Skype™ Conference Calls: A Way to Promote Speaking Skills in the Teaching and Learning of English

Llamadas para conferencia en Skype™: una forma de promover la habilidad de habla en la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés

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This article presents the results of a research project on the teaching and learning of English through the use of Skype™ conference calls. The research was carried out with a group of 12 English as a foreign language adult learners in the language institute of Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Bogotá, Colombia. The findings of this study suggest that Skype™ conference calls might be considered as an influential computer-mediated communication tool in order to promote English as a foreign language adult A1 learners' speaking skill, especially for social interaction purposes and oral reinforcement of both language fluency and course contents outside of classroom settings.

Key words: Computer-mediated communication tools, Skype™ conference calls, speaking skill.

Este artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación sobre la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de inglés a través de llamadas para conferencia en Skype™. Esta investigación se realizó con un grupo de 12 estudiantes adultos de inglés como lengua extranjera en el instituto de lenguas de la Universidad Distrital en Bogotá, Colombia. Los resultados de este estudio muestran que las llamadas para conferencia en Skype™ pueden influir positivamente a la hora de promover la habilidad de habla de estudiantes adultos de inglés como lengua extranjera, especialmente con fines de interacción social y refuerzo oral tanto de los contenidos de clase como la fluidez en el lenguaje fuera del aula de clase.

Palabras clave: habilidad de habla, herramientas de comunicación mediadas a través del computador, llamadas para conferencia en Skype™.

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Introduction

According to Pawlak, Waniek-Klimczak, and Majer (2011) the ability to speak in a foreign language is a difficult and arduous task; this is because the acquisition of speaking involves the mastery of different language subsystems to the point that they can be employed automatically in spontaneous communication. Therefore, one of the main functions of language teachers should be to provide as many opportunities as possible for their learners to develop their speaking skill in the target language so that they can interact with others under varied linguistic and social circumstances using such language subsystems appropriately and spontaneously. This is comprehensible in the sense that for many pupils the prime goal of learning a foreign language is to be able to speak it. This is essentially because many learners acknowledge that by being able to speak a foreign language, they are able to communicate with people of other countries, ethnic groups, race, and so on. Being able to speak a foreign language also builds their confidence, self-esteem, comprehension, and more (Vaseki, 2013). Consequently, teaching practices should help them to achieve that goal to the best of their ability (Grauberg, 1997). However, helping students to develop such speaking skill tends to be a demanding task for many foreign language teachers due to the fact that "organizing lessons to practice speaking English can be a big challenge for both teachers and students" (Baker & Westrup, 2003, p. 1). This is due to the fact that developing the speaking skill in a foreign language entails learners acquiring the ability to place focus on comprehension and production simultaneously, which is difficult to achieve because of limited resources as well as the impact of a wide range of social factors that often determine successful or unsuccessful attainment of communicative goals (Pawlak et al., 2011). Some of those factors which affect successful oral language production include the learners' ages, language knowledge and proficiency, and their motivation, among others.

Traditionally, the teaching of speaking has taken place within formal classroom settings. Recently, with the rapid growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), computers and internet-based technologies play a more relevant role in the teaching of the English speaking skill and English in general. Thus, more and more English language teachers have opted for incorporating such emerging technologies into their everyday teaching practices as such "technologies can empower them as teachers and improve their teaching as well" (Smith & Baber, 2007, p. 11).

With such a great influence of information technologies in human interaction, language teachers' and students' communication is not limited exclusively to live classroom interaction. On the contrary, computers and internet-based technologies offer a vast variety of options for online synchronous and asynchronous communication between language teachers and students. "Such communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers is known as Computer-Mediated Communication—CMC" (Herring, 1996, p. 1). Skype™ constitutes a useful CMC tool in order to achieve such human-computer interaction as a means for exchange of language knowledge and information. Additionally, Skype™ allows "learners to interact, modify and elaborate their input (Doughty & Long, 2003) while engaging in meaningful 'conversation'" (Long & Doughty, 2009, p. 1949).

In reference to the specific context where this research was carried out, class observations showed that the participants in this study tended to have low scores, especially while assessing their spoken production. They had limited opportunities to speak English during their ordinary classes. In other words, learners had rather limited access to the target language both inside and outside the classroom, which is the norm in the majority of foreign language contexts (Pawlak et al., 2011). Furthermore, Spanish is the language spoken by the majority of the population

of the learners' country. This reality did not help them much as their exposure to the target language, especially for oral language practice, was mainly restricted to their English class.

The above outlined facts stood for vital reasons and motivation to start this research with the main objective of promoting the English as a foreign language (EFL) adult A1 learners' speaking skill through Skype™ conference calls outside of classroom settings[1] at ILUD.[2]

The oncoming sections of this article discuss: First, the concepts of speaking skill in foreign language teaching and learning, CMC tools in language learning and teaching, and Skype™ conference calls in language learning and teaching. Second, the main methodological features of this research project are described, including: type of study and data collection instruments, context, participants, and pedagogical intervention. Third, the results and discussions sections are presented. Finally, the conclusions and pedagogical implications of this research project are portrayed.

Speaking Skill in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

From an international point of view, this study had its foundations based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages—CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). With reference to the CEFR, the language level of the target group of this study was that of basic users (A1 level). The CEFR establishes that the speaking skills of A1 English language users must be divided into spoken interaction and spoken production skills. In relation to the spoken

interaction skills, the CEFR states that language users must "be able to ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 26). In relation to the spoken production skills, language users must be able to "use simple phrases and sentences to describe where they live and people they know" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 26). With that understanding, this study sought to provide EFL adult A1 English users with a space where they could develop their spoken interaction and spoken production skills through the use of Skype™ conference calls. In this respect, the use of Skype™ conference calls aimed at generating more opportunities for adult learners with A1 language level proficiencies to orally reinforce everyday course contents and main language items studied in their classes.

From a national and local perspective, this study found its support in the *Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo* (PNB, National Bilingual Program) and *Bogotá y Cundinamarca Bilingüe* (BCB) programs. The first one—PNB (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2004)—seeks to create appropriate spaces and conditions to educate the Colombian population in a foreign language (English in this case) so that they can have more and better working and inclusion opportunities in the changing world that we live in nowadays. The second one—BCB—looks for designing short, medium, and long-term strategies, among both public and private institutions, that will enable their citizens to be competitive in English as a foreign language (Concejo de Bogotá D.C., 2006). Based on these national and local policies, Skype™ conference calls might become valuable tools to contribute to these paramount goals of the Colombian nation as English language learners could promote their speaking skill and initiate themselves into reaching the expected language proficiencies.

Many of my students' everyday talks confirm that the speaking skill still remains an unsatisfied ability

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[1]   In this study, the term *out of classroom settings* is synonym of the term *out-of-class learning* and it refers to "curricular and non-curricular learning experiences for pupils and students outside the school environment" (Resnick, 1987, p. 35). It might also be understood as "any kind of learning that takes place outside the classroom" (Benson, 2011, p. 62).

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in the language classroom. As a language teacher, I usually hear statements of this type from my students: "I understand many things I hear in English but when I have to speak, I feel like I cannot say a word," or less optimistic positions like: "I have studied English for years and I cannot speak English yet. I feel I will not ever speak English." From the teachers' perspective, Thornbury (2005) cites the following examples: "My students always say that they want more speaking, but I don't know how to teach it, apart from giving them lots of useful expressions" or "my business students are good at giving presentations, but they can't have even the simplest presentations. How can I help them improve?" (p. 1). These teachers' and learners' common declarations just corroborate Bygate's (1987) assumption that speaking is in many ways an undervalued skill in the language classroom. They also express some of the common dilemmas that teachers face when trying to address the teaching of speaking (Thornbury, 2005). Similarly, Baker and Westrup (2003) state that speaking is a neglected language skill in many classrooms. In fact, the speaking skill is viewed by many language teachers and students as one of the most challenging skills to develop when teaching or learning a foreign language. Regarding this, Brown and Yule (1983) state that "learning to talk in the foreign language is often considered to be one of the most difficult aspects of language learning for the teacher to help the student with" (p. 25). Likewise, Thornbury (2005) affirms that speaking represents a real challenge to most language learners. This has been the main reason behind the formulation of this action research project as a response to the need of finding alternative ways to promote the speaking skill outside the classroom setting.

Computer-Mediated Communication Tools in Language Learning and Teaching

Given that nowadays cmc is widely recognized as an academic field, it is quite pertinent to provide a definition of what is understood by cmc throughout this research study. From a broad point of view, Thurlow, Lengel, and Tomic (2004) define cmc as "any human communication achieved through, or with the help of, computer technology" (p. 15). In other words, cmc refers to "an integration of computer technology with our everyday lives and it studies how human behaviors are maintained or altered by exchange of information through machines" (Wood & Smith, 2005, p. 4). From the perspective of language learning and teaching, Kern and Warschauer (2000) state that cmc allows language learners with network access to communicate with other learners or speakers of the target language. This assumption just validates the idea that Skype™ conference calls might constitute a precious tool to generate meaningful communication and interaction among the participants of this research study. More importantly, the students' progress can be closely monitored in their spoken language skill from the use of Skype™ conference calls. In this regard, Levy and Stockwell (2006) state that cmc tools provide a method where teachers and researchers alike can monitor learner output easily and relatively non-intrusively.

cmc allows for two types of online communication: synchronous and asynchronous communication (Lamy & Hampel, 2007; Wood & Smith, 2005). For the purpose of this study, Skype™ conference calls are framed under the principles of synchronous communication tools. Hrastinsky (2008) affirms that media such as video conferencing and chat commonly support synchronous communication and they have the potential to support e-learners in the development of learning communities. In this respect, Richards and Schmidt (2002) state that

> in computer assisted language learning, synchronous communication refers to communication that is instantaneous, with all participants logged onto their computers and sending messages in real time. Language classes often use this type of communication in the form of internet chat, or with specialized programs (p. 533).

Hrastinsky (2008) affirms that the advantages of synchronous communication include the fact that "learners and teachers experience synchronous e-learning as more social and avoid frustration by asking and answering questions in real time. Synchronous sessions help e-learners feel like participants rather than isolates" (p. 52). Similarly, but with focus on the language-teaching field, Lamy and Hampel (2007) affirm that synchronous communication fosters peer collaboration and can be used to give feedback to students as well.

Skype™ Conference Calls in Language Learning and Teaching

Sheppard (2006) reminds us that Skype™ is a free computer program you can use to make telephone calls over the internet and that you can also use it to make conference calls and video calls, to chat, and to transfer files. Furthermore, Abdulezer, Abdulezer, and Dammond (2007) affirm that "Skype™ can dramatically alter how you exchange information, how you meet new people, and how you interact with friends, family, and colleagues" (p. 9). Chen and Cordier (2008) maintain that Skype™ offers one of the most popular voice-over internet protocol services and with a computer, an internet connection, and a few simple steps, foreign language speakers and learners can connect with and call one another across time zones. Chen and Cordier also point out that with Skype™ you can dial a contact (provided the person you are calling has also downloaded Skype™) and talk to and from any country, using a headset and microphone plugged into your computer.

Though there are many different things that can be done through Skype™ nowadays, for the purpose of this study, the main Skype™ features used during its development and implementation were the conference calls.

Although many consumer audio and video conferencing tools are available on the market (iChat, Skype™, MSN Messenger, etc.), literature on the use of such tools is still scarce (Kinoshita, 2008). Godwin-Jones (2005) explored the use of Skype™ and podcasting for language teaching and learning purposes in online environments. Overall, he found that

> both Skype™ and podcasting can be considered "disruptive technologies" in that they allow for new and different ways of doing familiar tasks and offer intriguing opportunities for language professionals and learners, as they provide additional channels for oral communication. (p. 9)

Similarly, Elia (2006) conducted a research study where she explored the effect of Skype™ for language learning in *Tandem*.[3] For this, she used and recommended *The Mixxer* (http://www.language-exchanges.org/) which is a free educational website for language exchanges via Skype™. She concluded that

> Skype™ language learning through "Mixxer" can be a convincing application to be widely supported, experimented, and its efficacy monitored in different language learning contexts, as it can be a valid aid in trying to support language learners who always face problems connected to the difficulty in having contact with native speakers. (p. 275)

More recently, Coburn (2010) conducted an action research study focusing on

> the online teaching of English conversation through Skype™, a VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol). [He concluded that] information elicited from interviews with eight conversation facilitators showed how conversation assignments needed to be designed in order to facilitate interaction patterns conducive to language learning. In other words, there was a need to introduce new tasks for weaker students though this implied that students would need to bring printed resource materials with them to the online conversations. As for the intermediate students who already possessed sufficient linguistic resources to interact more easily, increased task variety

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3   *Tandem Language Exchange*: Launched in Edinburgh in 2007, Tandem is a popular language exchange program run by the Edinburgh University Students' Association (EUSA). (http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/getinvolved/eusaglobal/languages/tandem/)

and more student-centered topics could offer relief for struggling conversation facilitators and students. (p. 1)

In Colombia, research in the area of language teaching and learning through Skype™, especially for the promotion of the English speaking skill, is rather new and unexplored. Recently, Beltrán (2009) conducted a research study in which she explored "the use of Skype™ chat for improving writing skills in an A2 adult learners group" (p. 4). She concluded that Skype™ text chat prompts students' motivation through the use of technology and is an opportunity to improve the teacher's performance. Although the target population of Beltrán's study was similar to the population of this study in regard to the participants' chronological age (adult learners), their language levels, learning context, and research focus were totally different from those specified in this study.

Method

Type of Study and Data Collection Instruments

This research project was carried out under the features and conditions of a qualitative research. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), "qualitative research allows researchers to get at the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables" (p. 12). Within the umbrella term of *qualitative research* is found what has been called *action research*. "Action research is defined as an investigation conducted by the person or the people empowered to take action concerning their own actions, for the purpose of empowering their future actions" (Sagor, 2005, p. 4). Burns (2010) adds that action research can be a very valuable way to extend our teaching skills and gain more understanding of ourselves as teachers, our classrooms, and our students.

The data analysis procedure chosen in this study was a qualitative data analysis. According to Dey (1993), "a qualitative data analysis involves breaking data into bits, and then 'beating' the bits together. It is a process of resolving data into [their] constituent components to reveal [their] characteristic elements and structure" (p. 31). Similarly, Corbin and Strauss (2008) define qualitative data analysis as "a process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (p. 1).

Taking into consideration that a whole range of procedures can be employed in analyzing qualitative data (Darlington & Scott, 2002; Dey, 1993; Norton, 2009), the methodology of data analysis adopted in this study was grounded theory. "Grounded theory is a specific methodology developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 for the purpose of building theory from data and it denotes theoretical constructs derived from qualitative analysis of data" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 1). In order to successfully develop grounded theory, it is necessary to use a procedure called coding (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Richards and Schmidt (2002) define coding as a "research technique in which data that have been collected are turned into classes or categories (i.e. codes)" (p. 81) while Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) understand it as "a procedure for organizing the text of the transcripts, and discovering patterns within that organizational structure" (p. 31).

The data collection instruments chosen for the development and application of this project were the researcher's reflection journal, surveys, and focus groups. The journal provided the researcher with a space in which to reflect critically and analytically upon emerging events and constraints of the study, learners' talk, and classroom procedures related to the intervention process of this research study. In this regard, Burns (2010) states that journals are extremely "useful as a way of capturing significant

reflections and events in an ongoing way" (p. 89). A total of three focus groups of four participants each were administered by the end of the pedagogical intervention phase of this study. According to Stringer (2007), "focus groups provide other means of acquiring information and might be characterized as a group interview" (p. 73). In this respect, Burns (2010) affirms that "focus groups have the advantage of taking the individual spotlight off one speaker, who may get nervous or anxious about being interviewed, and allowing ideas and thoughts to be triggered by others in the group" (p. 77). One survey was administered by the end of the pedagogical intervention process of this study. According to Stringer (2007), "a survey may provide a very useful tool for extending the data collection to a broader range of participants in later stages of action research" (p. 38). Burns (2010) also affirms that "surveys conducted by your students about their views on various aspects of language learning can provide you with good sources of information" (p. 54).

Context and Participants

This research took place at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas (Bogotá, Colombia), especially in the ILUD, which is the language institute of the university. The action research focal group consisted of 12 EFL adult A1 learners whose ages varied from 18 to 40 years old. Four of the participants were men and eight of them were women. The learners' educational backgrounds also varied as they came from different socio-economic groups and academic backgrounds. The study population consisted of students from different faculties of the university, professionals of different vocations, and self-employed people who learn English for varied reasons. At the moment of implementation and development of this research study, its target population was taking an introductory 1 English course. The level of English of the group consisted of basic users (A1) according

to the CEFR. The general purpose of the course, according to the syllabus, was to provide the group with basic grammatical forms of English and to develop appropriate pronunciation patterns. It also aimed at raising the learners' awareness in terms of form, meaning, and function of the language features learned along the instruction process.

Pedagogical Intervention

This research study was divided into three main stages: pre-, while, and post pedagogical implementation.

- Pre-stage: This initial stage was essentially devoted to informing the participants and the administrative staff at ILUD of the main objectives of the implementation of this research project.

- While stage: During the pedagogical intervention of this project, the online Skype™ conference calls were implemented. Fifty hours of the pedagogical intervention were held according to the participants' time availability. Thus, these online sessions were scheduled on Saturday and Sunday evenings from 5:00 to 9:00 p.m. It means that the 50 hours of the online Skype™ conference calls were covered within a total of eight weeks. Three (maximum four) participants, plus the researcher of the study integrated each online session. Before the online sessions, the researcher provided the participants with a set of questions based on the main topic of discussion of the session, so participants were familiar with the questions they were to talk about during the online sessions. The topics of discussion for the online sessions were the same topics that the participants had previously covered during their ordinary face-to-face sessions. These topics were chosen since the idea was to provide learners with the opportunity to orally practice the same topics that they had gone through during their live sessions. Thus, each session mainly intended to practice and develop

the learner's speaking skill through an online-based learning environment.

- Post stage: Once the 50 hours of pedagogical intervention were covered with online Skype™ sessions, two data collection instruments were applied by the researcher. The first one was a survey and the second one was a focus group. Both instruments aimed at collecting data related to the participants' insights on the experience of making use of Skype™ conference calls to promote their speaking skill about their course contents.

Results

In order to arrive at the following outlined results, it was necessary to go through the following coding steps: open, axial, and selective coding. These coding phases were defined and understood as follows: During the first step, open coding, the researcher began by "breaking data down into manageable pieces, reflecting upon those data and conceptualizing what he thought the data were indicating" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 193). The second term, axial coding, was understood as the process of crosscutting or relating concepts to each other (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The final step in the analysis of data in this study—selective coding—consisted of "selecting the central category, relating it to other categories, validating those relationships and filling in categories that needed further refinement and development" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 116). The central or core category in this study was identified as: Promoting Social Interaction Skills in English Language Learning. This core category has the ability to explain or convey "theoretically" what this research study was all about (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This emerging core category is supported by the following subcategories: Fluency Reinforcement and Oral Reinforcement of Course Contents.

Through this process of data analysis, it was necessary to fall back on the principles of triangulation in order to validate the emerging conclusions and findings resulting from the process of seeking relationships between categories as named by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Triangulation has to do with "the process of collecting data from several different sources or in different ways in order to provide a fuller understanding of a phenomenon" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 565).

Discussion

Promoting Social Interaction Skills in English Language Learning

This category aims to show that the use of Skype™ conference calls promotes EFL A1 adult learners' social interaction skills outside the classroom setting. Nash and Calonico (1996) define social interaction as "a process of communication and mutual influence involving contact between two or more minds" (p. 68). Social interaction is defined by Fitch and Sanders (2005) as a diverse, multidisciplinary convergence of interests that include conversation analysis, pragmatics, discourse analysis, ethnography, and the subarea of social psychology called language and social psychology. In this study, Skype™ is understood as a computer-mediated communication tool that uses the internet as the main means of online communication and social interaction. In this respect, Dumova and Fiordo (2010) affirm that the introduction of social interaction technologies has helped the internet to reflect the real world with its rich social connections and interactions more closely. It is not a secret that those social connections have been greatly impacted by the use of new technologies and computer-mediated communication tools such as Skype™. Therefore, the shift from more traditional social interaction settings such as the language classroom to a more computer-driven learning environment might represent a challenge for both language teachers and learners. In this respect, Dumova and Fiordo state that the lack of physical presence is challenging but

social interaction technologies enable learning as the key process of virtual work to be achieved more deeply. This was in essence the main purpose of this study as the major goal was to provide learners with a computer-driven learning environment that enabled them to interact with others while using and communicating in the target language.

The learners' need to socially interact with others was one of the most recurrent patterns identified throughout the data collection and analysis stages of this study. It was found that this social interaction need was evident in a high number of occasions all through the students' surveys, focus groups, and the teacher's reflective instrument. More specifically, it was found that learners seemed to notice a relevant connection between language and social interaction practices. In this respect, Fitch and Sanders (2005) identify a bilateral relationship between language and social interaction: "Language use is examined with reference to the social interactions that comprise it and social interactions are examined with reference to the language use that forms and organizes them" (p. 4). From this statement, it could be inferred that learners in this study seemed to notice the relevance of using the target language with the main purpose of socially interacting with their peers through the use of Skype™ conference calls. The following excerpts, collected from the same learner in different data collection instruments and corroborated by an entry taken from the researcher's reflective instrument, show clear examples of the above discussed need for social interaction through the use of the target language:

Excerpt 1

I think that Skype™ helps me speak with my other classmates out of the classroom and I can practice my English this way. (Student 4, Survey)[4]

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4   Excerpts from students have been translated from their original language, Spanish.

Excerpt 2

Yes, Student 2 is right. Skype™ is good because I can practice English with my classmates and with friends that I have from other levels. (Student 4, Focus group)

Excerpt 3

Students expressed that they liked Skype™ because they could interact in English among them. They also said that they could use Skype™ conference calls to keep in touch with their old friends at a low price. (Researcher's reflective journal, third online session)

As noticed in the above-presented excerpts, students acknowledged that Skype™ conference calls helped them practice their language skills and at the same time expand their social relationships; not only with their classmates but also with other people they knew from diverse contexts. It was also evidenced from the excerpts that students seemed to use the language as a means of constructing their social networks which is congruent with Maynard and Peräkylä's (2003) assumption that "it is partly through language that humans 'do' the social world" (p. 233).

The following subcategories are linked to the previously outlined category and also respond to the research question of this study.

Fluency Reinforcement

The participants of this study agreed that they had reinforced their oral language fluency by means of the Skype™ conference calls. This can be evidenced through the following excerpts, collected from the same learner in different data collection instruments.

Excerpt 4

I feel that the Skype™ conference calls have helped me speak better and more fluently in English. (Student 10, Survey)

Excerpt 5

When you are in the Skype™ conference calls, you have time to organize your ideas while another person is speaking. Then, you can speak better and more confidently. (Student 10, Focus group)

In this study, the idea of reinforcement is understood as the "strengthening of a response as a result of repetition followed by a positive reward" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 453). Similarly, Ashford, LeCroy, and Lortie (2001) define reinforcement as "anything (a reinforcer) that follows a behavior and increases the likelihood of that behavior" (p. 92). According to Miller (2006), "a reinforcer is any event or stimulus that follows a behavior closely in time and increases the frequency of that behavior" (p. 48). This way, the idea of reinforcement in this study is understood as the strengthening of a certain language system (such as fluency) that can be developed or acquired by the language learner in his/her learning process.

In relation to the idea of fluency, Richards and Schmidt (2002) claim that

> in second and foreign language teaching, fluency describes a level of proficiency in communication, which includes:
>
> (a) The ability to produce written and/or spoken language with ease.
>
> (b) The ability to speak with a good but not necessarily perfect command of intonation, vocabulary, and grammar.
>
> (c) The ability to communicate ideas effectively.
>
> (d) The ability to produce continuous speech without causing comprehension difficulties or a breakdown of communication. (p. 204)

For the purpose of this study, the level of fluency which has been analyzed and taken into account is that of "the ability to speak with a good but not necessarily perfect command of intonation, vocabulary, and grammar" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 204). This level of fluency has been chosen as it represents the most concurrent patterns identified throughout the data collection and analysis stages of this study. Additionally, in this study, fluency is referred specifically to speaking; however, today the concept is also being used as regards other major skills, such as "reading fluency" and "fluency in writing" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002; Simensen, 2010).

As noticed in the above-presented excerpts, learners agreed that through the Skype™ conference calls they felt they could communicate in English more fluently as they had the necessary time to organize their ideas in mind while other participants were doing their interventions. Furthermore, the fact of informing learners with anticipation of the main topics or ideas to be discussed throughout each Skype™ conference also seemed to help them become more fluent in their spoken language as they could plan ahead and slightly structure their ideas before the actual Skype™ conference took place. On top of that, the main purpose of the Skype™ conference calls was to orally reinforce the same language contents that learners had previously been exposed to during their ordinary face-to-face sessions. It means that they were already familiarized with such contents which made it easier for them to actively participate in the online Skype™ conference calls with ease and fluency.

The use of Skype™ conference calls helped learners reinforce their oral language fluency as they could communicate in the target language more effortlessly and with an easier command of language. This statement responds to the principle that "fluency is typically measured by speed of access or production and by the number of hesitations" (Nation & Newton, 2009, p. 152). This was evidenced through the following excerpts:

Excerpt 6

I think that the Skype™ conference calls have helped me to speak English more fluently and more confidently as well. (Student 9, Focus group)

Excerpt 7

After this Skype™ conference today, I noticed that Students 5 and 9 could communicate in English more fluently and with less pauses than before. (Researcher's reflective journal, fourth online session)

As noticed in the previous samples, the Skype™ conference calls seemed to have a direct

influence on the learners' oral language fluency. This was demonstrated as learners agreed that by means of the online Skype™ encounters, they could communicate in the target language more effortlessly, with less hesitation and better speed production. Such manifested reinforcement in the learners' oral language fluency might have been influenced by various aspects, among them: (a) their active engagement in the Skype™ conferences, (b) allocated time for preparing their participation of every Skype™ conference with anticipation, and (c) the fact that learners were familiarized with the topics of discussion during the Skype™ conferences. Whatever the influencing factor might have been, it was evidenced that the Skype™ conference calls seemed to have a positive effect on the learners' oral language fluency, especially when reinforcing course contents.

Oral Reinforcement of Course Contents

The participants of this study also agreed that through the Skype™ conference calls they had been able to orally reinforce course contents and increase their English practice from out-of-class learning environments. This can be evidenced through the following excerpts, collected from the same learner in different data collection instruments and corroborated by an entry taken from the researcher's reflective instrument.

Excerpt 8

The good thing of the Skype™ conference calls is that one can practice the topics that we study in class but in an oral way. This way, one progressively forgets about the fear to speak. (Student 1, Survey)

Excerpt 9

Yes, with these Skype™ conference calls, one can practice in a spoken way what we study in the face-to-face class.

Excerpt 10

Students affirmed that one of the best things of the Skype™ conference calls is that they can practice and reinforce the same topics that have studied in class but in an oral way. (Researcher's reflective journal, second online session)

As stated above, the word reinforcement in this study is understood as "anything (a reinforcer) that follows a behavior and increases the likelihood of that behavior" (Ashford et al., 2001, p. 92). On the contrary, the word course content in this study refers to all the different activities, language-related exercises, and linguistic items that integrate a language program. Having said this, and as it has been evidenced in the above-presented excerpts, participants in this study declared that Skype™ conference calls might be considered as a valuable and potential tool for oral reinforcement of course contents, especially in the field of language teaching and learning. In this respect, Flewelling and Snider (2005) state that technological tools (such as Skype™) "can help instructors address the oral skills in a more balanced fashion since it can so effectively facilitate oral language reinforcement" (p. 96).

Additionally, it was noticed that learners were highly engaged into participating in the online Skype™ encounters. This was evidenced through their positive and enthusiastic reactions and feelings towards the proposed Skype™ conference calls with the main purpose of oral practice of class topics. This can be supported through the following excerpts:

Excerpt 11

Yes, I really enjoyed the Skype™ conferences because I could talk about the same themes of the class but with more time and in a more comfortable way. (Student 5, Focus group)

Excerpt 12

I always felt really good in the Skype™ conferences with the teacher and my other classmates because the topics of the conferences were the same topics of the class. Also, the teacher gave us the questions to talk about in the conferences with anticipation, so it was easy for me to talk about the same topics that we had studied in class before. (Student 6, Survey)

Thus, it can be inferred that the Skype™ conference calls influenced learners' engagement to orally practice course contents for the following two reasons: First, the Skype™ conference calls made it

easier for them to speak about the same topics of their face-to-face sessions as they were already familiarized with such topics. This way, learners could continue expanding and reinforcing their course contents with a different, fashionable, and attractive method. Second, the Skype™ conference calls influenced the learners' engagement to practice course contents as they had much more time to talk and express their own opinions about such contents than during their face-to-face sessions. That is to say, the idea of having more time to talk about the proposed topics through the Skype™ conference calls seemed to engage learners to participate more actively in the online encounters.

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

This research aimed at promoting EFL adult A1 learners' speaking skill through Skype™ conference calls out of classroom settings at ILUD. The analysis and interpretation of data drew the following conclusions in response to this main objective.

It was found that the Skype™ conference calls might be considered an influential CMC tool to promote EFL adult A1 learners' speaking skill, especially for social interaction purposes out of classroom settings. This finding was evidenced as the participants in this research project acknowledged that the Skype™ conference calls helped them practice their language skills and at the same time expand their social relationships, not only with their classmates but also with other people they knew from diverse contexts. It was also evidenced that learners used the language as a means of constructing their social networks which is congruent with Maynard and Peräkylä's (2003) assumption that "it is partly through language that humans 'do' the social world" (p. 233). Additionally, it was evidenced that the Skype™ conference calls might also help learners in the reinforcement of both their fluency in the target language and their language course contents out of formal classroom settings. It was evidenced that

the Skype™ conference calls might also help learners increase their English practice from out-of-class learning environments since learners acknowledged that through the Skype™ conference calls they tended to have much more time to practice their spoken language skills than during their face-to-face sessions.

Any English language researcher, instructor, or learner who decides to implement Skype™ conference calls with the main purpose of promoting social interaction skills towards English language learning (main findings of this study), should take into account these recommendations: The participants in this study suggested that the smaller the number of people participating in the online Skype™ conferences, the better they are as they could have more time to speak and practice their English language knowledge and skills. They also suggested that the Skype™ conference calls could be implemented through other subject matters in the curriculum with academic and pedagogic purposes. They suggested that teachers and learners from any subject matter from the curriculum could arrange to have Skype™ conferences with different purposes; for example, to delve deeper into specific classroom contents, to revise and conclude with unfinished classroom topics, or simply to provide feedback on any homework or assignment from the face-to-face sessions. It is also recommended asking students to be on hand half an hour or a minimum of fifteen minutes before the actual time of the Skype™ conference, so that any technical or technological problems can be solved before the actual conference scheduled times.

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