

Foreign language learning experiences from future ESL language teachers: How online language learning affects peer interaction and cooperative learning

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Abstract

Education has suffered from drastic changes due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic. This investigation is a self-research study conducted by three foreign language students. The purpose of this research is to investigate how the new online learning modality affected language learning. This research focuses on cooperative learning and peer interaction in an online setting. This self-study research project will present the results of the longitudinal study carried out over eight months by students in a BA in English language teaching at the University of Guanajuato. The students were enrolled in foreign language learning classes, and data were collected in a Sway portfolio, using reflective journal entries and visual evidence. The data analysis presents qualitative results showing that online learning has negative effects on peer interaction, such as the feeling of loneliness and isolation. The results allowed us to obtain a major awareness about online learning and its challenges, as well as to reflect about the importance of peer interaction in language learning.

Keywords: self-study, online learning, synchronous, asynchronous, cooperative learning, peer interaction, peer scaffolding.

Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic emergency, education had to be modified to be delivered online during the last two years. This new modality brought some factors affecting learning, such as the way learners interact and collaborate online. This paper will focus on the effect of online learning on peer interaction and cooperative learning.

The purpose of this investigation is to explore through self-study research how online learning affects those elements. This self-study research was carried out by three participants studying three different foreign languages, French, Italian, and Japanese, for eight months. It is worth mentioning that the participants are undergraduate students in a BA in English language teaching, and for this reason, this research offers a broader perspective about the language teaching and language learning experience.

The research allowed each one of the participants to identify specific aspects of their learning process through the analysis of qualitative data. Each participant analyzed what they found relevant and significant in their classes. In the data, each participant shared their thoughts regarding the classes, how they felt in them, and even added comments from a teacher's perspective. Still, the common topics among the participants were online learning and its effect on the interaction between peers. The data of those topics will be presented as results

Literature review
Online learning

. The need for a rapid adaptation of the traditional education system into online schooling was caused by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic emergency. The article Online university teaching during and after the Covid-19 crisis: Refocusing teacher presence and learning activity, by Rapanta et al. (2020), explores this situation. They state that "in the Covid-19 emergency situation, educators have, almost overnight, been asked to become both designers and tutors, using tools which few have fluently mastered" (p. 926). Some examples of this situation were observed throughout this study. For instance, the participants witnessed the change from face-to-face lessons to the sudden online adjustment. They experienced how peer interaction and cooperative learning changed noticeably in this online

modality. These two components are closely linked to the affective factors necessary to facilitate language learning. Du (2009) mentions that besides some objective factors, “there are also some affective factors in language learning that are like a filter which filtrates the amount of input in learners’ brains. People with high affective filters will lower their intake, whereas people with low affective filters allow more input into their language acquisition device” (p.162).

Synchronous classes

Every participant had diverse online learning circumstances due to the type of online setting selected by the institution or the language teacher. Between the three participants, the most common context was the synchronous type. Synchronous learning uses simultaneous student-teacher presence to facilitate “face-to-face” interaction to provide immediate feedback and answers to the students (Perveen, 2016). For these classes, the teachers used a variety of platforms to communicate via video calls with the students, no matter the language they took.

Asynchronous classes

Additionally, as part of the learning process, in their respective language course, each participant used different platforms and apps to accomplish the asynchronous classes or activities programmed. In the case of these asynchronous sessions, there is flexibility for students to complete the activities even if they are not online at the same time (Hrastinski, 2008). Students are responsible for completing the work, contributing to the forums, platforms, and accomplishing the tasks assigned by the teacher. Diverse methods to promote language exposure also fit into those asynchronous activities. The participants spent time listening to music or watching movies in the target language as asynchronous learning strategies, for example.

Cooperative learning

In language learning, the interaction between students is essential, especially in a language classroom setting. Keeping in mind that “foreign language students spend an average of about 50% of class time on oral practice” (Fukada, 2013, p. 65), there is an expectation of having group activities to develop this skill. Cooperative learning is an approach that involves grouping activities to help students learn through collaboration with their peers (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). However, during the situation caused by the pandemic, cooperative learning was affected to a great extent. This element of learning a language is one of the focal points of the present research. Each participant encountered factors affecting collaboration among classmates in their language lessons.

Peer interaction in language classes

As mentioned, interaction is a crucial element of language learning. Philip et al. (2014) define peer interaction as “any communicative activity carried out between learners, where there is minimal or no participation from the teacher” (p. 3). Online classes not only reduce the interaction between students and teachers, but also between classmates. Online learning, from a social perspective, can lead to feelings of isolation. (O'Donoghue et al., 2004). There was a consensus among the research participants, in which all of them reported identifying with the feeling of isolation due to the lack of interaction with their peers. This feeling encompasses the fact that the language students rarely turned on their cameras. They never saw their classmates or, on some occasions, even their teachers, which can be counterproductive for language acquisition.

Tavares (2019) mentions that “peer interaction may involve two or more participants, and when engaged in such activities, participants work collaboratively toward a common goal” (p. 114). In the case of online learning, collaborative work among students who do not know each other, and cannot see each other either, might be discouraging, affecting the success of the task. In an online classroom environment, it is significant to create some kind of relationship with our classmates. According to Swan (2002), “interactions among students seem clearly to matter in online discussion. Indeed, [...] the perceived interaction with others is one of the cornerstones for the development of online learning communities” (p. 26).

Literature review Qualitative paradigm

For this longitudinal research investigation, over eight months, all the participants worked with a qualitative research paradigm in which the data were “a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations [...] [where]

one can preserve chronological flow, see which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 4). Hence, our work includes our own voice as participants, our reflexivity as researchers, the description and interpretation of the phenomenon, and our contribution to the literature, and a call for transformation in our future teaching practice (Creswell, 2013).

Self-study

As a research methodology, we used self-study “to understand situated human activity from the perspectives of those engaged in it” (Berry & Kitchen, 2020, p. 124). In this research, we as research participants are also the researchers of our language learning project. To better frame what self-study research means, let us mention that “self-study has also been pliant enough to evolve over time and borrow methods, theories, and ideas from other traditions such as action research, narrative inquiry, and autoethnography” (Cuenca, 2020, p. 463). Self-study has important contributions to make in these times for documenting the experiences and insights that come from radical educational change (Berry & Kitchen, 2020). We used the self-study results as a way to help us improve our teaching by understanding the learning process and being able to empathize with our students.

Data collection Instruments

For our data collection, we used several instruments over a period of eight months, while we were studying a foreign language class. Each one of the participants used a journal and an online portfolio as basic instruments. Still, the participants could add more materials and instruments to document their learning process and provide evidence for the investigation. For example, participant three, learning Japanese, used the app LingoDeer to practice the language outside the classroom.

For the journal required, every week we wrote down our experiences and processes regarding the language learning process. We were able to add information regarding our feelings towards the class, the language, etc., and add comments from our perspective not only as students but as teachers. On the other hand, for the online portfolio, each one of us had a portfolio on Sway. There, each student added the recollected information and included the journal of that week. For instance, if one of the students was required to do a video presentation for the language class, that video was posted on the portfolio and contained a brief description of the activity that required that video.

Participants and context

The participants in this research were three foreign language students involved in this research article, as well as their university teacher. The participants were registered in the class “Second language learning II” (Lengua Extranjera II) in the BA program called Licenciatura de la Enseñanza del Inglés in the División de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades del Campus Guanajuato de la Universidad de Guanajuato. The BA students participating are all enrolled in a four-year program to become English language teachers.

This research took place over a period of eight months while students were studying a foreign language class. All the participants chose their language class. One student was learning French, one was enrolled in Italian, and the third one was studying Japanese. All the participants in this research speak Spanish as their first language and English as their second language. They are all considered bilingual speakers (Spanish and English), so their foreign language class was their third or fourth language.

Ethics

Being a self-study research project, the participants did not sign a consent form as this was their own individual project for eight months. They were all committed to protecting the identity of their language teacher and classmates, and they are not focusing on other people but themselves as language learners. As per Gísladóttir et al. (2019), we understand that self-study research “often includes specific ethical issues that are rooted in the very nature of self-study” (p. 81). The issue of confidentiality and non-identifiability of participants was dealt with by using numbers for each participant instead of their names. Hence, for the identity protection, in the following paper when referring to the participants it will be as Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3. Participant 1 studied Italian, participant 2 was enrolled in French, and Participant 3 was studying Japanese. The data collected by the participants is brought to interpret reality from a personal perspective of lived experiences, with insights from each researcher, and is used to shed light on the issue at stake.

Procedure for data analysis

To work with the collected data, the research participants read their journals to highlight the most valuable and salient information, etc. Each one of the participants searched in their journal and portfolio for data related to the online modality, peer interaction, and cooperative learning. A participant might have had data regarding all the topics, and others did not; this could happen because of the different topics analyzed separately. After the recollection of data from all the participants, the analysis was done individually. The participants, who also function as authors of this research, explained the data collected while linking it to the information found. To connect all the data from all participants, the authors looked for shared comments regarding the topic presented.

Results and findings

Online classes contain pros and cons, no matter the modality used. As an example, the possibility of taking classes even when the students are not in the same geographic zone as the teacher is an advantage of this modality. Still, the possible obstacles found by the students should be considered. One particular example found by the participants of this research was the lack of interaction, not only between teacher-student, but between classmates. This lack of interaction was analyzed and presented by each one of the participants. An example of how they identified that absence was with the non-use of cameras during the synchronous sessions.



Image 1: Screen capture of cameras being turned off during class, shared by P3 (image altered for ethical concerns).

As it was previously mentioned, the synchronous sessions look for the facilitation of “face-to-face” interaction in an online modality. Having in mind that teachers’ verbal and nonverbal interactions have a positive effect on the students (Bouhnik & Marcus, 2006), that intercommunication between teacher-students is important for the learning process. This is why the use of cameras in an online modality is relevant; however, this was not possible within the participants’ classes. In some cases, not even the teacher had their camera on, which made communication a challenge.

The purpose of the cameras being on is to benefit in the interaction between teacher-students and student-students. An example of how they can help the interaction is the use of non-verbal cues (body language, facial expressions, etc.) that are common in a typical classroom setting (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). These cues allow the teacher to know if the students are paying attention, if they have doubts, etc., but they also allow the students to communicate with each other.

In the case of Participant 1, who is learning Italian, the cameras being off caused her discomfort. One of the reasons that caused that discomfort was that it was her first semester with this particular group; therefore, she did not know her classmates. Because she did not have previous interaction with her classmates, she felt that the cameras being off were a barrier. Even though all the classmates participated in class, she felt as if she was the only person in the class. It should be mentioned that not even the teacher had his camera on; this also discomfited the participant. The interaction with the teacher was more established because of the roles in the classroom; however, there was a “filter” presented by the lack of “face-to-face” interaction.

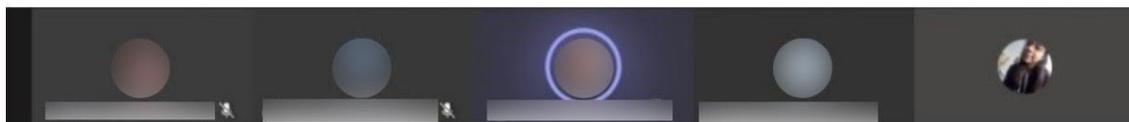


Image 2: Screen capture of cameras being turned off during class, shared by P1 (image altered for ethical concerns).

Participant 2, who is learning French, experienced a sense of loneliness because all her peers and the teacher kept their cameras off during the whole semester. She made the observation that sometimes, she felt that she was the only student in the class. She also expressed that the lack of interaction made the class environment uncomfortable sometimes. Having this lack of interaction not only affected her loneliness feeling but also more factors such as bad communication. As Swan (2002) mentioned, “participants in online discussions make up for the lack of communication channels by engaging in a greater number of verbal immediacy behaviors” (p. 43). This is why it is relevant to have more communication cues during the class. As it was mentioned before, body language could be a good way of improving communication between teachers and classmates. Hence, having the cameras turned off made communication during classes less efficient due to the lack of communication cues.

In the case of Participant 3, who is learning Japanese with a heavy grammatical approach, the non-existent use of the cameras during the language classes resulted in an increased difficulty paying attention. That made the lessons draining and tiring, which eventually led to feelings of isolation, frustration, and anxiety. Batstone (1994) explains that “learners do not learn grammar overnight, nor do they learn it in isolation” (p. 104). It was clear for Participant 3 that peer interaction was missing and much needed to achieve more progress in learning the grammatical structures required. All those factors made the language learning experience more challenging and less successful than in the face-to-face modality.



Image 3: Screen capture of cameras being turned off during class, shared by P2 (image altered for ethical concerns).

Even though a common challenge between the participants was the reduction of peer interaction as they commonly do, there was a level of peer scaffolding in the classes. As Nguyen (2013) presented, peer scaffolding is “beneficial and highly valued by the participants. [...] it helped them to overcome many challenges in the task such as lack of ideas, shortages of materials, limited technology skills, and content knowledge” (p. 71).

In the case of Participant 1, peer scaffolding was not as notorious as with the other participants. Perhaps the reason is the lack of interactions with her classmates. As it was previously mentioned, she did not know the other students because it was her first semester with them. Even though there were occasions in which the participant could interact with her classmates, those were minimal and scripted (i.e., reading a role-play). Another factor that might have affected is that Participant 1 had a mix of synchronous and asynchronous classes. For instance, during the synchronous classes, the participant had little to few interactions with her classmates (P1-J3-02/15/21), but in the asynchronous classes, the interaction became null.

“During the class, I continued being the only one with the camera on. It makes me feel [...] like I am alone even though I have classmates that participate”. (P1-J3-02/15/21)

As shared by Participant 2, she had two experiences with peer scaffolding. The first extract (P2-J4-02/22/21) is from the beginning of the semester. It seems evident that the reactions of her classmates changed drastically because of different factors. The principal factor is the time they have been in class together and the way she gave her the scaffolding. The first time this occurred, the classmate seemed to have had a bad reaction towards her comment. However, the second time was different (P2-J10-04/19/21). She explained that the group had a good time learning when they felt that they were a learning community and that they could count on each other when they had questions. "One classmate had a question, and the teacher did not answer her question. I knew the answer to her question, so I decided to explain her, but it seemed that she did not take well my feedback. Even when I was very gentle and nice to her, she probably felt that I was trying to show off or something. Not having a close relationship with our classmates limits peer scaffolding". (P2-J4-02/22/21)

"I also tried to help my classmates if they needed it, one of my classmates asked me if I knew one word in French, I told him that no, but I investigated it and I told him the answer. I even played the audio of the correct pronunciation, we all tried to imitate the pronunciation, and we laughed together. It was interesting how the scaffolding worked and how we all had a good time learning". (P2-J10-04/19/21)

In the case of Participant 3, peer scaffolding was considered critical during the language classes as explained in the extracts of her learning journal (P3-J4-02/08/21 and P3-J9-03/01/21). Peer scaffolding helped to achieve a more significant improvement than if the students had done the work independently. Cooperation among peers provided reinforcement for the knowledge and a stronger sense of security when using the language. A group of nine students from the language class created a study group to review the information each week (Image 4). In said group, the students helped each other with homework and tried to solve their questions about different topics. However, this type of interaction was perceived as scant and insufficient. One thing worth mentioning is that the students did not know each other, and they seldom turned on their computer cameras.

"On Sunday, my classmates and I did a review of what we learned in the past semesters... I have been feeling frustrated because I already forgot what I learned. It makes me understand the frustration our students might feel about English. (About the cameras turned off) During the classes I feel like I'm missing something because I am a very visual learner". (P3-J4-02/08/21)

"They clarified so many questions I had. After that I felt more confident to take my online lessons again". (P3-J9-03/01/21)



Image 4: Evidence of the study group that helped with peer scaffolding for P3.

Based on the necessities of each language, the participants used the online modality to practice the language with different platforms, activities, and apps. In some cases, the activities done in an asynchronous modality were part of the language class; however, this was not the case for all of them. Even though the asynchronous activities were not mandatory for all of them, the participants saw these as a way to practice and obtain language input.

In the case of Participant 1, most of the asynchronous activities were mandatory due to the use of both online modalities in her language class. During the asynchronous classes, Participant 1 practiced the language through fill-in-the-blanks, writing, and reading comprehension activities. To her, these lessons help her practice the target language seen during the synchronous classes; however, they were a challenge. The lack of instant feedback and interaction with classmates made the asynchronous activities tedious.

1. Andiamo **dai fruttivendolo** a comprare 1e mele. 2- Vorrei **due etti** di salame. 3- Vado **in salumeria** a comprare 1l prosciutto. 4- Devi comprare **due pacchi** di spaghetti. 5- Per fare la torta dobbiamo comprare **un panetto** di burro e **due tavolette** di cioccolata. 6- Dobbiamo comprare **un fustino** di detersivo in polvere. 7- Vorrei **tre lattine** di birra. 8- Stasera vorrei mangiare le lasagne, ma non ho voglia di cucinare, andiamo a comprarle **in rosticceria**. 9- Quando torni a casa compra **un cartone** di latte per favore. 10- Vorrei **un vasetto** di marmellata di fragole.

Correggi esercizio

Image 5: Ex. of the asynchronous activities done by P1.

Still, those were not the only asynchronous activities done by Participant 1, as the asynchronous modality allows students to use the material available such as videos, readings, and handouts (Perveen, 2016) the participant used those to practice the language. In all the different materials, Participant 1 tried to identify the tenses she was learning and the vocabulary seen in class.

"I felt so happy that I was able to understand part of [the documentary]. I think I was able to do it because it is told with the use of past tenses, and those are the ones I have been learning". (P1-J11-04/28/21)



Image 6: Ex. of the material used by P1 to practice the language.

Participant 2 did not have asynchronous classes. However, she did autonomous activities outside the synchronous class. She found that it was helpful for her language learning to do extra activities to expose herself to the language, "things you already do that can be adapted to help you learn. Language exposure is anything that reinforces the language, but it's not necessarily focused on learning. You could watch movies, read simple short stories, listen to audiobooks, etc." (Quino, 2020, para. 3). Participant 2 mentions in her journal (P2-J6-03/10/21) that her motivation increased while doing these extra activities because she felt more improvement in her language learning.

"I watched movies and series in French, as I mentioned before, I like to listen to podcasts and also music in French. I think that these extra activities reinforce my listening skill development, and it also motivates me. This is because every time I can understand words, or even complete sentence in the target language I get excited, and I feel that I am learning". (P2-J6-03/10/21)

Participant 3 experienced asynchronous activities when the teacher did not give synchronous classes. She did exercises from the book used in the class, then she verified her answers in class with the rest of the group during the synchronous sessions. Even though those were the only asynchronous activities programmed, the participant worked, as mentioned before, in collaboration with her classmates. Another thing she did on her own was re-watching the recorded lessons. Participant 3 also studied kanjis asynchronously because those were never seen in class, but they were required at the exams.

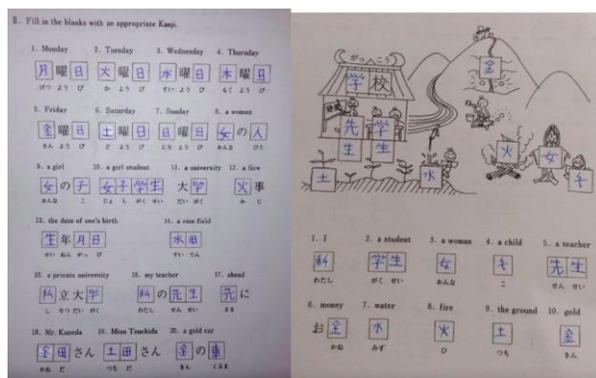


Image 7: Material used by P3 to practice the written language asynchronously.

After analyzing all the data and comparing it among the participants, it is possible to say that they found the online experience a challenge due to the lack of peer interaction and cooperative learning. For all the participants, the decision to turn off the cameras made the classes more tedious and increased the feeling of isolation. Another factor that represented a challenge was the modality chosen by the teacher. Two out of the three participants had synchronous and asynchronous classes. However, only one of them was able to communicate with her classmates and collaborate with them in the asynchronous classes.

Conclusion

This self-study research project examined the language learning experiences lived by three students in a BA in English as a Second Language program at the University of Guanajuato in Mexico. From the data collection and analysis that occurred from being enrolled in foreign language classes over two semesters, we can conclude that the interaction between peers is essential to have a more profound comprehension of the learning situation. It is vital to build a good learning community to promote peer scaffolding on the grounds that when students have good interaction with their peers, they feel comfortable committing mistakes and ask for help in case of need. Learning languages is a social activity, and the way students interact with learning is critical for their progress in acquiring the target language. As presented, online learning might represent a challenge for the learners' social interaction because of the aforementioned factors. Even though these challenges exist, this does not mean that online learning is an inadequate teaching/learning method. The online modality has its pros and cons; however, we only reflected on the challenges to better understand our own learning experience and to obtain an idea of what our students were living. This experience helped the participants to comprehend in a deeper manner their own language learning process, as well as their students' learning experience. Hopefully, this research will help them to become better teachers in their future practice.

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