AUTHENTIC USE OF TECHNOLOGY
TO IMPROVE EFL COMMUNICATION AND MOTIVATION
THROUGH INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE EXCHANGE VIDEO CHAT

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Abstract

University EFL students in Ecuador do not have many opportunities to authentically practice English outside of the classroom. This lack of daily connections decreases students' ability to effectively communicate and improve in language learning. Therefore, an international language exchange program was created with 17 students through video chat platforms. The objective of the research was to give students an opportunity to practice English to increase intrinsic motivation and oral communication. This study followed a mixed method approach using questionnaires, informal interviews and observations over a five-week period. The program showed increased confidence in speaking, students seemed to be more intrinsically motivated to improve and an increase in fluency was seen in overall communication skills.

Keywords: authentic learning; communication; EFL; motivation; technology; video chat

1. Introduction

In Ecuador, there is a deficiency of 4,250 English language teachers throughout the country (El Comercio, 2016) and many schools do not have English language teachers that are properly trained with the necessary knowledge of the English language to teach English in Ecuador (Andes, 2012). To confront this lack of recourses, a new major in pedagogy of national and foreign languages was created at the *Universidad Nacional de Educación* (UNAE) in Ecuador and was further defined in 2017 when an innovative proposal was specifically written for this major. The goal of the new major is to train English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers for primary and secondary education to fill the deficit of EFL school teachers and improve overall English language teaching quality throughout the country. The first cohort of 38 students in the English language teaching major has begun this semester.

However, one of the obstacles facing these students is that many of them have entered the program with little or no English language knowledge. The results from their entrance

exams show that most of the students tested below an A1.1 level of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Thus, the proficiency professors for this group were faced with the obstacle of increasing students' English language levels specifically in oral communication. They had to find innovative alternatives to enhance the students' ability to internalize English and increase their knowledge, ability and fluency at an increased rate, because the expected level of English upon graduating is C1 per CEFR. In 2016, *El Consejo de Educación Superior* required that all students training to be English language teachers prove in the seventh semester of study that they have obtained a C1 or higher in English, so that they can continue studying and graduate as EFL teachers. Due to this new regulation, students must now have an extremely high level of English by the time they graduate to become English language teachers in Ecuador.

2. The background for the study

To create an innovative and interesting approach for increasing oral communication and motivation an online video chat language exchange was initiated. It allows students to have authentic interactions with English language speakers, since many of them do not have this option outside the classroom. This program involved 17 of the 38 students in the first cohort studying to be English language teachers. The 17 students chosen showed that they needed much support to improve their English language skills. These students participated in a five-week video chat language exchange for 60 minutes each week with 17 Spanish language students from a state university in California.

The program allowed students to practice speaking in an authentic setting outside of the classroom. Students gained knowledge about native English speakers' culture and practiced their oral communication skills which boosted their confidence in speaking at an increased rate. Finding a strategy to allow students to practice English authentically outside the classroom is important, since most of the students do not have regular contact with English in Ecuador. These students only practice English in class, which does not aid in internalizing the language or motivate them to improve their skills. As Alshumaimeri (2015) demonstrates, EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia have similar problems and, as a result, EFL students also do not have access to daily authentic English use. The article explains that some EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia have been working on finding various authentic materials and activities that would give students opportunities to practice English authentically to lead to the internalization of the language. In this research, the authors suggest that the use of authentic materials, specifically video chat

language exchanges, may allow for authentic English language learning for EFL students at UNAE.

Through informal interviews, the instructors found that many of the students did not initially choose to study teaching English as a foreign language and were not intrinsically motivated to learn English fluently. The video chats facilitated learning because they increased participants' intrinsic motivation by giving them alternative reasons to improve English language skills. Students now had a relationship to maintain for a short amount of time and insight into the culture and customs of native English speakers. As it was found by Wen-chi, Wu, Yen & Marek (2011), lack of motivation can decrease students' abilities to internalize and ultimately learn EFL. Oletić (2014) explains that without intrinsic or personal motivation to learn a language it is almost impossible to become proficient.

Therefore, it has been one of the goals of the researcher to find activities, methodologies and strategies to motivate EFL students at UNAE to want to learn English both inside and outside of the classroom. Finding alternative ways to motivate and increase speaking skills for students has been a challenge, but the use of technology as an authentic material through international video chat language exchanges has been an innovative teaching and learning tool. This tool focuses on how interacting with native speakers can aid in increasing EFL student's motivation to learn English, oral communication skills, and confidence levels using English.

The post test and post questionnaire showed positive results which will be described in the findings of this paper. Principally a few administrative obstacles were found, but once these problems were solved, students began to make meaningful connections with their partners in the United States.

3. Literature review

3.1. Use of technology, specifically video chat in EFL

The technology used to increase communication skills is a type of technological communication tool which Hsu (2019) defines as any tool used by humans to communicate through the internet. In a study of first year university EFL students, Al-Abdali (2016) found that technology, specifically video chat, increased university level students' communication skills largely in part because they could communicate and have regular interactions with native speakers. This technological interaction allowed students to develop their skills in a more relaxed and purposeful setting. In Japan, Iino and Yabuta (2015) found that students not only increased their English language communication skills, but also gained global competencies through international video chats. They also found that the use of technology such as video

chats could fill the void of purposeful L2 communicative experiences, resulting in the improvement of students' oral articulation.

Kasapoglu-Akol (2010) explains how technology and the internet are part of students' everyday lives and are proliferated throughout the world today. The research from the present study suggests that when connected to EFL, technology and the internet can create a more purposeful learning environment. Jauregi and Bañados (2008) also found this to be true in their study of the use of virtual video communication to improve oral Spanish skills. Students found that establishing connections to real-life activities while learning a language aided their oral expression. A study conducted by Carey and Crittenden (2000) found that the proliferation of various web CTs allowed for more effective learning, especially as regards communicative skills. This study specifically looked at the use of the internet to support communication skills among students and Park and Son (2009) also found students to be active autonomous learners with technology, giving them more control over their learning.

Golonka et al. (2012) completed a comprehensive review of hundreds of studies that focused on the relevance of the role of technology in language learning. This review guides the findings in this current article, as they also discovered that technology can play an important role in foreign language learning by increasing authentic interaction and students' connections with the new language being learned. Ryobe (2009) found that the use of technology, and specifically video chat, not only increased students' abilities to communicate, but also gave them a sense of confidence they did not have before participating in the activity. Through video chats, Kristi et al. (2012) found that the tasks provided along with the use of technology allowed for improved learning in various skills, students felt an increased motivation using video chat and purposefully used the target language of English. Yanguas (2010) completed a complex study using computers to promote communication for language learners at a university level. The study used video chat as a classroom tool to practice listening and communication skills and it found that language learning was generated. This is because it was an authentic situation where students could improve L2 communication even when they had not yet perfected these skills.

3.2. Authentic materials

Authentic materials are defined as "materials which are prepared for native speakers and not designed to be used for teaching purposes Al Azri and Al-Rashdi, 2014, p. 249". Hsu (2019) explains that technological communication tools are a popular authentic tool to use in an EFL classroom to promote communication. Alshumaimeri (2015) mentions that there are many

different types of authentic materials and when they are used in the classroom, real-life situations are emphasized and internal connections for the learners are created. Al Alzri and Al-Rashdi (2014) also explain that these types of materials have become extremely important for EFL teachers around the world as a teaching tool to bring situations into the classroom that would be encountered in the real world and to aid in student learning. Their study discusses how authentic tools are necessary to utilize in EFL classes which have little or no interaction with native speakers. Like the participants in this study, Carey and Crittenden (2000) completed their research with participants that had very little access to authentic English speakers. They found that the use of video and audio technology allowed for authentic communication to occur between the participants and fluent English speakers. This interaction was seen to be a very effective tool aiding in increasing oral communication. Wen-chi et al. (2011) explain how teachers must be creative in providing authentic teaching strategies in the classroom to design opportunities for language learners to participate in real-life communication activities. Reiterating the idea Peacock (1997) claims that authentic materials can mimic actual social interactions, which is exactly what a video chat between L1 and L2 language learners could be. The present researcher used authentic materials as an innovative mode of communication practice using video chat, where the EFL participants interacted with native speakers in a comfortable reliable setting.

3.3. Motivation in EFL

Oletić (2014) defines motivation as the reason people persevere and attempt to attain anything. When motivation is connected to students, this tends to stem from students' personal experiences or eagerness to prevail in the area being studied. When EFL students have very little authentic interaction with L1 speakers, many feel unmotivated (Gilakjani, 2012). The research in this paper shows that very few of the participants had regular interaction with L1 speakers. Wen-chi et al. (2011) explain that this phenomenon happens in many countries around the world where EFL is taught since many learners around the world do not have the opportunities to speak English in authentic settings and therefore lack meaningful interactions in their L2. The researchers explained this ultimately results in a lack of motivation among students' which tends to decrease their abilities to reach an advanced level of language proficiency. In this study, this phenomenon was seen in case of the participants since many of them did not use English in their daily life and since they had no connection to English, they did not have an intrinsic reason to learn it. As the participants began the video chat language exchange program, similar results were found from the study conducted by Almeida d'Eca

(2003). Almeida d'Eca explains how various forms of internet chat provide an extremely motivating experience for language learners when there is little opportunity for authentic communication. This strategy not only aids in oral communication but can give students an intrinsic reason to improve English language learning by allowing them opportunities for authentic interaction with L1 speakers. Similarly, Tafazoli and Golshan (2014) recognize that various types of technological interactions can aid to enhance communication skills and motivate students, especially in EFL settings, when used as a specific tool and not the only form of language learning. However, the research completed by Mora Vázquez, Trejo Guzmán & Roux Rodríguez (2010) showed that any activity allowing students to utilize L2 in the community of native language speakers will have a positive impact on student motivation to improve L2 knowledge.

The participants in this study explained that it was difficult to be motivated because they had little to no interaction with the L2 outside of the classroom. Students needed the motivation in the classroom, since, as Gilakjani (2012) explains, "students learn best by seeing the value and importance of the information presented in the classroom. If the students are not interested in the material presented, they will not learn it" (p. 57). The researcher used video chats to connect learning to real-life interactions, which in turn created an authentic reason to increase their language skills. Gilakjani (2012) also suggests that student motivation can be increased when different types of technology are used in EFL courses. Finally, as Hsu (2019) found, the use of video chat increased L2 student motivation because of students' interactions with native speakers from other countries. Participants from the study felt more comfortable speaking to L1 speakers after participating in the program.

4. The study

4.1. Participants

The participants of this study were beginner level EFL students in UNAE in Ecuador. They were 17 native Spanish speakers from a beginner language proficiency course. These students were chosen because they needed the most support in various language skills, specifically listening and speaking, and they had little or no authentic or meaningful opportunities to practice English with native or fluent English speakers outside of the classroom. For many students participation in the video chats was the first time they had long or meaningful conversations in English with a native speaker in an authentic setting.

The native English speakers for this program were university students in California studying in their first year of Spanish courses. They were also chosen because they have few opportunities to practice their Spanish with native speakers outside of the classroom. The university they are studying at lacks students with cultural and economic diversity and finding Spanish speakers to practice with can be a challenge. This exchange program allowed for a unique opportunity to gain cultural insight along with language practice.

4.2. Design and procedure

The study used the action research framework following a mixed methods approach. The researcher used qualitative and quantitative tools to gather information about the use of technology and authentic materials in the classroom and the way in which these educational tools and strategies effect the motivation of EFL students at a university level.

At the beginning of the semester, first year university students who were studying to be English language teachers joined this program. These students volunteered to interact on a regular basis with a native speaker outside the classroom because they did not have these opportunities to use English in an authentic manner and they were looking for innovative strategies to improve L2 learning.

First the students took an oral pretest to evaluate their level of English. This allowed the researcher to be able to monitor the student's growth over the five weeks. The students were then paired randomly with university students from the United States. Each Ecuadorian student was given an email template, an email address and a WhatsApp number of their video chat exchange program partner. They were given one week to establish contact with their partners and set up the first meeting according to the schedules of both students. They were obligated to meet once a week for the five-week period for a minimum of one hour. During each meeting the students spoke using WhatsApp, Skype, Facebook or Facetime as a means of interaction for the video chat. Each student was given specific questions for each weekly meeting based on the topics of the language class they were attending simultaneously. Each week the students also had to evidence each meeting by sending the instructor a screenshot with a time stamp of their meeting and the completed questionnaire. Examples of the questionnaires are included Appendix 1.

Throughout the program the student's meetings were monitored through checking the completed questionnaires, screenshots and informal individual discussions about the student's experiences. This is when students shared their positive experiences such as speaking to native speakers for the first time, being able to communicate in English for short periods of time and

making cultural connections with their video chat partners. This was also when such difficulties of the program as the use of new technology, having scheduling confusions and being unable to meet on certain specified dates were discussed. Also discussions concerned the ways to improve and eliminate these problems. Concluding the five-week program, students had a post-test to evaluate their communication abilities.

4.3. Data collection procedures

The researcher used various tools to gather data in the study over the five-week period. This time frame was chosen after a trail period in previous semesters. It was found that students often lost interest if the experience was longer and when it was shorter, time did not allow for students to develop skills authentically. Various tools were used in this study to measure the needs, abilities, difficulties and results.

(1) A pre-questionnaire related to the following topics:

    a) previous use and knowledge of this type of technology;

    b) previous interaction with native speakers;

    c) opinions about improving English oral communication;

    d) motivation to learn English.

(2) An oral pre-test - this was administered at the beginning of the five-week period and followed CEFR, which allowed the teacher to discover if students were below an A1, A1.1, A1.2, A2, A2.2. The findings show that students who participated in this activity were at various levels ranging from below A1 to A2.2.

(3) Various informal conversations over the five-week period - the participants shared their experiences and conversations with their partners in the United States, they also discussed their difficulties and concerns about their participation.

(4) An oral post-test - administered following the same parameters as the pre-test, it included direct questions, open ended questions, describing images and having a simple conversation based on various topics with another student. This test allowed the professor to see if students increased their oral communication skills following the five-week video chat language exchange.

(5) A post questionnaire - completed by the participants to find opinions about:

    a) changes in comfort levels when speaking in English;

    b) use of technology to improve EFL oral communication;

    c) motivation in relation to the activity;

    d) opinions about the activity.

Below are the action research findings of each of the tools used and completed by the instructor.

5. Results and findings

5.1. Pre-questionnaire results

The pre-questionnaire results shown in Table 1 explain students' familiarity with the use of technology and the English language. This describes students' general use and knowledge of technology and English in their daily lives.

Table 1 Student use of technology and English

Questions / Answers	Yes	%	No	%	Total n	Total %
Previous use of video chat technology	14	82.35	3	17.64	17	100
Regular oral interaction with English in daily life	1	5.88	16	94.11	17	100
Motivating factor to speak to a native English speaker	17	100	0	0	17	100

5.2 Oral pretest and post test results

The pretest and post test results shown below in Figure 1 are of those who participated in the video chat. These results are based on the CEFR levels for A1 and show that all the students who participated in the program improved their oral communication skills over the five-week period. The students who had a lower level of English improved more than those whose level of English was A2 or higher. These students' English did not improve but stayed at the same level.
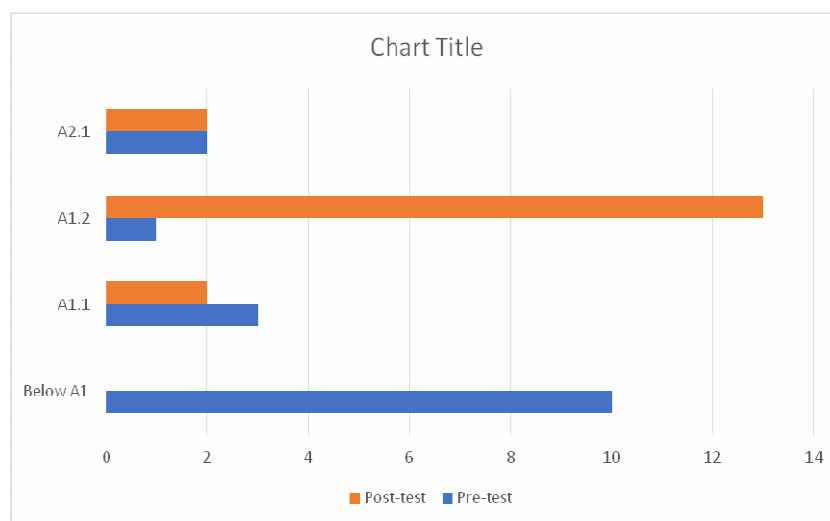

Figure 1. Pre and post test results

5.3. Informal meeting results

The informal meetings took place before the video chats began, about once a week during the activity and at the end of the five-week period. These meetings were utilized to discuss any opinions or thoughts the students had about the video chats. Below are the results of the discussions in the meetings. The participants' comments from discussions during the activity are included in the conclusion.

Table 2 shows that the participants were uncomfortable speaking in English before the video chat sessions. However, throughout their participation in the project, these students began to feel more comfortable speaking in English. At the end of the program most of the participants expressed their comfort levels in oral communication had increased. As they were exposed to native speakers from the United States, 6 students discussed various culture differences they found between Americans and Ecuadorians such as being on time, differences in school schedules and living arrangements.

Table 2. Students' opinions about language exchange video chat

Topics discussed	yes	%	No	%	Total n	Total %
Comfortable speaking in English at the beginning	2	11.76	15	88.23	17	100
Cultural differences	6	35.29	11	64.70	17	100
More comfortable speaking in English after experience	15	88.23	2	11.76	17	100

Throughout the video chat program various administrative and technological problems arose. Students discussed these problems with the instructor throughout the five-week program. The problems included internet connection, time management, assignment completion and student responsibility problems. The percentages of participants who encountered these issues are shown below in Table 3.

Table 3 Problems encountered by participants during the language exchange video chat

Problems during the five-week period	Yes	%	No	%	Total n	Total %
Technological problems	8	47.05	9	52.94	17	100
Did not meet weekly	5	29.41	12	70.58	17	100

Students found that technology sometimes impeded their abilities to meet with their partners on a regular basis. Some had internet connection problems, while others did not have

access to a computer or a cell phone at the allotted meeting time. Other students found the time change between Ecuador and California confusing and tried to meet at the wrong times. A reoccurring problem students found is that they could not meet weekly because their partner was not available at the allotted time.

5.4. Participants' opinions shared in the post questionnaire

As evidenced in Table 4 below, most students who participated in the video chat had very positive experiences, increased motivation and improved communication skills. It can also be seen that 15 students used WhatsApp to communicate with their partners who were in the United States. Two students did not benefit from the video chat experience, because they could never connect with their partners to complete the activity.

Table 4. Post-experience opinions about the video chat language exchange

Comments and student opinions	Yes	%	No	%	Total n	Total %
Use of WhatsApp video	15	88.23	2	11.77	17	100
Positive experience	15	88.23	2	11.77	17	100
Increased motivation	15	88.23	2	11.77	17	100
Improved communication skills	15	88.23	2	11.77	17	100

6. Discussion

The instructor of this group found that most of the participants lacked communication skills when using EFL. They were shy, did not speak fluently, had poor pronunciation and were ultimately uncomfortable speaking English in the classroom. When the teacher asked if they had access or any interaction with the English language outside of class, the majority answered they did not. They also did not feel that social oral interaction was a motivating factor to learn English, because none of the students used English in their daily lives. However, since these students were studying to become English teachers, they understood that oral communication was an important part of their teacher training formation and they were excited to participate in the authentic learning strategy provided by the professor.

Therefore, the researcher decided to use video chats with native speakers as an approach to aid in increasing regular interactions in English and motivating students to make English language learning a part of daily life. Students at first were reluctant to participate in the video chats since they did not feel they had sufficient levels of English to interact with native speakers, most being beginner language learners. These students voiced concerns of being shy

or unable to communicate sufficiently in English. However, after many initial meetings they found they could converse and interact in English at a level they did not think possible. Some students even connected with their language exchange partners at a personal level and made friends. Some students explained in the exit questionnaire that they were able to learn from their partner and vice versa. They also stated that they had created connections with English on a cultural level.

Others continued their weekly chats even after the activity concluded. Participants were surprised at how well they could interact, and many began to feel that gaining the sufficient levels of English would enable them to become an English language teacher in the future. This type of feedback validates the results found in this paper. Participants began with little or no authentic daily L1 interaction and later found motivation and rapid improvements using authentic materials provided by the EFL instructor.

The main drawbacks that were seen by the instructor was the inability to control the entire situation. Since this is an authentic interaction, there were two parties involved. The participants from the US sometimes cancelled or did not show up for their meetings. The participants in Ecuador sometimes did not have functioning internet connections. When this occurred, it resulted in unmotivated participants from UNAE and their counterparts. This was observed with two students who began the program but were unable to finish. They lacked motivation and were not able to improve communication skills since they were rarely or unable to connect with their partners for the reasons mentioned above. These students only met once and then their partner did not show up or the internet did not work properly. The instructor hopes that in the future there will be ways to overcome these issues, so every participant will benefit from the exchange to the same extent.

7. Conclusion

Students who participated weekly in the video chats were surprised at how much they could speak in English with their partners and the overall feedback from students was positive. The study can be used as an example of how Latin American EFL professors can utilize video chat and technology as a strategy that enables students to practice L2 in real-life situations when they are not available. This study also shows that having purposeful L2 interactions can motivate students to improve in oral communication and skills. It was seen that students began the course with little EFL knowledge and after five weeks were able to have a simple conversation and felt empowered by the experience in their language learning abilities. Others explained how they increased their comfort levels when speaking and now are not afraid to

speak in English with other people. This suggests that participants may have felt more intrinsically motivated to improve their communication skills and may have been more comfortable speaking in English after participating in the video chat.

Another aspect seen throughout the program was that if students or their partners did not commit to meeting regularly, a frustration among the students who made the effort was created. One student explained that they scheduled a meeting at three different times over the course of a week and their partner never connected. After this experience, they did not want to participate again. Another student explained that whenever they tried to connect on video chat with their US partners, the internet connection would not work. This is a technological problem that is unfortunately unavoidable in Ecuador. However, it still decreased student interest in the program. These are administrative and technical issues the instructors are attempting to fix for future replications of the activity.

The research mentioned has shown that most students were motivated to learn English and improved their oral EFL skills with confidence and fluidity after the activity. The students who regularly participated in the program became intrinsically motivated to interact with their US partners and therefore began to show more interest in English language learning. This increased their communication skills in English as they were given a situation where L2 was used authentically. As for the problems that arose, the instructors plan to find solutions in future replicas to solve the unmotivating administrative and technical problems that happened during the language exchange video chats.

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