LLT Journal, e-ISSN 2579-9533, p-ISSN 1410-7201, Vol. 28, No. 1, April 2025, pp. 20-36

LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching
http://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/LLT
Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

NEW INSIGHTS INTO PEER FEEDBACK IN VIRTUAL LANGUAGE EXCHANGES

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https://doi.org/10.24071/llt.v28i1.10642
received 6 December 2024; accepted 13 April 2025

Abstract

To foster the acquisition of English or Spanish as a foreign language, 26 undergraduate students took part in a synchronous virtual language exchange between Oxford College of Emory University (United States) and CETT Barcelona School of Tourism, Hospitality and Gastronomy (affiliated with the University of Barcelona, Spain). After each conversation, participants had to fill in a 5-item questionnaire and comment on their language partner's performance. Individual feedback was gathered by means of *Google Forms* and referred to overall oral performance, specific grammar and vocabulary errors, specific pronunciation errors, improvement suggestions for enhanced communication, and remarkable conversation features. To explore the main characteristics and components of peer feedback in this virtual context, the comments provided by the participants were analysed through content analysis and categorization using the qualitative data analysis software *QDA Miner Lite*. The results show that the participants made constructive recommendations and comments that supported the development of their communicative competences and intercultural skills. In practical terms, the specific strengths and weaknesses pointed out in the questionnaires can be used as formative indicators by students and instructors. This small-scale study aligns with previous research indicating that peer feedback as an integrated element in virtual language exchanges contributes to linguistic awareness and progress among undergraduate foreign language learners.

Keywords: communicative competence, foreign language acquisition, intercultural competence, online exchange, peer feedback

Introduction

Virtual exchanges have been recognized as especially beneficial for enabling students to interact with fellow students who are native speakers of the target language, thereby fostering the development of linguistic and intercultural competence (Al Khateeb & Hassan, 2022; Carr & Wicking, 2022; Ennis et al., 2021; Yeh & Heng, 2022). However, few empirical research works have been published focusing on how to improve participants' oral production in a foreign language in video-mediated exchanges. This article reports on a Spanish-English synchronous

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virtual language exchange held at a higher education institution in the United States and another one in Spain. We examined the types of feedback shared between US and Spanish students regarding their oral communicative performance, which is in line with prior research conducted by Iglesias and Tarazona (2022, 2023).

Our research objective was to explore the main characteristics of peer feedback provided by the students in the context of virtual language exchanges aiming at oral skill development since we identified a research gap in this specific area. The following research questions were formulated:

RQ1. What aspects related to linguistic competence did students focus on?
RQ2. What conversational aspects emerged?
RQ3. What communicative strategies did students employ?
RQ4. What feedback strategies did students use?
RQ5. What improvement suggestions did students offer?
RQ6. What non-linguistic benefits were perceived by students?

Language educators can benefit from the insights derived from this study to develop more effective language learning programs that include reflective, peer-led virtual exchanges in their teaching methods, enhancing learners' oral communication skills. Researchers in applied linguistics can also expand the understanding of peer feedback in oral contexts and use this study as a model for future investigations.

Virtual exchanges and peer feedback from a social constructivist perspective

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in educational initiatives that promote computer-assisted collaboration among students who are located in geographically diverse locations (Ennis et al., 2021; O'Dowd, 2018; Yeh & Heng, 2022). According to Ennis et al. (2021), the rise in this type of collaboration is linked to the commitment of many universities to promote global citizenship, which is reflected in their mission statements. It is the belief of numerous scholars and practitioners that providing students with virtual opportunities to collaborate with students from other institutions, often in different countries, can facilitate the development of their linguistic proficiency in a foreign language, as well as enhance their intercultural competence and digital literacies (Yeh & Heng, 2022).

O'Dowd, one of the leading scholars in computer-assisted collaboration, provides a thorough overview of the evolution of this phenomenon and discusses the different terminology that is employed to refer to this type of endeavor. What some authors label as "telecollaboration," is alternatively referred to as "eTandem," "teletandem," "online intercultural exchange," or "virtual exchange" (O'Dowd, 2018, p. 1). The term we favor, as identified by O'Dowd as currently gaining the most traction, is "virtual exchange." This term is used not only in language teaching environments but also in a range of other contexts that reap benefits from global cooperation. Yet, how do we define the term "virtual exchange"? O'Dowd proposes the following definition: "Virtual exchange involves the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programs and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators" (O'Dowd, 2018, p. 4). In this learning setting, which can be

conducted synchronously or asynchronously, teachers' and students' roles are altered, as teachers become facilitators of these collaborative experiences and students take charge of their own learning. Following Vygotskyan and Piagetian constructivist theories, learners play an active role in knowledge construction through interaction, collaboration, and context (Jonassen, 2003; Tam, 2000). Therefore, social constructivism can be regarded as an underlying framework for virtual exchange experiences.

One way to enhance language competence in virtual exchanges is by means of peer feedback. Corrective feedback has been traditionally regarded as "an indication to a learner that his or her use of the target language is incorrect" (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 216). However, as other authors point out, feedback should not be reduced to error correction but should also include the positive aspects of communication to avoid discomfort and increase motivation (Aranha & Cavalari, 2015; Chang, 2012; Thurlings, Vermeulen, Bastiaens & Stijnen, 2013).

Peer feedback also aligns with social constructivist principles (Hyland & Hyland, 2019; Payant & Zuniga, 2022; Price, O'Donovan & Rust, 2007; Thurlings et al., 2013) and some authors emphasize the benefits of the integration of teacher, peer, and self-feedback in language acquisition (Fukuda, Lander & Pope, 2024; Iglesias, 2013; Patri, 2002). Hyland and Hyland (2019) highlight the advantages of peer feedback and claim that it promotes linguistic and social skills, as well as students' self-regulation and autonomous learning. Peer feedback focusing on written texts stands out as the dominant research topic (e.g., Al Khateeb & Hassan, 2022; Allen & Mills, 2016; Aranha & Cavalari, 2015; Chang, 2012; Ennis et al., 2021; Iswandari & Jiang, 2020; Payant & Zuniga, 2022; Vo & Nguyen, 2023; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008; Zhang, Song, Shen & Huang, 2014). In contrast, oral communication appears to have received considerably less attention. While research on this subject is relatively limited, some studies point to the value of peer feedback in enhancing oral skills within virtual language exchanges (Iglesias & Tarazona, 2022, 2023) and in oral tasks within second language instruction, such as oral presentations (Ahangari, Rassekh-Alqol & Hamed, 2013; Cheng & Warren, 2005; Patri, 2002).

Peer feedback in virtual exchanges

With respect to peer feedback in telecollaborative projects, most researchers agree that students' engagement is boosted. In this context, Payant and Zuniga (2022) have reported positive perceptions of flow associated with student involvement and focus, particularly when sharing synchronous feedback on a task. While asynchronous feedback has occasionally been associated with a lower degree of engagement (Chang, 2012), this stance is contested by Carr and Wicking (2022), who state that the sense of novelty plays a fundamental role also in terms of asynchronous feedback in international virtual exchanges. On the other hand, even though synchronous peer feedback seems to generate fewer error corrections (Carr & Wicking, 2022), an excessively prescriptive approach towards errors may hinder the rich potential of mistakes as valuable learning opportunities (Aranha & Cavalari, 2015). Therefore, combining various peer feedback modalities may be the most effective way to benefit from online exchanges (Aranha & Cavalari, 2015; Carr & Wicking, 2022; Chang, 2012; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008)

Allen and Mills (2016) advocate for pairing students with similar knowledge of the task topics and parallel proficiency levels of their target languages. Additionally, when students are given the chance to provide feedback in their native language, they appear to be more willing and confident in offering feedback to their language partners (Iglesias & Tarazona, 2022). Yet, students need prior training, guidelines, and modelling on how to provide peer feedback (Chang, 2012; Vo & Nguyen, 2023; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008; Zhang et al., 2014). In the research conducted by Ware and O'Dowd (2008), the participants were instructed to offer feedback by differentiating local errors -i.e., minor mistakes made when focusing on fluency, such as omitted articles, misspellings, or occasionally incorrect verb tenses- from global errors -i.e., sentences or phrases that sound unnatural to native speakers. This could be done by highlighting up to two types of mistakes in their partners' written texts using a different font, giving examples for vocabulary or grammar rules, asking for clarification, reformulating sentences, and offering explanations for grammar patterns. Ware and O'Dowd (2008) found that students' feedback was more directed towards morphosyntax than lexis, and this fact was attributed to several factors, including the time and resources available to students, the possible false perception that vocabulary should not be included in their feedback, and the advanced level of proficiency in the target language exhibited by the students (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008).

According to Chang (2012), learners should be encouraged to use communication strategies to avoid misunderstandings. This author recommends synchronous negotiation of text content and organization in collaborative online writing, followed by asynchronous peer review of local mistakes by means of word processing software to track changes. Aranha and Cavalari (2015) make a distinction between direct and indirect feedback strategies used by the participants in their study to provide explicit corrections or just indicate problems in their peers' texts through the *Track Changes* tool. In their analyses, these authors also distinguish between focus on form and focus on content and conclude that the peer feedback that they examined was mainly explicit and dealt with verbs, prepositions, gender, number concordance, vocabulary accuracy, stress, and spelling. In Allen and Mills' study (2016), most feedback suggestions were related to subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, plurals, and text mechanics and formatting. Zhang et al. (2014) reported that the peer revision in their investigation covered non-linguistic elements like text organization, coherence, and unity. Al Khateeb and Hassan (2022) noticed instead that their respondents prioritized intercultural aspects rather than syntax and lexis in their peer feedback, with participants expressing their feelings. This outcome converges with the view that virtual language exchanges can also foster critical thinking and personal relationships (Zhang et al., 2014).

As for feedback on oral performance, Cheng and Warren (2005) concluded that oral language proficiency was mostly linked to fluency in their study. In their analysis of peer feedback in an oral asynchronous Spanish-English language exchange, Iglesias and Tarazona (2022) discovered that students primarily focused their feedback on grammar and vocabulary, followed by textual and phonetic aspects. However, they observed a significant divergence in the type of feedback provided by the two groups. Spanish students tended to prioritize form and error correction, while US students shared more comments related to content. The authors attributed this disparity in findings to the difference in target language

proficiency levels. The US students were enrolled in an elementary Spanish course, indicating a lower command of the language, whereas their counterparts were taking an upper-intermediate English course.

As mentioned earlier, peer feedback has primarily centered around the study of written project collaborations (Iglesias & Tarazona, 2022). Thus, the present study aims to build upon the existing research on telecollaboration and provide further insight into the types of feedback provided in synchronous oral Spanish-English virtual exchanges, an area that has received limited attention.

Method

Foreign language professors at Oxford College of Emory University (United States) and CETT Barcelona School of Tourism, Hospitality organized a Spanish-English synchronous virtual language exchange and Gastronomy (affiliated with the University of Barcelona, Spain). In this language exchange, 13 undergraduate Oxford learners of Spanish maintained five 30-minute conversations with 13 vocational CETT learners of English over a three-month timespan. The participants were between 18 and 22 years old. At Oxford College, nine students took an intermediate Spanish course, and the rest were enrolled in elementary Spanish, while all the students from CETT had an intermediate level of English.

The language exchange utilized Zoom as a platform and assigned Oxford students the responsibility of setting up, recording, and sharing the meetings with their instructor. This way, evidence for each interaction was provided, and both participation and compliance with the instructions were monitored. Each session was divided into a 15-minute conversation in Spanish and another 15-minute conversation in English. Once Oxford students submitted a *Google Form* with their contact details, interests, and availability, CETT students used that information to select their language partners, resulting in the formation of 13 language pairs. All participants received academic credit for this activity, but it was only mandatory for the intermediate-Spanish students from Oxford. For the remaining participants, the activity was voluntary and considered an extracurricular experience.

The conversation sessions had a set of suggested questions proposed by the instructors covering these five topics in chronological order: family, traditions and customs, food, travel and holidays, and entertainment. However, participants were also encouraged to develop their own to explore personal and mutual interests in order to promote their autonomy and motivation. Moreover, we instructed students not to mix languages in their conversation sessions and to offer each other feedback, and we informed them that the collected data would be used for investigation purposes and would remain anonymous. All students gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study.

All participants (N=26) in the virtual language exchange were required to comment on each other's performance after each conversation by filling in a *Google Form*. The form could be accessed through a link shared by each professor and included the following sections:

1. Short introduction asking students to give individual feedback for each session and appreciating their collaboration. The questionnaire was written in English, and students were encouraged to write their comments in their preferred language, Spanish or English.

2. Identification of feedback provider, their educational institution, feedback receiver, and specific conversation topic.
3. Five open-ended feedback questions, namely:
   3.1. How did your partner do overall? Please consider fluency, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.
   3.2. Point out a specific grammar/vocabulary error.
   3.3. Point out a specific pronunciation error.
   3.4. Make a suggestion to help your partner improve their communication.
   3.5. Write down what you liked the best about this conversation.

By the end of the language exchange experience, 59 questionnaires were collected out of an expected total of 130, so the response rate was 45.4%. Following a qualitative approach aligned with similar previous descriptive studies (Iglesias & Tarazona, 2022), respondents' comments were examined by means of content analysis and categorization. The qualitative data analysis software QDA Miner Lite was used to replicate the procedure portrayed by Culubret, González, Iglesias, Moreno, and Roigé (2022).

After an initial inspection of the data corpus, a taxonomy of aspects mentioned in respondents' comments was created. The taxonomy was comprised of four categories, broken down into subcategories, and was structured in three levels. Table 1 illustrates the first two levels, whereas the third level is shown in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 in the results section to report on the fine-grained analysis.

Table 1. Taxonomy of respondents' comments

Category	Subcategories
A. Linguistic competence	A1. Grammar and vocabulary
	A2. Pronunciation and fluency
B. Interaction	B1. Conversational aspects
	B2. Communicative strategies
C. Feedback	C1. Strategies
	C2. Suggestions
D. Other benefits	D1. Intercultural skills
	D2. Interpersonal skills
	D3. Topic-related knowledge

Respondents' comments were expressed through a single word or a few sentences. Sometimes one language-related episode (LRE) was classified into different categories. For example, when remarking on the mispronunciation of a word, several students broke the word down into syllables while trying to emulate their phonetic transcription. Such comments were included in both Subcategory A2 (Pronunciation and fluency) and C1 (Feedback strategies).

The next section shows metrics for each subcategory (code) from various perspectives:

1. Number of LREs of every category aspect (count), taking into account that each respondent may have mentioned the same aspect more than once in a given questionnaire, for instance in relation to a specific inaccuracy and when making improvement suggestions.

2. Relative frequencies of LREs within every category (% codes).
3. Number of respondents who commented on each aspect (cases).
4. Percentage of respondents who commented on each aspect out of the total number of 59 questionnaires (% cases).

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Despite the fact that the same number of undergraduate students from each educational institution took part in this language exchange, their involvement in feedback provision was significantly unbalanced: the response rate from Oxford was 74.6% in contrast to a response rate of 25.4% from CETT. On the other hand, only one student from Oxford and four students from CETT received five feedback questionnaires for all of the conversations, while five students from Oxford and two students from CETT did not receive any. Feedback questionnaires were unevenly related to the different conversation topics, namely entertainment (28.8%), travel and holidays (20.3%), food (16.9%), traditions and customs (16.9%), and family (16.9%).

With respect to Category A (Linguistic competence), respondents focused slightly more on grammar and vocabulary (54.7%) than on pronunciation and fluency (45.3%). While global accuracy and a wide range of vocabulary were positively highlighted, the rest of the grammatical and lexical aspects referred to linguistic weaknesses. Some of them were linked to a common difficulty for speakers of a given first language (L1) when acquiring a specific target language (TL) structure, such as the challenges usually experienced by English speakers with noun gender in Spanish, as well as their problems with article-noun agreement (e.g. “el comida” instead of “la comida”, or “los mujeres” instead of “las mujeres”) and subject-verb agreement (e.g. “yo hace”). Conversely, time references, dates, and expressing age in English were an obstacle for native Spanish speakers (e.g. “you have … years” as opposed to “you are … years old”). Respondents provided examples of specific errors made during their conversations, such as confusing past and present tenses (e.g. “says” and “said”), meal types (e.g. “dinner” and “lunch”), and false friends (e.g. “largo” and “grande”).

Global fluency and accurate pronunciation were underscored. However, the majority of the comments in this subcategory pointed out occasional disfluency or mispronunciations, particularly in regard to specific words or phonemes. Figure 1 depicts a detailed account of all these aspects.

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
Grammar and vocabulary				
Wide repertoire and/or accurate globally	20	12,6%	17	28,8%
Awkward phrasing	7	4,4%	5	8,5%
Incorrect verb tenses	6	3,8%	4	6,8%
Incorrect grammatical agreement	11	6,9%	5	8,5%
Problems with articles	3	1,9%	3	5,1%
Problems with time reference	4	2,5%	3	5,1%
Problems with noun gender	5	3,1%	5	8,5%
Incorrect word order	1	0,6%	1	1,7%
Incorrect word choice	9	5,7%	8	13,6%
Limited vocabulary range	11	6,9%	9	15,3%
Problems with topic-related vocabulary	10	6,3%	8	13,6%
Pronunciation and fluency				
Correct pronunciation and/or fluent globally	23	14,5%	19	32,2%
Excessive pausing and/or lack of fluency	9	5,7%	8	13,6%
Unclear pronunciation	5	3,1%	4	6,8%
Wrong word stress	3	1,9%	3	5,1%
Problems with a specific phoneme or word	28	17,6%	24	40,7%
Noticeably accented and/or interference from L1	4	2,5%	4	6,8%

Figure 1. Results for category A: Linguistic competence

As for Category B (Interaction), an array of conversational aspects emerged mostly in positive terms, with the exception of misunderstandings hindering effective communication. The vast majority of the respondents referred to their partners' overall performance, which was perceived as satisfactory by nearly everybody. Negative comments on their partners' attitudes and behaviours were inexistent since respondents considered that their interlocutors had been friendly, kind, and/or patient. Students reported that they had enjoyed the topics and flow of their conversations, and instead of feeling awkward, some stated that they engaged in interesting discussions, shared interests, joked, laughed, and had fun. Cross-cultural aspects were another recurrent feature which will be described in more depth in Figure 4. Furthermore, students indicated that their partners resorted to several communicative strategies, like using their L1 or searching for the translation of words, among other resources shown in Figure 2.

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
Conversational aspects				
Conversation flow and/or ease	26	12,1%	23	39,0%
Interlocutors' ability to comprehend	15	7,0%	13	22,0%
Interlocutors' ability to respond	2	0,9%	2	3,4%
Partner's overall performance	63	29,3%	52	88,1%
Partner's attitude	18	8,4%	16	27,1%
Topic engagement	32	14,9%	32	54,2%
Cross-cultural features	26	12,1%	22	37,3%
Misunderstandings	9	4,2%	8	13,6%
Communicative strategies				
Used L1	7	3,3%	6	10,2%
Used dictionary and/or automatic translation	4	1,9%	4	6,8%
Used images	2	0,9%	2	3,4%
Requested help	2	0,9%	2	3,4%
Offered help	4	1,9%	4	6,8%
Repeated questions	1	0,5%	1	1,7%
Wrote down questions	1	0,5%	1	1,7%
Self-corrected	1	0,5%	1	1,7%
Used fillers during pauses	2	0,9%	2	3,4%

Figure 2. Results for category B: Interaction

In regard to Category C (Feedback), as their virtual exchange progressed, respondents assured that their partners' communicative competence had improved with respect to previous conversations and acknowledged the intrinsic complexities of the TL. Respondents also employed a number of strategies to comment on linguistic inaccuracy. They enumerated specific mistakes and provided the correct form, not only in grammatical and lexical terms (e.g. "public transportation instead of transportation public" and "listen to instead of hear songs"), but also phonetically (e.g. "psychology pronounced like si-cology not see-cology"). To a minor extent, they compared similar phonemes and tried to convey accurate enunciations by writing out words syllable by syllable (e.g. "the 'ch' in Chicago sounds like 'sh', so the pronunciation would sound like shi-cah-go"). The linguistic feedback in this section was provided in either concise expressions, longer explanations highlighting the error and its correction, or general comments. Below are some literal examples provided by Oxford (OX) and CETT (CETT) learners during their conversations (C).

> OX12.C4. "How much does it cost (not how it cost or how much cost)."
> OX11.C3. "The one point of confusion I remember is when he said do you 'meet your relatives' rather than 'do you visit with' or 'get together with your relatives'."
> OX7.C4. "Some specific grammar errors include when she said relax ambiente. She probably wanted to say relaxing environment but said half in English and half in Spanish. I could comprehend her nonetheless"
> OX7.C3. "I think that for both of us, we sometimes forget how to translate certain words into a different language. We then had to search the words up or show the picture to each other to fully comprehend what we are trying to get at."
> OX2.C2. "We both learned about the verb 'To sting'/'a picar'."
> OX3.C3. "She mispronounced the word vegetables. To make it easier to pronounce she can break it down to (veg-ta-bulls)."
> CETT4.C1. "She said 'Soy indio' to refer to herself, it would be 'Soy india' in femenin."

Improvement suggestions were also offered. Practice was considered fundamental, particularly as regards listening and speaking. Respondents recommended that they should continue interacting to get to know each other better, engage in natural conversational exchanges, and have more feedback opportunities. Among other suggestions, they urged their partners to ask them questions to find out unknown words or to clarify misunderstandings, as well as to speak more slowly to unjumble words or to avoid getting stuck. Peer students were also encouraged to watch TV shows and movies, or to listen to songs, news, and podcasts. Some respondents believed that conversational language and common vocabulary needed to be acquired too, for instance, by switching the default language of electronic devices to the TL. Figure 3 displays the feedback strategies and recommendations encompassed in this category.

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
Strategies				
Acknowledged improvement and/or learning difficulty	20	15,3%	15	25,4%
Attempted to provide a phonetic transcription	7	5,3%	7	11,9%
Showed contrast between correct and incorrect forms	25	19,1%	22	37,3%
Broke down words into syllables	3	2,3%	3	5,1%
Compared with a similar phoneme	5	3,8%	5	8,5%
Described proper tongue position	1	0,8%	1	1,7%
Suggestions				
Practice more	24	18,3%	24	40,7%
Listen to input in TL	13	9,9%	12	20,3%
Read texts in TL	2	1,5%	2	3,4%
Speak more slowly and/or clearly	7	5,3%	6	10,2%
Enunciate difficult words syllable by syllable	1	0,8%	1	1,7%
Learn and use new everyday vocabulary	6	4,6%	6	10,2%
Find out specific topic-related vocabulary	2	1,5%	2	3,4%
Focus on grammar and/or pronunciation accuracy	5	3,8%	5	8,5%
Paraphrase and/or try different word arrangements	3	2,3%	3	5,1%
Think in TL instead of translating from L1	3	2,3%	3	5,1%
Request assistance from interlocutor	3	2,3%	3	5,1%
Become familiar with the TL culture	1	0,8%	1	1,7%

Figure 3. Results for category C: Feedback

Finally, concerning Category D (Other benefits), in addition to the above-mentioned linguistic gains, the participants' intercultural competence was reported to have developed (32.8%). Becoming familiar with their interlocutors' culture and talking about their own contributed to raising their cross-cultural awareness.

This virtual exchange was also an opportunity to experience openness, diversity, negotiation, active listening, empathizing with others, and building relationships. Therefore, the interpersonal competences of the students who took part in it were also enhanced (53%), since they got to know each other and their viewpoints. Several affirmed that they had created strong connections (e.g. "it was always so funny and cool! she is great! I hope to meet her on person one day").

The conversation topics enabled the participants to relate to each other, for example when sharing information about their countries and traditions, similar and opposing gastronomic likes and dislikes, family environments, childhood memories, educational background, holiday experiences, personal habits and expectations, hobbies, and entertainment (e.g. videogames and anime). In this vein, some respondents mentioned that during their virtual meetings they had learned new facts related to their topics for discussion. Below are some literal response samples and Figure 4 illustrates all these non-linguistic outcomes.

> OX1.C2. "I enjoyed learning about her culture in Cataluña and I enjoyed telling her about some of my favorite traditions!"
> OX4.C3. "I liked learning about Spanish culture and more specifically, the concept of La Merienda, a meal typically consumed in between lunch and dinner where breakfast foods are served."
> OX7.C3. "I love learning about the sociopolitical situation in Spain, especially how the gas and food prices have gone up due to the economic sanctions imposed on Russia. I would enjoy sharing my favorite foods/cuisines with her."
> OX7.C4. "I loved when we talked about our vacation plans, the location, the company, and the preferences. I got to know her a lot more while sharing my interests."
> OX4.C5. "I liked that we got along really well and the conversation did not feel awkward but I would say I enjoyed learning about Spanish Christmas traditions."

OX3.C2. "Something I liked about this conversation is that I was able to find similarities between my culture and Monica's culture."
OX11.C2. "I enjoyed learning about Spanish culture and traditions, and comparing them to the traditions we have in the US. It is cool to hear about a country that has a more extensive history and culture than the US, which is a relatively young country."

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
Intercultural skills				
Learned about TL culture	24	20,2%	21	35,6%
Shared own's cultural background	15	12,6%	14	23,7%
Interpersonal skills				
Exchanged points of view	17	14,3%	17	28,8%
Learned about partner's life and background	27	22,7%	26	44,1%
Developed a personal bond	19	16,0%	19	32,2%
Topic-related knowledge				
Learned about specific conversation topics	17	14,3%	16	27,1%

Figure 4. Results for category D: Other benefits

Discussion

The unbalanced peer feedback provided by students from the participating institutions converges with findings reported in previous research (Ennis et al., 2021). At least three factors may account for the low response rate and disparity in students' involvement. The first one is the fact that the language exchange was fully integrated into their Spanish course for most US students and offered as extra credit to the rest of the US students, while it was an elective activity for all the Spanish students among many other continuous assessment tasks. The second factor that may have influenced the low response rate is that students were expected to complete their feedback questionnaires after engaging in each synchronous conversation. Since completing the questionnaires was a separate task, it is understandable that students might have forgotten about it unless they received an immediate reminder. This lower engagement in an asynchronous task is consistent with evidence gathered by Chang (2012). Furthermore, a third contributing factor may have been the language in which the questionnaire was designed. Although the instructions encouraged students to answer the questions in their preferred language, the fact that the questions were formulated in English probably prompted students to respond in the same language, which may have been daunting for students with lower English proficiency.

When providing peer feedback on linguistic competence, our students adopted a mixed approach, in accordance with the results reported by Iglesias and Tarazona (2022). Positive comments on global language accuracy and range were combined with an error correction perspective. Our students mainly identified problems with morphosyntax and lexis in line with Iglesias and Tarazona (2022). This contrasts with the findings of Ware and O'Dowd (2008), where feedback on vocabulary was secondary. Furthermore, our students distinguished between global and local linguistic problems aligning with other research projects (Chang, 2012; Ware & O'Dowd; 2008). They tended to provide direct feedback, as illustrated by other researchers (Aranha & Cavalari, 2015; Carr & Wicking, 2022), and their focus on form prioritized aspects already pointed out in previous investigations, such as verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, articles, and gender (Allen & Mills, 2016;

Aranha & Cavalari, 2015). However, our students did not seem to pay attention to text organization, a feature highlighted by Chang (2012) and Zhang et al. (2014). As expected, other specific characteristics of written communication pinpointed by some authors, namely formatting (Allen & Mills, 2016) and spelling (Aranha & Cavalari, 2015), were completely ignored by our respondents. Instead, fluency took the spotlight in alignment with other previous studies (Cheng & Warren, 2005), so it can be claimed that fluency is perceived as fundamental in oral competence. In the wake of Iglesias and Tarazona (2022), our study offers new evidence showing that specific pronunciation issues were relevant for our students, with a special emphasis on mispronounced phonemes, whereas suprasegmental features (i.e. prosodic features like intonation, sentence stress, and rhythm) were mostly disregarded.

The fact that students' peer feedback did not focus on prosody probably reflects how oral skills are developed in educational contexts as a result of prescriptive pedagogical orientations that neglect sentence phonetics. Following Iglesias (2013), instructors should take into account the idiosyncratic nature of communicative oral competence and incorporate a focus on prosody in teaching-learning-assessment processes. Therefore, students should not only undertake tasks which draw their attention exclusively towards sound-units (i.e. phonemes) and their contextualized pronunciation (i.e. allophones) but also work on all aspects of phonological competence. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, phonological competence entails the ability to perceive and produce sound-units and their distinctive features, as well as the phonetic composition of words, sentence phonetics, and phonetic reduction (Council of Europe, 2001).

Concerning conversational aspects, the profusion of cross-cultural references in our students' comments coincides with Al Khateeb and Hassan's findings (2022). On the other hand, our students experienced flow, as in Payant and Zuniga (2022), and they mostly referred to their peers' attitudes and overall performance in positive terms, aligning with Aranha and Cavalari (2015). As recommended by Chang (2012), our students used communicative strategies in their meetings. Some of them also resorted to dictionaries, like the students in Carr and Wicking's study (2022). Nevertheless, other new discoveries have been brought to light in our study, such as the participants' use of images as communicative resources, their comments on their interlocutors' comprehension during their interaction, and their interest in the conversation topics. This last aspect could be the subject of close scrutiny to find out if the increasing number of collected peer feedback questionnaires correlated with topic engagement or if other variables came into play, like more familiarity with the peers or the task over time. Considering the potential implications, conversation topics should be strategically designed and scheduled.

To the best of our knowledge, several detailed feedback strategies and suggestions on pronunciation offered by our students are an unprecedented contribution in this research area since they are specifically related to oral communication. Other recommendations made by our students transcend oral skill development, such as advocating for more practice, enhanced exposure to input in the target language, or the acquisition of new vocabulary. They can be considered reminders of prompts that learners may have already received from their instructors, but they are not usually expressed explicitly in other studies, with the exception of

reformulating and showing the contrast between correct and incorrect forms, also mentioned by Ware and O'Dowd (2008). Some feedback strategies reported by other researchers, like highlighting inaccuracies with a different font type or using the *Track Changes* tool to indicate errors (Aranha & Cavalari, 2015; Chang, 2012), can only refer to written text revision and did not take place in our project. Conversely, the indications provided by Ware and O'Dowd (2008) concerning selective feedback deserve special attention and seem particularly useful as they can be applied to any type of virtual language exchange.

Beyond linguistic gains, students' comments on how cross-cultural awareness was raised match prior research findings (Carr & Wicking, 2022; Ennis et al., 2021; Yeh & Heng, 2022), particularly in terms of becoming familiar with their peers' cultures (Iglesias & Tarazona, 2023) while also sharing information on their own (Al Khateeb & Hassan, 2022). Likewise, the interpersonal nature of this exchange also enabled the participants to share their own perspectives (Al Khateeb & Hassan, 2022), discover new personal backgrounds (Iglesias & Tarazona, 2023), and create personal relationships (Zhang et al., 2014). This can have valuable implications in fostering intercultural understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity beyond stereotypes (Al Khateeb & Hassan, 2022), as well as facilitating the development of social skills (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). As for other non-linguistic benefits, unlike other research outcomes, no comments were made indicating the promotion of students' critical thinking (Zhang et al., 2014) and autonomy (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). A distinctive outcome in our study is the evidence of students gaining new knowledge on their conversation topics.

Valuable insights can be gained from this research and employed in future iterations. To start with, the success of a virtual exchange is greatly aided by its integration into the language curriculum for all participating institutions, as emphasized by Castillo-Scott (2015). While a full integration may not always be feasible, it is recommended to strive to incorporate language exchanges into the curriculum and reward all the students with significant academic credit. Another valuable lesson learned is to better incorporate peer feedback into the synchronous interactions to maximize benefits more effectively, possibly as a mandatory task that students can complete together by the end of their sessions. This approach, supported by other authors (Aranha & Cavalari, 2015; Carr & Wicking, 2022), endorses Chang's claim (2012) that the quantity and the quality of peer feedback are affected by how and when it is provided.

Differences in learners' target language proficiency should be minimized (Allen & Mills, 2016) and students should be paired with peers with similar interests whenever possible to foster an engaging and relatable language exchange environment. In addition, the participants ought to complete their feedback questionnaires in their native language to make the task more approachable for all learners, as indicated by Iglesias and Tarazona (2022). Yet, having a feedback tool is not enough in itself. We concur with the recommendation that all language exchange participants should receive some peer feedback training in advance (Chang, 2012; Vo & Nguyen, 2023; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008), both in terms of what to focus on and how to articulate useful comments in a respectful way. In line with Zhang et al. (2014), specific orientations and examples could be offered in a preliminary session taking advantage of the novelty associated with a virtual exchange, which has been correlated with a high rate of engagement (Carr &

Wicking, 2022). Students' perspectives should be broadened beyond error correction (Aranha & Cavalari, 2015; Chang, 2012; Thurlings et al., 2013), and direct and indirect feedback should be offered (Aranha & Cavalari, 2015) so that learners can have both explicit corrections and orientation guidelines for autonomous self-improvement. The feedback strategies described by Ware & O'Dowd (2008) should be incorporated to highlight selected mistakes according to the participants' profile and target, provide intelligible explanations, and illustrate them clearly. Finding the most convenient method to cover all these aspects may be a challenge but may provide new venues for further research.

Despite the small sample size of feedback data collected, it is important to highlight that the majority of students successfully completed the main component of their language exchange project, which involved engaging in five 30-minute conversations with their language partners. Those conversations, many of which were shared as video files, contain a wealth of data including oral feedback exchanged between students during each synchronous exchange encounter. Thus, one potential avenue of research which could yield highly valuable findings would be to transcribe the conversations and analyse the spontaneous types of feedback provided by students while negotiating meaning. Additionally, and given the learning reap underscored by Iglesias (2013), it would also be beneficial to incorporate further self-assessment into future language exchanges. Allowing students to ponder on their oral language performance in addition to reflecting on the intercultural value of their conversations would deepen their awareness of both their linguistic strengths and weaknesses, as well as promote their sense of autonomy and empowerment in their learning process. One step further would be to incorporate formative teacher, peer and self-assessment, as suggested in previous studies (Iglesias, 2013). Watching the recorded conversations could thus be turned into an opportunity for self-reflection and for more detailed peer and teacher feedback. Finally, forthcoming investigations on peer feedback in language teletandems following qualitative approaches could delve into participants' beliefs and views by keeping learners and/or researchers' diaries throughout the experience, while any long-lasting effects could be analysed longitudinally through in depth-interviews or focus groups.

Conclusion

This small-scale study contributes to the growing research on virtual language exchanges and offers new insights specifically into the nature of peer feedback on oral communication between English and Spanish learners, an area that has not received as much attention as written communication. The study of delayed peer feedback given by means of retrospective questionnaires is a significant contribution in terms of promoting learners' awareness. Our findings suggest that students appreciate the opportunity to engage with native speakers of their target language, not only to enhance their oral language skills, but also to develop their intercultural competence, broaden their perspectives, and expand their personal relationships. Students also demonstrated a genuine desire to support each other through their feedback exchanges. Linguistic errors were pointed out in a constructive and respectful manner, and some students even took the initiative to offer detailed explanations for greater assistance. Moreover, students made efforts to empathize with their partners and offered ideas to further develop their language

skills. In spite of its challenges, the data confirm that this type of language exchange has a positive impact on foreign language learning and should be considered a potential mainstay in foreign language courses.

Following students' suggestions, practical recommendations for language learners entail maximized exposure and practice of the target language. In addition, they should become aware of the need to pay attention to all aspects of phonological competence, including prosody. Another fundamental aspect learners must consciously integrate in their acquisition process is frequent meta-reflection on their linguistic and intercultural competences.

Concerning practical implications for educators, language exchange activities incentivized with academic credit should be included in the curriculum to enhance participation and a higher response rate. Students should be matched according to shared interests and language proficiency, and conversation themes should be planned thoughtfully. Peer feedback should be incorporated in each virtual meeting as a mandatory task that students could complete in their native language. Prior training on how to give effective peer feedback should be offered to students with specific guidelines and sample responses. Furthermore, students' perspectives should be broadened beyond error correction by encouraging both direct and indirect feedback, underlining selected mistakes with clear explanations and examples.

One of the most evident limitations of this study was the restricted feedback dataset. As indicated earlier, we received less than half of all expected feedback questionnaires, and most of them were submitted by US students. On the other hand, data were collected over a very limited period of time, and no subsequent follow-up instruments were designed to research the scope of the positive impact of this language exchange on the participants beyond its termination. In-depth interviews could be conducted in the future to clarify learners' responses on the *Google Form*s. Further explorations could also aim at replying to the following research questions: What types of feedback did students provide while negotiating meaning during their conversations? Since more feedback questionnaires were produced in relation to the last two conversation sessions, what specific aspects influenced this phenomenon? What were learners' perceptions regarding their own second language acquisition? How did their instructors evaluate this virtual language experience? Could the effects be noticeable over time?

Reflecting on the successes and challenges identified in this present study, it is essential to continue exploring new strategies for the continued enhancement of online exchanges that foster oral communication. Peer feedback is a valuable tool for enriching students' language learning experience and should be part of telecollaborative projects. By building upon the lessons learned in previous experiences with this methodology, instructors can further promote students' linguistic and intercultural development.

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