six partner chats, students were required to complete a pre- and post-conversation worksheet. Activities required before the virtual exchanges included generating a list of vocabulary and questions relating to the assigned topic. Students were reminded that the conversations were meant to be spontaneous

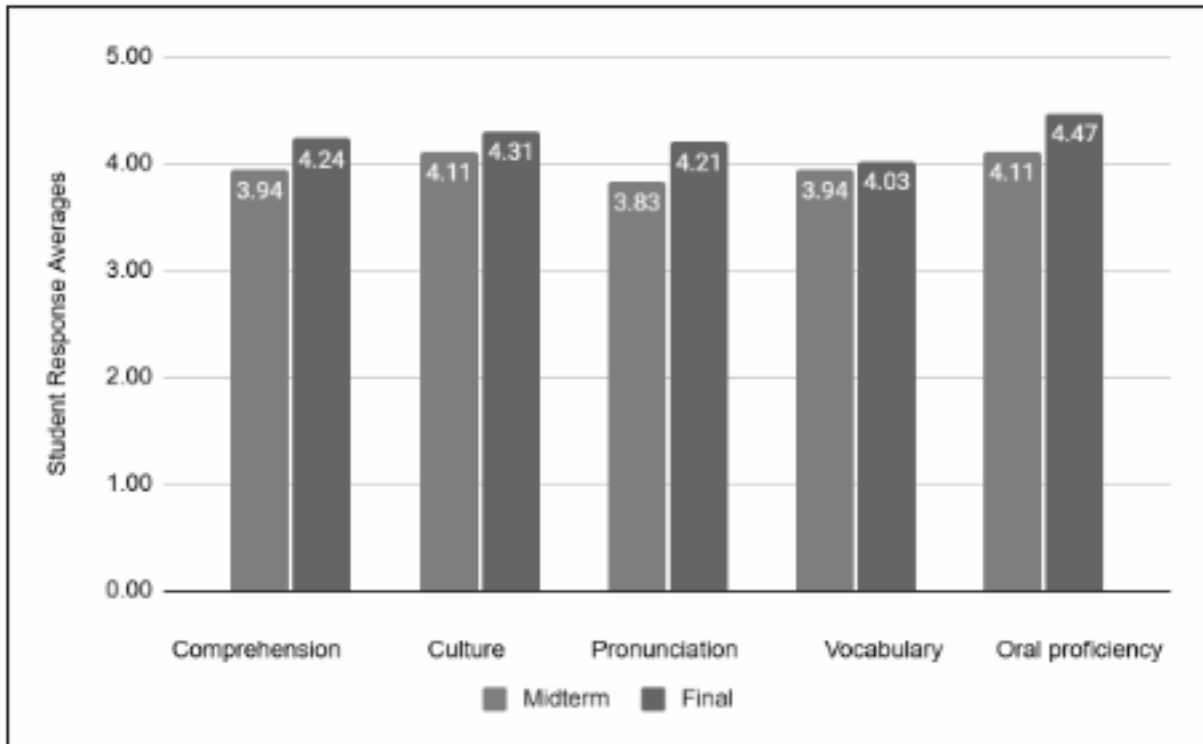
and unscripted, but that the vocabulary and questions were assigned to help them prepare and feel more at ease with the particular theme. Following each chat, students were asked to listen carefully to their recording and evaluate the conversation. Post-conversation worksheets consisted of eight open-ended questions, including their general assessment of the conversation, comprehension, communication problems, level of nervousness, cultural comparisons, new vocabulary, and dialectal differences (Appendix 1).

Following the third and sixth partner chats, students completed a written survey of 16 questions, written in English, to gauge their attitudes toward the features of their specific platform, affective factors, and the effectiveness of the practice on different aspects of their communicative competence (Appendix 2). Platform-specific questions were related to the ease of set-up, cost, perceived engagement, and helpfulness of their conversational partners. Students responded using a Likert scale from one to five to measure their opinions and were also invited to elaborate on their responses. The final survey included an additional question to determine if students used the same conversational partner for each assignment or if they selected different partners. In addition to the written reflection sheets and surveys, student recordings of the second and fifth conversations were analyzed using a keyword coding method to identify significant themes for qualitative analysis.

Results

In the two surveys, students provided their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of virtual chats on different aspects of their language proficiency, including comprehension, cultural awareness, pronunciation, vocabulary, and overall oral proficiency. Average ratings for all skills were above 3.8 on the first survey and were above 4.0 on the final survey. Students rated overall gains in oral proficiency highest in both the midterm survey and the final survey, with averages of 4.11 and 4.47 out of 5 points. The second highest ratings were on cultural awareness, with students reporting an increase in cultural awareness averaging 4.11 at midterm and 4.31 at the end of the semester. Comprehension skills received the third highest ratings with

an average of 3.94 at midterm and 4.24 on the final survey. The skill that received the lowest average ratings was vocabulary. For each skill category, the average student ratings increased from the midterm to the final survey (Figure 1).



The survey included three questions relating to the students' affective domain and self-efficacy (Figure 2). Average student ratings on the effects of the virtual chats on their motivation for speaking Spanish increased from 3.97 to 4.32 by the end of

the semester. Students reported high ratings on increased confidence with the averages remaining similar, 4.17 and 4.15, on both surveys. When asked about how comfortable they were when talking to their conversational partners, the average student ratings were both above 4.0, but were lower on the final survey.

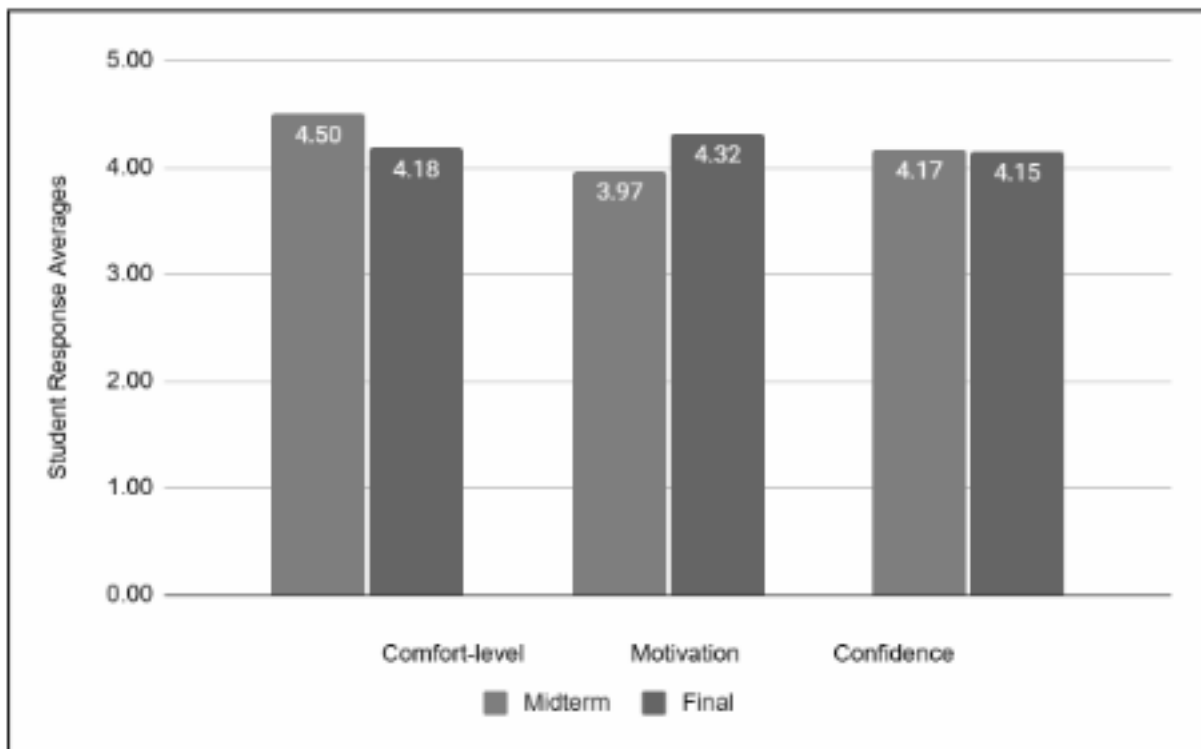
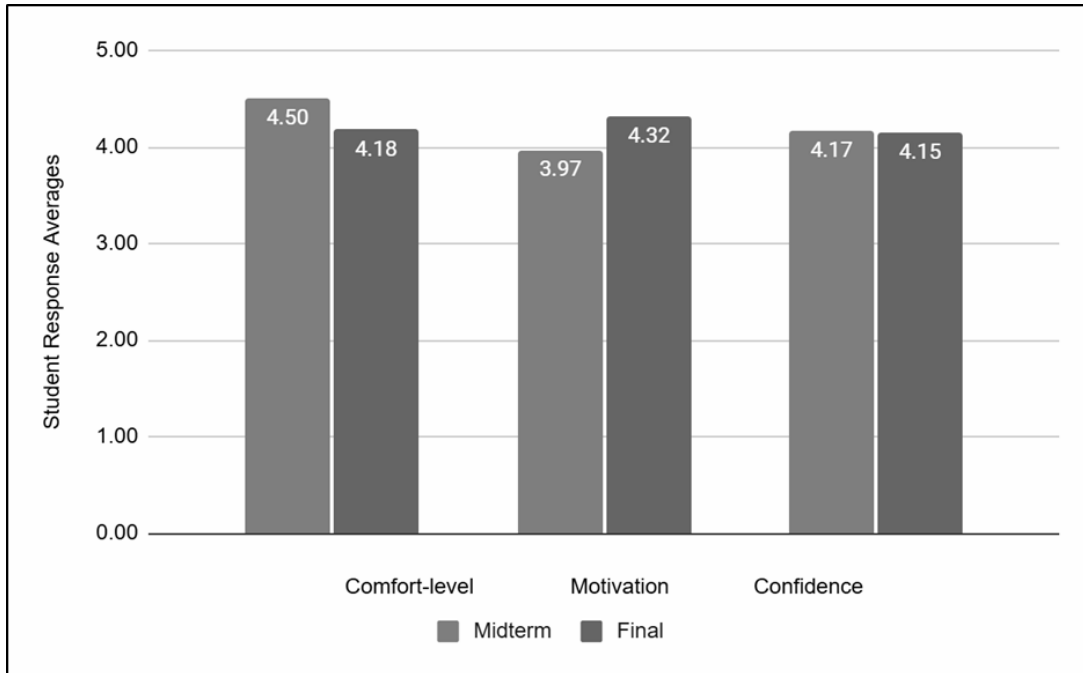


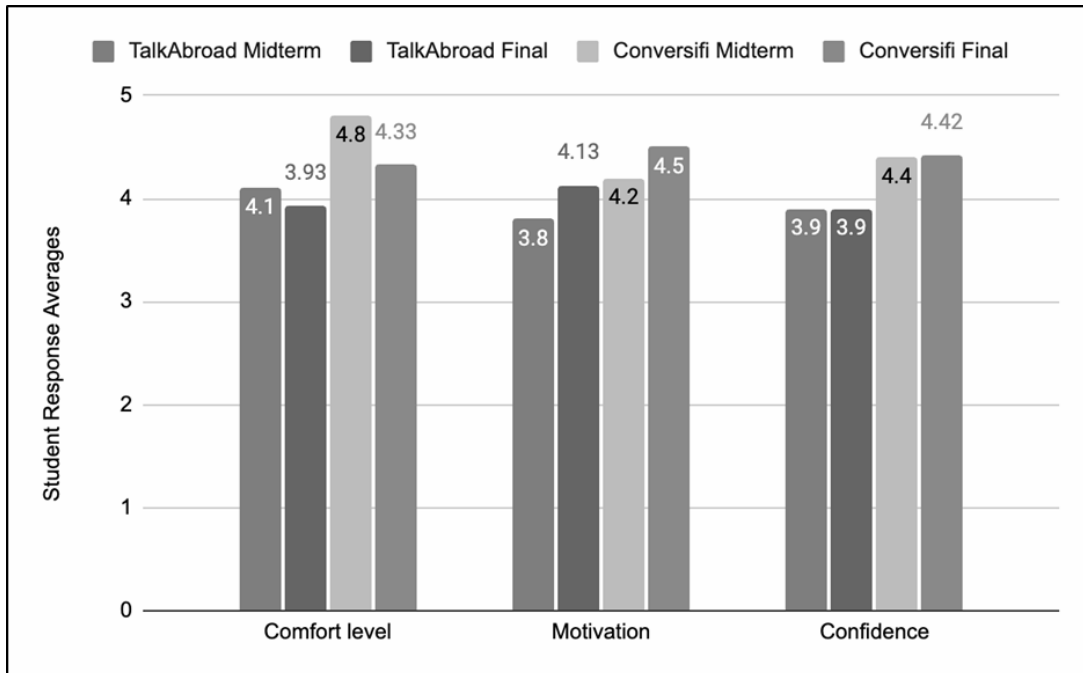
Figure 2
Student self-efficacy



A comparison of student responses about their comfort level during interactions, motivation toward speaking Spanish, and confidence in their ability to communicate in Spanish by conversational platform revealed slight differences. Students using Conversifi reported feeling more comfortable during partner chats than those using TalkAbroad on the mid-term survey, with both groups reporting similarly lower levels on the final survey. When asked whether the partner chats increased their motivation to speak Spanish, participants in the Conversifi group responded more favorably than the TalkAbroad group; however, both groups' averages showed an increase between the mid-term and final surveys. Higher confidence in oral proficiency due to the virtual exchanges was also found in the Conversifi group than in the TalkAbroad group. Still, both groups maintained the same average on the mid-term and final surveys (Figure 3).

Figure 3

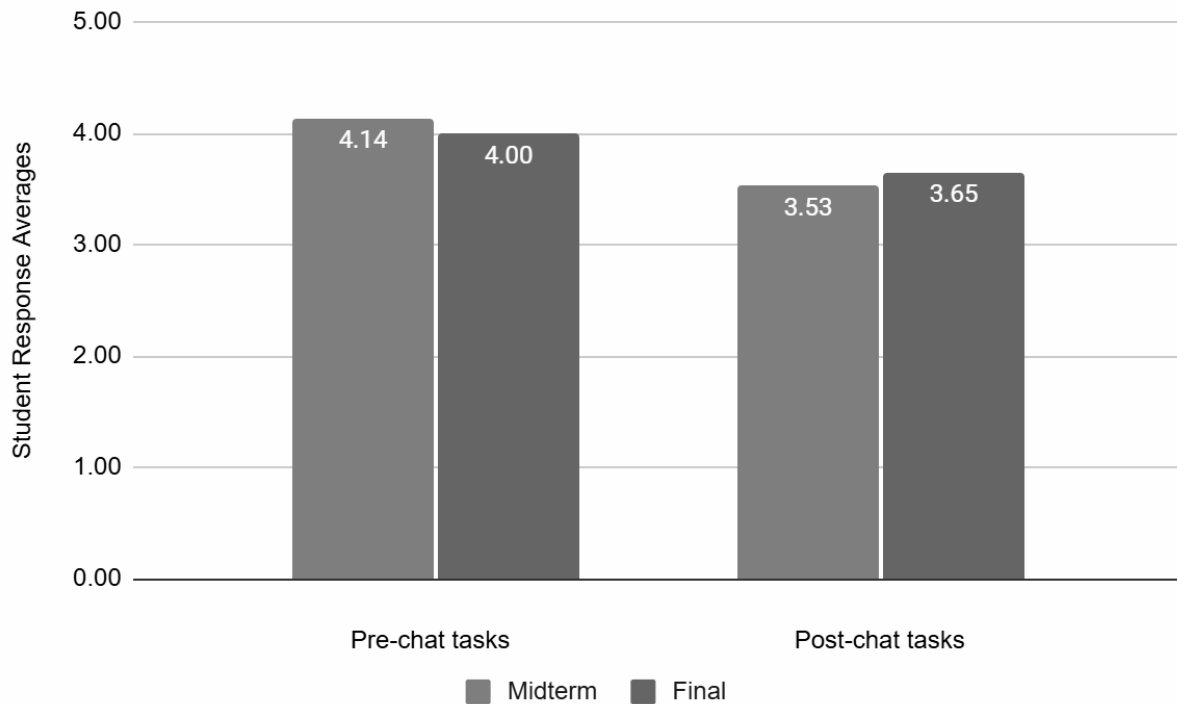
Platform comparison of comfort, motivation, and confidence



Two questions eliciting student attitudes toward the pre- and post-conversation activities for helping optimize the conversation practice were included in the survey (Figure 4). In general, the pre-conversation tasks were rated as more beneficial than the post-conversation tasks at both points during the semester. The average rating for the pre-chat activities was 4.14 on the first survey and 4.00 on the final survey. Post-task ratings were lower with averages of 3.53 and 3.65 on the first and second surveys.

Figure 4

Student perceptions of pre- and post-conversation tasks



To gain information regarding the students' experience with the two conversational platforms used in the study, the survey included questions on the ease of set-up, cost, engagement, and helpfulness of their conversational partners (Figures 5 and 6). There were also two questions to determine if the students would recommend using their conversation platform and to provide an overall rating of the platform. Students using TalkAbroad rated the ease of set-up higher on the mid-term and final surveys. In terms of the cost of the programs, the Conversifi group had a slightly lower rating than TalkAbroad. Students using Conversifi, however, had a higher rating for partner engagement on both the mid-term and final surveys. Still, when asked

if they would recommend their conversational platform, averages were equal at mid-term and slightly higher for TalkAbroad on the final survey. The overall student rating for each platform was lower for Conversifi than TalkAbroad at mid-term and the end of the semester. The rating for TalkAbroad remained the same on the mid-term and final surveys.

Figure 5
Midterm Survey of Platform Features

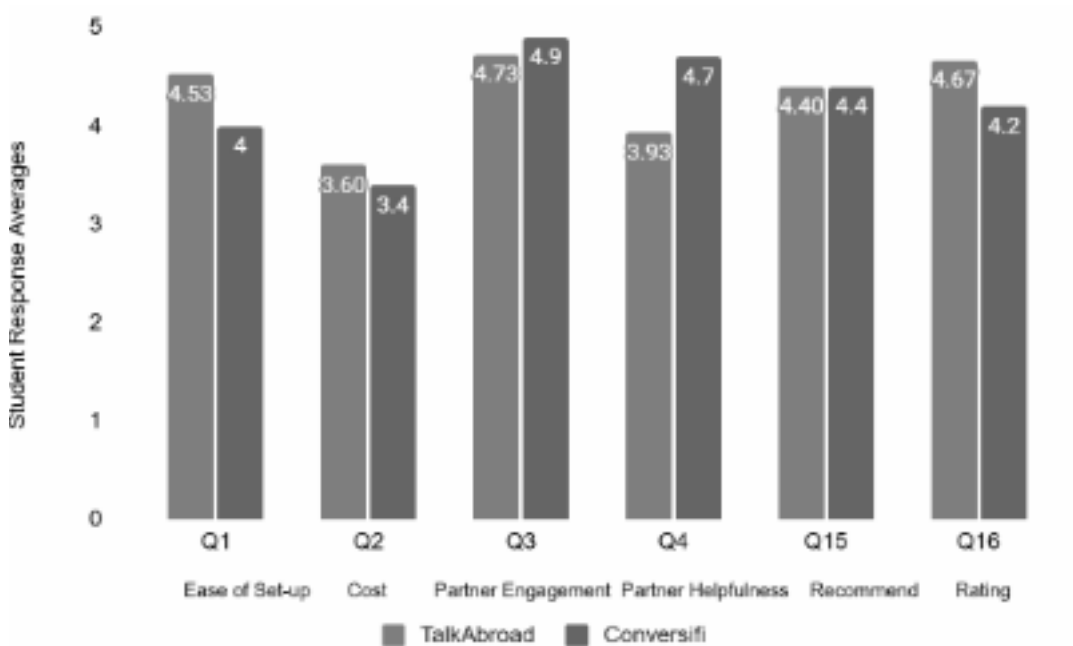
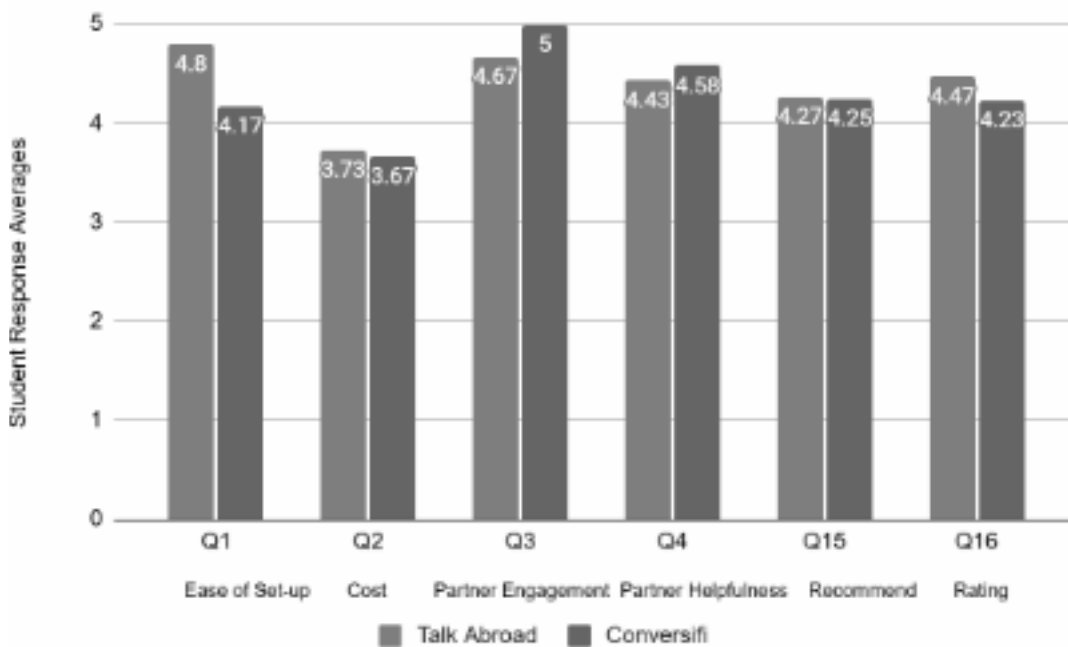


Figure 6

Final Survey of Platform Features



In addition to the quantitative analysis of the surveys, qualitative data was gathered from the six post-conversation reflection worksheets, as well as from student responses to the open-ended questions on the two surveys. Student comments were analyzed by both researchers using a keyword coding system and were subsequently grouped into four themes: linguistic awareness, assigned activities, cultural awareness and comparisons, and platforms and partners (Table 2). Many students commented on their increased comfort level when speaking Spanish. Some made specific comments regarding their acquisition of new vocabulary words: “I really benefited from the pre-conversation activities; they forced me to learn new words.” Some commented on their need to increase their vocabulary to improve their speaking ability: *“a veces me faltaron las palabras para explicarme y explicar mi cultura”* [Sometimes I lacked the words to explain myself and explain my culture]. Some students

mentioned their need to learn more phrases to help with transitions and pauses.

Others commented on their grammar mistakes, pronunciation, and lack of fluency. There were also several observations on the pronunciation features of their conversational partners. One student observed “Mi compañera pronunció sus letras “ll” un poco como la letra ‘j’ en inglés, y “v” como “b”” [my partner pronounced the letters “ll” a little like the letter “j” in English and “v” like “b”]. Another student noted that their partner “eliminaba consonantes y fluía de vocal en vocal” [eliminated consonants and flowed from vowel to vowel]. Additionally, the assigned topics also impacted the students’ perceptions of their conversations. As the themes became less personal and more abstract, students reported having more difficulty maintaining the conversation.

In responding to the benefit of virtual exchanges for increasing their cultural knowledge, many students cited specific topics and drew comparisons to their own culture. Several participants commented on their perceived differences between family customs, eating habits, and the concept of independence. Some students cited gaining new perspectives on topics such as climate change and immigration. Since the conversational partners were from various Spanish-speaking countries, students also reported gaining insight into the cultural differences within the Spanish-speaking world.

Student comments relating to their conversational partners and the virtual chat platforms they used were varied. Some expressed their positive opinion of the value of virtual chats in helping them improve their conversational skills. There were also highly favorable comments regarding the partners’ engagement and helpfulness. The few negative comments included opinions about the lack of correction by conversational partners and their difficulty in setting up their accounts and navigating the platform.

Table 2

Free Responses on Post-Conversation Reflections and Surveys

Theme	Example Quotes
Linguistic Awareness	<p>“I gradually became more comfortable speaking in Spanish and my vocabulary increased with new words”</p> <p>“I don’t think the partners chose to correct my mistakes and I mostly forgot the (vocabulary) after the conversations”</p> <p>“Hubo algunos momentos en los que mi concordancia del verbo y sujeto no era correcta, pero con más práctica en clase y en estas conversaciones estas fluirán mejor y ni siquiera tendré que pensar en ellas.”</p> <p>“Me gustaría mejorar mi acento para la próxima conversación. Quiero hablar más rápido también.”</p> <p>“Tenía muchas pausas...A veces cortaba mis frases en lugares extraños.”</p> <p>“Necesito usar más frases para ayudar con las transiciones. Necesito responder con más palabras y decir más.”</p>
Pre- and Post Activities	<p>“...conversations with native speakers are very helpful and the topics we talked about were useful...”</p> <p>“For the pre-conversation questions, I didn’t think the vocab part was as useful as the questions. I never ended up using the vocab...”</p> <p>“I was able to feel more confident by preparing new questions and I was able to fix mistakes for the next conversation”</p>

Theme	Example Quotes
Cultural Knowledge and Comparisons	<p>“I was exposed to new information and I have learned a lot about other Hispanic cultures.”</p> <p>“Aprendí que al igual que en nuestra cultura yo diría que comer con la familia es cada año menos común.”</p> <p>“siempre escucho en las noticias las opiniones de los mexicanos que vienen a Estados Unidos, pero nunca lo contrario.”</p> <p>“le sorprendió mucho que yo trabajara en verano, por lo que quizás eso sea algo común a una edad temprana en su país.</p> <p>En Colombia, en general la comida es menos procesada. En la comunidad de mi compañero, él tiene acceso a ingredientes frescas.”</p> <p>“...en España, hay una expectativa que un grupo de comedores necesita pasar tiempo juntos y disfrutar su comida. Esto es bien diferente de como es en los EEUU.”</p> <p>“Gracias a la conversación, ahora yo tengo una nueva perspectiva del cambio climático.”</p>
Partners/Platforms	<p>“It was a great platform.”</p> <p>“Conversifi was a bit confusing at the beginning. The platform needs a better organization.”</p> <p>“I loved my partners! They were all very kind and ready to talk/listen.”</p> <p>“I love Talk Abroad - it has really helped me be able to think quickly in Spanish”</p> <p>“Excellent platform (Conversifi)”</p> <p>“Every person was very engaged and interested in talking and helping me learn.”</p> <p>“...todos los compañeros de conversación son simpáticos.”</p>

Discussion

Virtual exchanges are becoming an increasingly popular tool in world language classes. They provide a way to target the five C's of language learning set forth by ACTFL's World Readiness Standards (ACTFL, 2011) by enabling students to practice their communication skills, increase their awareness of cultural practices and perspectives, encourage linguistic and cultural comparisons, extend their language use to communities beyond the classroom, and make connections to topics and information that are relevant to them. They also enable students to have greater autonomy and self-determination over their language development by engaging in authentic use of the language through social interactions. The present study was motivated by a desire to determine students' perceptions of this form of language practice and to gauge their assessment of the particular features of two of the most popular virtual exchange platforms.

The survey data clearly show that students viewed the virtual exchanges as having a positive impact on different aspects of their proficiency. It is not surprising that among the skills rated most highly were oral proficiency and comprehension, as these are the bases of conversation. The second highest average rating indicated a perceived increase in cultural awareness, which aligns with O'Dowd's (2021) research on increased cultural awareness as a result of virtual interaction with native speakers. For students who do not have opportunities to travel and engage with native speakers outside of the classroom, virtual exchanges can allow all students to have intercultural experiences, which provide exposure to different perspectives and build cultural competence. Possibly contributing to the students' perception was that the pre-conversation activities, in which students prepared a list of questions in preparation for the exchanges, included a suggestion to try to focus their questions on cultural comparisons related to the assigned theme. Overall, the increase in the average student ratings from the first to the second survey suggests that the more practice students had with the conversation exchanges, the more positively they perceived the benefits of the interactions on oral proficiency, cultural awareness, comprehension, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

With regard to self-efficacy, students reported an increase in their motivation to speak Spanish and confidence in speaking Spanish. These are two major hurdles in building proficiency. Motivating students to converse in class and interact with their peers can be challenging, and most students have difficulty finding practice opportunities outside the classroom. Increased motivation among students who participated in virtual exchanges was also reported by Kessler et al. (2020). This may be due to the fact that virtual exchanges are a more authentic use of the L2. Students know they must find ways to express themselves in Spanish and can't rely on other students or the instructor to help them out. They are forced to negotiate meaning and, with a supportive partner, feel accomplished when they are able to successfully convey their ideas. It should be noted that in listening to the recordings of the conversations, there was very little error correction on the part of the conversational partners, and students often received praise for their attempts to communicate. It is important to note, student recordings were also not analyzed for accuracy, neither by the students nor instructors. This lack of attention to accuracy may be related to the students' reported increase in confidence and motivation. While Dekeyser (1993) suggests that the usefulness of error correction may be related to individual differences in anxiety levels and extrinsic motivational factors, Kessler et al. (2020) reported a decrease in student confidence when students analyzed their interactions for grammatical accuracy.

Quantitative findings did not clearly indicate student preference for either of the two platforms used for virtual conversations. The student response averages were similar for each platform regarding their ease of use, cost, and the helpfulness of conversational partners. However, Conversifi did average lower on students' perceptions of ease of use and cost. Student comments on the surveys and reflection papers mentioned their confusion when setting up their account and navigating the platform. One key difference between the two programs is the cost structure. While both charge a price per session and offer bundle pricing, Conversifi also has a subscription fee and offers a system that allows students to earn tokens to offset the cost by serving as coaches to their partners who are learning English. Although this would have reduced the cost of the platform, none of the students in the study served as

coaches. It should also be noted that for the semester of the study, Conversifi waived the subscription fee, which made the platforms more comparable in price. Interestingly, the only categories in which TalkAbroad received higher averages were ease of use and cost. In addition, students gave TalkAbroad a higher overall rating and recommendation than those who used Conversifi. This finding suggests the importance that students place on the cost and ease of use in their evaluation of classroom materials in general. Another difference between the platforms was that Conversifi had a higher rating on partner engagement on the final survey. This could be related to Conversifi's post-chat feedback feature in which students and partners evaluate each other. All the partner feedback reviewed was highly positive, which could impact a student's view of their partner. Subsequent to this study, TalkAbroad has implemented this feedback feature, as well.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations regarding its scope and generalizability, the study provided helpful information regarding students' attitudes toward the benefits of virtual chats for intermediate-level language learners. Although the quantitative data does not support a clear preference between the two platforms, perhaps as informative is the qualitative data gathered from student responses to the two surveys and reflection papers on their assessment of the two platforms, and the benefits of using virtual chats in the L2 classroom. Students from both groups commented positively about the platforms, especially on the engagement and helpfulness of their conversational partners. They viewed the conversations as beneficial in developing their proficiency and increasing cultural awareness. Student reflections provided critical evaluations of different aspects of their communication skills and gave insight into their metalinguistic awareness, which, as part of metacognition, has been shown to be predictive of a learner's language performance (Raofi et al., 2013). Overall, there were more student comments about cultural awareness, differences, and perspectives than any other topic. As previously mentioned, each conversation assignment was based on a common intermediate-level topic and included instructions to encourage intercultural exploration and cultural comparison. Both virtual chat platforms allowed students to

converse with native speakers from various Spanish-speaking countries, which allowed for intercultural discussions and learning.

Based on student feedback, the virtual exchanges provided opportunities to develop the 5 C's of language learning: communication, culture, comparisons, community, and connections (ACTFL, 2011). Learners need opportunities to practice oral communication beyond the classroom. In this study, virtual chats enhanced the L2 classroom experience by allowing learners to use their conversational skills to communicate with a wider community and gain diverse perspectives on course topics. Students had the autonomy to guide general topics toward their own areas of interest. The students in the present study reported positive perceptions of virtual chats for increasing their self-confidence and motivation to speak Spanish. They also thought the conversational practice opportunities were beneficial for developing their oral proficiency, comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary, and cultural awareness. These benefits can be amplified by carefully designing each conversation assignment to encourage intercultural comparison and by dedicating classroom time to pre- and post-conversation activities, promoting self-reflection, pragmatic competence, and cultural knowledge.

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Appendix 1

Post-chat Questions

1. ¿Cómo te fue la conversación por lo general?/ *In general, how did the conversation go?*
2. ¿Te sentías nervioso/a? ¿Por qué?/ *Did you feel nervous? Why?*
3. ¿Entendiste la mayoría de la conversación?/ *Did you understand the majority of the conversation?*
4. ¿A qué se deben los problemas de comunicación?/ *What were the causes of the communication problems?*
5. ¿Qué comparaciones culturales puedes hacer basada en la conversación?/ *What cultural comparisons can you draw based on your conversation?*
6. ¿Cuáles son las palabras nuevas que aprendiste?/ *What new vocabulary words did you learn?*
7. ¿Qué notaste acerca del dialecto de tu compañero/a?/ *What did you notice about your partner's dialect?*
8. ¿Qué puedes hacer para mejorar la conversación para la próxima vez?/ *What can you do to improve your communication for the next conversation?*

Appendix 2

Survey completed after partner chats #3 and #6

1. How easy was it to set up your account on the conversation partner platform?

1(most difficult) 2 3 4 5(eas-
iest)

2. In your opinion, how affordable are the partner chats?

1(too expensive) 2 3 4
5(most affordable)

3. Were your conversation partners adequately engaged and interested in the conversation?

1(least) 2 3 4 5(most)

4. How interested were your partners in helping you improve your oral proficiency?

1(least) 2 3 4 5(most)

5. How comfortable were you when talking with your partners?

1(least) 2 3 4 5(most)

6. In general, how much did partner chats affect your motivation to speak Spanish?

1(least) 2 3 4 5(most)

7. In general, how much did partner chats affect your confidence in speaking Spanish?

1(least) 2 3 4 5(most)

8. In general, how much did partner chats affect your comprehension of Spanish?

1(least) 2 3 4 5(most)

9. Did the partner chats increase your knowledge of Hispanic cultures?

1(least) 2 3 4 5(most)

10. How beneficial were the **pre-conversation** activities for optimizing the conversation practice?

1(least) 2 3 4 5(most)

11. How beneficial were the **post-conversation reflection** activities for optimizing the conversation practice?

1(least) 2 3 4 5(most)

12. How beneficial were the partner chats in improving your pronunciation?

1(least) 2 3 4 5(most)

13. How beneficial were the partner chats in improving your vocabulary?

1(least) 2 3 4 5(most)

14. How beneficial were the partner chats with native speakers for improving your overall fluency (oral proficiency)?

1(least) 2 3 4 5(most)

15. Would you recommend this conversation practice platform to other students?

1(least) 2 3 4 5(most)

16. How would you rate the partner chat platform that you are currently using?

1(least) 2 3 4 5(most)

17. Did you use the same partner for each conversation? (please specify)

18. Please use the following space to elaborate on any of the previous questions.