Skype™ Classes: Teachers and Students’ Perceptions on Synchronous Online Classes in Relation to Face-to-face Teaching and Learning

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Abstract — The possibilities for language learning are expanding with the advent of the Internet, which allows for online classes. This study investigates teachers’ and students’ perceptions regarding synchronous Skype™ classes. Learning languages through webconferencing tools entail differences, similarities, advantages and disadvantages when compared to face-to-face classes. Aspects of this learning ought to be tracked, but most importantly, learners and teachers involved in the learning processes should be taken into consideration as well. In regard to that, participants answered a questionnaire about their experiences with online classes, in relation to face-to-face learning environments. Results brought to light characteristics, advantages and disadvantages that may be taken into consideration when designing online classes through webconferencing tools. Overall, participants perceive webconferencing as potential for language learning, with emphasis on the speaking and listening skills. The results also enlighten pedagogy and future research in the area.

Index Terms—Skype™ classes, Synchronous online classes, Language learning, Teachers’ and students’ perceptions

I. INTRODUCTION

Notably, the opportunities for language learners to interact in the foreign language (L2) with other speakers have expanded beyond what could have been possible prior to the advent of the Internet, which also impacts language classes.

A specific mode of language learning has been gaining prominence: Skype™ classes. Learning language through Skype™ can benefit learners who do not have access to classes in formal settings due to various reasons, such as time constraints, commuting difficulties, busy schedules, and so forth. Online language classes through Skype™ entail an opportunity for learners to develop language skills. The software has gained popularity since its launch in 2003 and many online schools have been using Skype™ as a teaching tool. Here are some examples: Easy Español (www.easyespanol.org); Native English Speaker (nativeenglishteacher.net); Skype English School (skype-englishschool.com).

There has been a number of investigations concerned about the use of different conferencing tools (e.g. Skype™, Blackboard™, Flashmeeting™, Netmeeting™) for the purpose of language learning (e.g. Hampel & Stickler, 2012; Guo, 2013; Verjano, 2013). However studies specifically focusing on perceptions of teachers and students regarding characteristics of online modes of learning, compared to face-to-face (f2f) classes, have not been found so far. It is essential to understand and reflect upon participants’ views in any learning context. Therefore, this study aims to investigate similarities, differences, advantages and disadvantages regarding the two modes of teaching and learning, according to teachers’ and students’ perceptions.

This investigation may shed light on how the two modes of teaching and learning are viewed from two different perceptions: students’ and teachers’, who have had experience with both Skype™ and f2f classes. Participants answered a questionnaire regarding their experience with both modes of learning. Their answers were compared, and the outstanding findings are presented in this paper.

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II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and Language Learning

Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) refers to ‘any real-time or delayed communicative transaction that occurs through the use of tools taking advantage of networked technology capabilities’ (Lin, 2014, p. 123). It has had a relevant impact on the way people live, work, and learn, since it allows simultaneous communication with people all around the world at little cost, and offers new opportunities for language learning and teaching. CMC can be asynchronous, i.e. in the form of writing e-mails, or posting responses to a discussion forum; or it can be synchronous, such as conversations held in chatrooms (Xu, 2005).

Studies have found that CMC for language learning qualitatively changes communication because students are more willing to engage in online conversations (Kern, 1995; Hampel & Stickler, 2012; Verjano, 2013). Verjano (2013), for instance, mentions that students in online environments were exposed to increased and more varied input from other classmates when engaged in CMC. Some years ago, Kern (1995) found out that, in language learning, CMC activities may reduce anxiety and enhance motivation, when compared to f2f interaction.

There has been a shift in teaching from f2f classes towards using webconferencing applications (Stockwell, 2007). The applications (e.g. Elluminate™, FlashMeeting™, and Skype™) serve as tools for online interaction combining different modes of communication 1, such as body language, spoken and written language, visual and graphic systems, among others, and have been increasingly used for the purposes of teaching and learning languages.

Research on two different modes of communication - text and audio – through webconferencing for language learning includes Jepson’s (2005), which analyzed the patterns of moves in synchronous non-native speaker text chat rooms in comparison to voice chat rooms. Jepson observed repair moves that substantiate the online interaction in both modes and found that online classes are potential ways of language development.

Other studies about computer mediated speaking environments have shown positive influence of CMC for teaching and learning languages (Heins, Duensing, Stickler, Batstone, 2007; Stickler, Batstone, Duensing, Heins, 2007). Specifically, Heins et al (2007) found a higher ratio of L2 input/output by students, a prevalence of highly structured L2 input and output, greater emphasis on classroom management, and fewer student-student exchanges outside allocated tasks, while Stickler et al (2007) found that online classes require more classroom management. Consequently, more positive language development can be a result from online classes.

Following the same line, Blake (2005) reports on the benefits of using an application that combines voice and text chat for negotiating meaning, and highlights the socio-affective benefits for distance learning contexts. Kenning (2010) looks at the different impacts of using voice and text chat, identifying a number of positive factors in online classes, such as increasing learner participation, lessening teacher dominance, and more production of output by learners.

More recently, Hampel and Stickler (2012) illustrated how an online videoconferencing environment can be used in language teaching, and more specifically, how teachers and students adapt to the online environment and how new patterns of communication emerge in the process. The authors’ findings showed categories of language use to interact in class, such as social conversations, management of technology, negotiation of meaning related to the task, off-task conversations and teacher feedback. These categories can be found in f2f classes as well, but they differ in some aspects presented in the study (Hampel & Stickler, 2012), for example, students using the chat box to parallel conversations in order to have a consensus on their answers, , in relation to activities proposed.

It is important to note that, despite the proliferation of literature on online learning, there is a need for further research dedicated to examining how language learning takes place through CMC tools, especially comparing to f2f classes. Perceptions of users enlighten pedagogy and might be analyzed in order to better design and plan synchronous online classes.

B. Skype™: CMC Tools for Synchronous Language Learning

There have been a growing number of studies about the use of Skype™, or other similar webconferencing tools (e.g. Flashmeeting™, Netmeeting™) for blended learning (e.g. Hampel & Stickler, 2012; Guo, 2013; Verjano, 2013). However, few studies comparing characteristics, advantages and disadvantages between online and f2f classes have been found (e.g. Kirtman, 2009; Ni, 2013), and no studies analyzing participants perceptions on the use of such tools for language learning have been identified so far.

Warschauer (1996), almost twenty years ago, analyzed electronic and f2f discussions. The author found that computer-mediated communication resulted in more equal participation among students. That adds up to the advantages of using CMC tools for language development. However, Blake (2005) clarifies that “only a carefully prepared curriculum can make learning languages at a distance a format palatable for students and the profession at large” (p. 509).

1 Jewitt (2004) has defined modes of communication as “organized, regular means of representation and communication” (p. 184).
Recent research in Spain and Australia, for instance, have demonstrated the benefits of having online group sessions with students as a way of integrating technology into the regular course plan for f2f classrooms (Guo, 2013; Verjano, 2013). Guo (2013) found that the development of activities through a webconferencing tool creates real communicative needs for students to speak in the target language. On similar lines, Verjano (2013) concluded that a higher number of students interacted in the online synchronous tool, in comparison to the f2f classroom.

Despite the time lapse, it is relevant to point out that Kern (1995) had already showed that blending classroom practices through f2f and online activities offered restructured classroom dynamics and created a new context for social use of language. The author investigated a group of French students at the University of California at Berkeley and the results showed that one group of students produced 88% of the total number of sentences online, while in their f2f discussions they produced only 37%. The author also showed that the online interaction brought up more discourse functions, including more greetings, assertions, and questions, produced by the students. This study was replicated in 2015 and similar results were found (Jones, Murphy, Holland, 2015), especially in what regards more sophisticated conversation in the chatroom setting.

In sum, research has been showing the benefits of webconferencing tools, such as Skype™, for language learning in classes in which students have f2f interaction and some online activities. However, there is still a need to systematically understand online classes. In addition, it is relevant to examine how teachers and students feel about teaching and learning in a synchronous online environment. In this sense, this study aims at investigating and discussing students’ and teachers’ perceptions on how online classes may compare to or differ from f2f classes.

III. METHOD

This is a qualitative research in which 10 participants answered an online questionnaire regarding their perceptions on Skype™ online voice call classes (without video) compared to f2f in-class courses. Participants were teachers and students who had experience with Skype™ and f2f classes.

It can be considered a case study since it analyses a selected group of people whose boundary was the experience with Skype™ classes (Dörnyei, 2007). It can also be considered an exploratory study since it is innovative in terms of perceptions of students and teachers in relation to one-to-one synchronous online classes.

This section describes in more detail the instruments and the participants of this study.

A. Instruments

The questionnaire presented four open-ended questions and one question in which participants were asked to choose between three alternatives (equal, advantage, disadvantage) to compare the development of the four skills in the two modes of learning: webconferencing through Skype™ and f2f language classes. In all the questions, participants were allowed space to explain, comment and/or provide examples to their answers.

The questionnaire applied to students was similar to the one applied to teachers. The only difference was the substitution of the word ‘learning’ for ‘teaching’ in the questionnaire for teachers. The questionnaires are available on a host website².

The questions inquired participants about their perceptions regarding Skype™ language classes, focusing their views on developing the four skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking – through the CMC tool Skype™. Participants could answer in English or in Portuguese³.

The instruments were made available online and participants had 3 months to participate. They were invited by e-mail. Around 4 e-mails were sent as a reminder for interested participants to answer the questionnaire.

B. Participants

Participants⁴ were divided into two groups: (a) students who have had at least three months of experience with Skype™ classes; and (b) teachers who have had a sustained experience with Skype™ classes. All the participants had experience with f2f in-class courses, thus they were able to establish comparisons and provide their informed perceptions regarding both modes of teaching and learning.

Teachers participating in this study were teaching different languages. Two of them were teaching Spanish as a foreign language in Argentina to American students in the United States. They were working for an online private language school that adopted Skype™ as a platform for the classes – Easy Español (www.easyespanol.org). Both Spanish teachers had taught f2f classes in Argentina as well. The third teacher was an American working with Brazilian students who taught English as a foreign language in Brazil. This teacher also worked in a private language school; he had online and f2f classes.

² Questionnaire for teachers: https://pt.surveymonkey.com/s/YQKJFLS
Questionnaire for students: https://pt.surveymonkey.com/s/k6CJVS5
³ Answers in Portuguese were translated into English by the authors of this article.
⁴ All participants are addressed as ‘he’ since gender was not accounted for in this investigation.
In what concerns time of experience, one of the Spanish teachers had 1 year and a half of experience, the second Spanish teacher had about 6 years of experience and the American teacher had 1 year of experience with Skype™ classes.

The students who answered the questionnaire are originally from Brazil; English is a foreign language for them. All of the students have had f2f English classes as well, not necessarily with the same teacher. They have had different experiences in terms of time, ranging from 3 months to 3 years of Skype™ classes.

Some of the participant students (n=3) have a high-intermediate level of English; the other participants (n=4) have a low-intermediate level. The high level of English is attributed to the time they have been studying English in general (4 to 6 years), not only to the time they have been having Skype™ classes. It is relevant to notice that there were no Spanish students participating in this research, only English students, different from the participant teachers. Also participant students were having one-to-one English classes; thus, their perceptions could have been different if they were having group classes.

Participants are referred to as SS+number, which stands for Skype™ Students, and ST+number, for Skype™ Teachers. They are referred to as males, although females also participated in the study.

The authors of this study do recognize that the number of participants was small. Out of 30 participants invited (10 teachers; 20 students), only 10 agreed to participate (3 teachers; 7 students). Participants who declined claimed lack of time. Despite all that, the findings can still be representative if related to other similar contexts of investigation.

IV. ANALYSES AND DISCUSSIONS
A. Skype™ Classes Students

A total of 7 students who have been studying on Skype™ for at least three months up to 3 years answered the questionnaire. They are referred to as SS+number, which stands for Skype™ Student. They pointed out similarities and differences, advantages and disadvantages of this mode of classes, according to their perceptions and also regarding their experiences in f2f contexts.

In general terms, Skype™ classes seem to raise positive perspectives in relation to learning. All the participant students see their experiences on Skype™ classes as positive and they stated that it is possible to develop the four skills in English through this mode of interaction. SS2 and SS6 comment:

“I think I develop more the speakings and the listenings, because this is our focus everyday”. (SS2)

“The combination of language skills during classes and also in activities extra classes are very calm and natural”. (SS6)

While SS6 thinks it is easy to work on all the four skills on Skype™ classes, SS2 considers that speaking and listening are more emphasized. In addition to that, SS1, SS3, and SS7 assured that it is necessary more attention to understand and establish communication with the teacher. Since the Skype™ class consists of a voice call, all students claimed that the skills of speaking and listening are in advantage when compared to f2f contexts.

“I believe that the skills that are more explored in this teaching mode are speaking and listening”. (SS2)

“It [Skype™ classes] makes students to use correct expressions so that the teachers understand the meaning of the dialogue”. (SS5)

Participants are in agreement that speaking and listening are further worked on on Skype™ classes. Participants SS2, SS4, SS5, and SS6 (four participants out of seven) stated that they feel more comfortable to practice speaking, consequently further developing their vocabulary and conversation skills.

“I particularly feel more comfortable to practice my ‘speaking’ than in ‘face to face’ classes, which I see as an advantage because I develop more my vocabulary and speaking”. (SS2)

SS2 emphasized the comfortable feeling of speaking on Skype™. Warschauer (1996) and Ni (2013), despite the time lapse, also found evidence that interaction in an online environment is less intimidating between individuals and also has less pressure on students than does interaction in f2f settings.

In fact, students generally pointed out more advantages than disadvantages regarding online classes. Similar results were found by Hampel and Stickler (2012), Guo (2013), Verjano (2013), Heins et al (2007), Stickler et al (2007), Jepson (2005), among others, who identified...
positive results from language classes through CMC webconferencing tools.

Nonetheless, disadvantages were also shown. Among them, there were 3 participants (SS2, SS3, SS7) who raised the issue of impossibility of interpreting facial expressions or reading lips; 2 participants (SS1, SS4) highlighted the possibility of facing technical problems; and 1 participant (SS5) stated that the lack of personal contact due to the online interaction can be a disadvantage as well.

The final question asked participants about their perceptions regarding the four skills separately – reading, writing, speaking and listening. They were required to state if the development of each skill was in advantage, disadvantage or equal, if compared to f2f contexts: On Skype™ classes, the skill (reading, writing, speaking and listening) is in advantage, disadvantage or is equal, if compared to face-to-face classes?. There was a table listing all the four skills and the three options for participants to select (advantage, disadvantage or equal); there was also space for comments. For none of the skills, the types of activities were defined. Participants were asked in general about reading, writing, speaking and listening activities in online and f2f modes of learning.

Most of the participants claimed that writing and reading are equal, and all participants stated that speaking and listening are in advantage. Participants SS1 and SS7 considered that writing is in disadvantage, and participant SS1 thinks that reading is in disadvantage. Speaking and listening are always seen as in advantage by the respondents. Table 1 shows their answers to the final question:

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A = Advantage; D = Disadvantage; E = Equal

All the participants highlighted that speaking and listening are in advantage when compared to f2f classes. In the space for comments, participants stated that it is highly necessary to pay more attention while listening to the teacher on Skype™ classes. This may happen because students have no visual contexts providing clues for comprehension, since they use only voice calls instead of video calls. Participant students also stated that they need to talk more to make sure they understand instructions and make themselves understandable.

I think listening is better at skype, because it's a phone call, and you need to speak and listening more. And as you can't be distracted with movements of other things, you only look at your computer, I think you can focus more in the conversation than face to face classes (in face to face you can be distracted with the world out of the window, with the movements outside school, with cell phones, with another students...). Then, at skype you need to pay attention all the time in the conversation. (SS1)

"In my opinion, it seems that students speak and listen more on Skype classes, which is important for the ones who want to practice their capacity to listen and understand English and it requires concentration all the time to know how to talk to the teacher". (SS2)

"I need to pronounce better to promote comprehension. (...) I need to concentrate better to listen since I do not have the facial expression and gesture resources". (SS7)

Participants SS1, SS2, and SS7 emphasized the need for more concentration on both speaking and listening on Skype™ classes. This is in accordance with Santos (2012), who investigated the use of Skype™ for developing the four skills in English, and found that students highlighted listening and speaking as having a considerable advantage in this mode of interaction.

From the question Do you believe that it is possible to develop the four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) on Skype™ language classes? Explain, please, it was possible to interpret that all participant students see the development of the four skills in English through Skype™ classes as possible. Although some of them believe that writing and reading may be in disadvantage, in this question all participants claimed to believe that the development the four skills in online classes is feasible. Participant SS2 mentioned that, even in f2f classes, writing is in disadvantage if compared to the other skills. The participant stated that “this skill is a little forgotten”. Thus, if the questionnaire was about f2f classes, some of the participants may also have mentioned that reading and writing were less worked on, if compared to the other skills.

It is necessary for Skype™ teachers to call students’ attention to the writing and reading skills. On Skype™ classes, teachers and students use the chat box tool to register new vocabulary, to check spelling, to work on pronunciation along with spelling, etc. Therefore, writing can be certainly worked on through the use of the chat box. Other writing exercises may be provided, but as SS4 suggested, writing and reading are required more as homework because of the amount of time they demand, even in f2f classes.

Concluding, the perceptions of students who have experience with Skype™ classes were positive in terms

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9 Authors’ translation for: “Na minha opinião, parece que em aulas via Skype fala-se e se ouve-se mais, o que é importante para quem deseja treinar sua capacidade de ouvir e entender inglês e exige concentração o tempo todo para saber dialogar com o professor”.

10 Authors’ translation for: “Preciso pronunciar melhor para promover compreensão. (…) Preciso me concentrar melhor para escutar, já que não tenho o recurso de expressão facial e gestos”.

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of the development of the four skills in English. Therefore, participant students’ perceptions point to the potential of learning languages through Skype™ as a CMC webconferencing tool.

B. Skype™ Classes Teachers

Three teachers who had at least 1 year of experience teaching on Skype™ participated in this study. They answered a questionnaire with 5 questions inquiring their perceptions on language classes on Skype™. They are referred to as ST+number, which stands for Skype™ Teacher. Regarding their experiences, ST1 taught English for 1 year; ST2 taught Spanish for 1 year and a half; and ST3 taught Spanish for 6 years on Skype™.

Participants were asked to describe the language learning and teaching processes on Skype™, and to point out similarities and differences between teaching on Skype™ and teaching f2f classes. They raised important topics, pointing out advantages and disadvantages they see through their experiences.

Some of their answers showed that Skype™ classes can resemble f2f classes. ST1, for example, stated that you can either use online tools or a book, as teachers would do in f2f classes. According to this participant, that consists in an advantage for online classes, being that it does not differ much from f2f classes. Hampel and Stickler (2012) also found that online classes present a variety of similarities to f2f contexts of language learning, such as the discourse functions of social conversations, negotiation of meaning, and off-task conversations.

ST2 pointed out that students see this type of class as effective.

"[...] as my students told me, they learn as much as in their face to face private classes, so they see no difference in the learning process. Skype is a great way to develop the student’s speaking skills, whereas face to face can focus on writing and reading skills and take advantage of that". (ST2)

It is interesting to notice that writing and reading are seen as in disadvantage in f2f classes, while speaking and listening are in advantage on Skype™ classes. This corresponds to perceptions of students discussed in the previous section. Therefore, students and teachers with experience on both Skype™ and f2f classes agree that speaking and listening are in advantage on Skype™ classes.

ST3 believes that holding students’ attention on Skype™ classes may be challenging. On the other hand, students stated that they have to pay much more attention on Skype™ classes, in order to be able to follow instructions and interact with the teacher. ST3 stated that students get easily distracted:

“For me, the main difference has been holding the student focus in the class: using Skype sometimes classes get interrupted by other calls or messages or students get distracted by other things happening on their screens that I'm not able to see”. (ST3)

A possible explanation is that each student has a different personality; some of them may get distracted the same way they do in f2f classes. Thus, that would not constitute a characteristic solely of online classes. In regard to that, ST3 stated that teachers need a well-structured lesson plan to make sure students profit from the class. That, in fact, may hold students attention. As Blake (2005) pointed out, the organization and content of the lesson plan is what will determine the effectiveness of the class. In regard to that, ST3 mentioned:

“In addition, I find that you need to be more resourceful and organized as a teacher in planning your classes to make the most of the Skype tools (instant messages, share screen, files exchange) to ensure that your student gets a full learning experience”. (ST3)

Teachers do need to be very prepared to handle unforeseen events, especially dealing with technology. On top of that, a well-structured lesson plan ensures that students work hard on all the skills (Blake, 2005), besides keeping learners busy with their learning while in class, either in online or f2f contexts.

Among the advantages mentioned by the teachers, ST1 mentioned access. It is easier for learners to access their computers and learn from anywhere, instead of commuting. The other two participants ST2 and ST3 also mentioned that Skype™ constitutes a characteristic solely of online classes. In the same way they do in f2f classes. Thus, that would not be seen through their experiences.

It is not enough on its own. To share homework, you may need another platform. In fact, it is possible to share files (images, sound, pdf, docs, etc.) through Skype™, so it is not clear what exactly was allowed the same quality of interaction between teacher and student”. (ST3)

As for the disadvantages, pronunciation practice may be seen as challenging. According to ST1, miscommunication due to poor sound quality can hinder students’ ability to learn. Additionally, ST2 states that Skype™ is not enough on its own. To share homework, for example, you may need another platform. In fact, it is possible to share files (images, sound, pdf, docs, etc.) through Skype™, so it is not clear what exactly was meant by other platforms.

Participant teachers also answered a question regarding their beliefs in relation to the development of the four skills: Do you believe that it is possible to develop the four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) on Skype™ language classes? Explain, please. Similarly to
the participant students, teachers’ perceptions indicated that all of them see it as possible. ST1 and ST2 argued that speaking and listening are more worked on through Skype™ classes, while reading and writing are less developed.

“Yes, I do agree that you can learn and develop of the 4 skills on Skype. Speaking and listening through Skype force the students to challenge themselves because they will hear a foreign language through a machine and is therefore not 100% clear as it is face-to-face. This forces them to listen harder to what the teacher is saying. If you assign reading and writing assignments I believe that they can develop those skills as well. For example, if you send a student an article to read and then they write a summary of the article this would be similar to what you would assign a student in a face to face class”. (ST1)

“Skype is useful to develop a student’s speaking skills just like what you can do in your face to face classes. But it’s what Skype better does: be a channel of communication. Thus, we can perfectly use Skype to develop our speaking skills in the comfort of our home”. (ST2)

Through teachers’ answers, one can see that reading and writing are developed, but since Skype™ is more of a conversation software, as ST2 stated, it is expected that listening and speaking are further developed. Participant students agreed with the teachers’ perceptions in regard to that.

However, ST3 claimed that it is absolutely possible to develop the four skills through Skype™. This participant did not differentiate the four skills, but emphasized that the chat conversation is recorded in the software and can be used by students and teachers to review what was covered in class.

“Skype is a great communication tool and as such allows for language input and feedback through audio, video, and chat screen. It also allows for the sharing of learning resources (audio files, exercises) and records the conversation chat history, so students (and teachers) can review what was covered in previous classes to compliment their notes”. (ST3)

The chat conversation may foster reading and writing. While students are reading words posted by teachers, they are working on their spelling and vocabulary. Besides that, students also may write words and sentences; consequently, writing can be a skill developed on Skype™ classes. In this case, what matters will be the lesson plan and not the means of communication for learning a language, as Blake (2005) has emphasized.

In relation to the question On Skype™ classes, the skill is in advantage, disadvantage or is equal, if compared to face-to-face classes?, teachers diverged regarding a comparison between the development of the four skills through Skype™ and f2f classes, while most students agreed on this question. Participants had three options to choose from – equal, advantage, disadvantage – besides a comment box. Table 2 shows their answers.

<table>
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<th>TABLE 2 TEACHERS’ ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION “ON SKYPE™ CLASSES, THE FOUR SKILLS (READING, WRITING, LISTENING AND SPEAKING) ARE IN ADVANTAGE (A), DISADVANTAGE (D) OR ARE EQUAL (E), IF COMPEARED TO FACE-TO-FACE CLASSES?”</th>
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<td><strong>ST1</strong></td>
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As shown in Table 2, participant ST1 considers that reading and writing are equal in both modes of teaching and learning. ST1 claimed that it really depends on the student’s necessities to be assigned reading and writing activities and they would work in f2f classes as well. For ST2, these skills are in disadvantage because Skype™ is a means of communication and not a platform for reading and writing.

“Skype only serves as a communicator purpose. Students and teachers can discuss the solutions of a reading exercise, but the reading is done by the student from another platform or website. So, Skype provides an advantage to communicate the solutions to the reading exercise but not for the reading itself”. (ST2)

“Here, it is the same as in the reading skill. Writing exercises can be perfectly done by the student as homework, but then share the solutions via Skype while communicating with the teacher. So, again, I think Skype only serves as the channel of communication for both members of the class”. (ST2)

According to ST2, in case teachers plan to work with reading and writing, they will need another platform. However, it is possible to read and write using the Skype™ software. There is a chat box in which teachers can post written text, images, links, etc. In the same way, students can write and teachers can check learners’ production. Written feedback can also be provided in the Skype™ chat box.

For ST3, reading is in advantage on Skype™ classes because students feel more comfortable to sound out words and make mistakes when reading out loud and trying to comprehend texts and participant students agreed on that. However, writing is in disadvantage because external tools are usually necessary to work on this skill.

“I’ve found that for many students (especially beginners) having Skype as a buffer between them and their teacher gives them a sense of security and confidence. This allows them to feel less self-conscious when making mistakes, sounding out the words, or when trying to process and comprehend the texts”. (ST3)
“Although writing can be developed just fine though Skype, sometimes the chat screen is rather limited and external tools (such as Word) are required”. (ST3)

In f2f classes, external resources to the classroom are always used as a means of developing different activities. If students are required to write an essay, for example, certainly they will need either paper and pen or a word processor software to record their textual production. Consequently, the use of external resources is part of both f2f and online classes.

Answers were divergent as well considering speaking and listening. ST1 argued that pronunciation is difficult to be worked on through Skype™. This participant compared it to a phone call in which sometimes it is impossible to understand all the words accurately. Yet, in f2f classes, misunderstandings due to mispronunciation also happen. In addition, some students have difficulties producing certain sounds and it is probably not the fact that there is a teacher in front of him/her to sound words out that learners will produce the correct pronunciation.

While ST2 stated that speaking and listening are equally developed on Skype™ and f2f classes, ST3 believes these skills are in advantage on Skype™ classes. Similarly to what participant students stated, ST3 claimed that students feel more relaxed to try out what they are learning.

“Skype’s great communication tools make students feel as if they are having a f2f classes with the added comfort and ease that comes from having classes in their own home or offices, and having Skype as a buffer - albeit a rather invisible one. These aspects make the Skype learning experience fun and relaxed which allows students to forget about their insecurities and inhibitions and speak freely”. (ST3)

As for listening, students can profit from wearing headsets, so that they understand better the teacher, as claimed ST3.

“Skype’s strong communication tools allow for a great exchange of language input and feedback. Wearing headsets in class and focusing on the language samples being provided by the teacher though conversation or audio files makes for a faster development of one of the skills with which students struggle the most”. (ST3)

For ST3, listening is in advantage on Skype™ classes because it allows a great deal of language input, as Jepson found in his investigation back in 2005. Skype™ classes may be indicated for students who have difficulties listening because they can listen directly to the teacher by using a headphone.

Putting together all the participant teachers’ and students’ answers, one can notice that more advantages (n = 18) were pointed out than disadvantages (n = 8). Moreover, the number of ‘equals’ (n = 14) selected by participants was higher than the number of disadvantages. These numbers make possible to state that Skype™ classes are seen as affording language learning since the number of ‘disadvantage’ is smaller than the ‘advantage’ and ‘equal’ options selected by participants. Table 3 shows the number of teachers’ and students’ answers counted together, regarding each skill separately.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Equal</th>
<th>Advantage</th>
<th>Disadvantage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All in all, it is possible to conclude that teachers’ and students’ perceptions portray a positive view of Skype™ classes, despite some negative aspects of the software use in language classes. What can be concluded from the analysis of their perceptions is that Skype™ is a software that allows communication and not language learning per se. The development of the four skills may, thus, rely more on teachers and students and how teachers plan their classes and how students monitor their learning processes, as Blake (2005) had already claimed.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study investigated students’ and teachers’ perceptions on Skype™ language classes in relation to f2f classes. It reported on similarities, differences, advantages, and disadvantages regarding the two modes of teaching and learning. Investigating characteristics about how online differs from f2f classes may be insightful for language teachers and students in order to make informed decisions about how, when, and to what purposes they could use these two modes of communication.

This study contributes to the discussion of online language classes, in relation to f2f modes of learning and teaching. It examined perceptions’ of students and teachers, which gives a broader and more complete view of the topic regarding such context of language learning and teaching.

Teachers and learners consider that Skype™ language classes create potential language learning opportunities. Results pointed to more learning advantages than disadvantages. Among the advantages, there are the following: the necessity of paying more attention to the online interaction; the need for making oneself understandable through the voice interaction; lower affective filter since it is an online interaction; further development of speaking and listening skills, which are considered hard to be developed; more comfort; and,
finally, access to learning from anywhere. In what regards disadvantages, participants pointed out that technical problems, the impossibility of lips and body gestures reading, and lack of social contact may represent obstacles.

The authors do recognize the limitations of this investigation. The number of participants was small and the results may be limited only to similar contexts: one-to-one synchronous webconferencing voice call classes (without video). However, this study can be seen as an attempt in systematizing characteristics of this mode of classes in relation to f2f ones.

There is a need for more investigation regarding synchronous online learning. This mode of education has been growing substantially and it allows more access for people to learn a language (Hampel & Stickler, 2012; Guo, 2013; Verjano, 2013). It is for many an easily accessible environment for language practice, especially for learners who do not live in target language-speaking areas (Blake, 2000; Doughty & Long, 2003). In addition, teachers may want to direct learners to use online environments, such as Skype™, to provide out-of-class language learning opportunities.

In sum, the results of this study suggest that it may be possible to maximize student language development through Skype™ language classes, as long as teachers and students are aware and committed to the learning and teaching processes.
REFERENCES


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