



STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF BLENDED ASYNCHRONOUS AND SYNCHRONOUS LEARNING IN AN ADVANCED SPANISH CONVERSATION CLASS

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Abstract:

This study examines students' perception of blended asynchronous and synchronous learning in an advanced L2 Spanish conversation course that took place at a major-sized public university in the United States as an intensive 5-week summer course during the COVID-19 pandemic. Twenty students participated in a survey, which was comprised with open-ended questions about their overall perception about the online activities and learning, in addition to 51 five-point Likert scale questions about course design, course components, instructor feedback, and peer interactions and rapport. Findings indicate that most of students perceived that they have gained proficiency in speaking, listening, reading and writing, and they felt more comfortable and confident in communicating in Spanish. The activities that students perceived more helpful than others in enhancing communication skills in Spanish were both the semi-guided synchronous, unsupervised group conversations via Zoom and the asynchronous video reports and discussions, while the small group Zoom conversation activity was also perceived as the most enjoyable. Students' overall positive perceptions and satisfaction about this blended course were achieved through a combination of several factors, such as the clarity of the course design and instructions, the right combination of asynchronous and synchronous online activities that provided students with enriched materials to learn as well as ample opportunities to practice Spanish, the interactions and support with peers that created a sense of learning community and connectedness, and the instructor's timely and constant feedback, rapport, and social presence to motivate students to learn.

Keywords: foreign language, asynchronous, synchronous, blended learning, course design

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1. Introduction

Online language learning or E-learning of language has been found as useful as face-to-face (F2F) classes even if teaching online presents challenges of its own (Money Penny & Aldrich, 2016; Goertler & Gacs, 2018; Gacs et al., 2020). Greater challenges are often encountered when teaching and learning a second language (L2) online, in which the main goal of the L2 classes is normally to enhance the level of language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, not just delivering the content of the course. Achieving such a goal in a virtual setting often requires good preparation and a great deal of time from instructors who must carefully design course content and organization that can be comparable to what students could receive in F2F classrooms. Due to this, it has been more common to observe in the United States, for example, that most of L2 classes in colleges are offered as in-person classes rather than online.

The unexpected onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, however, forced many institutions around the world to swiftly switch from F2F instruction to remote (or online) instruction at the last minute (Farros et al., 2020; Liguori & Winkler, 2020; Bailey et al., 2021; Baker, 2021). This type of unplanned, crisis-prompt online teaching was often called remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020), which, strictly speaking, can be distinguished from online teaching, which typically requires more rigorous preparation and designing of the course. It should be noted, however, that online teaching has often been used as an overarching term for both during emergency situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. While many face-to-face L2 classes were forced to transition into synchronous classes that meet via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and WebEx, for instance, at a set time (Ying et al., 2021), many other L2 classes were converted into asynchronous classes in which students could have more flexibility of choosing when and where to take them during the pandemic. In a rushed situation such as this one, the nature of the asynchronous L2 classes may be mistakenly misunderstood by instructors as a simple transition of class materials from classrooms to a learning management system (LMS) like Canvas, Blackboard, or Moodle as a choice for a course platform. Moreover, many educators as well as learners were not familiar with using e-learning applications proficiently, which often led to a negative attitude towards online learning even if it was understood that online learning was the only viable option during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rohman et al., 2020). Simply putting class materials together in an LMS like Canvas and expecting students to be self-motivated enough to follow through daily or weekly assignments is not equivalent to what students learn and achieve in F2F classes. What's more, classes focusing mainly on conversation in a target language (e.g., Spanish for English-native students) require even more creativity from instructors who must design a course that can enhance students' communication ability in L2 in a virtual setting. There is still much research that needs to be done about how effective foreign language conversation online classes are and how students perceive them (Gyamfi & Suksemuang, 2018). As the global pandemic is still ongoing, it seems important to tackle

this topic as more L2 classes, including conversation classes, have been offered online than ever before.

This study is an attempt to explore the blended asynchronous and synchronous teaching/learning of an Advanced Spanish Conversation class for L1 English speakers, with the aim of examining students' perception of learning Spanish in such virtual environments. While the overall delivery format of this class was asynchronous (meaning students used a learning management system such as Canvas to complete various assignments at their own pace), a small portion of synchronous components was incorporated into this course. In order to understand the blended nature of a course, an examination of the advantages and disadvantages of asynchronous and synchronous learning is in order.

2. Literature review

2.1 Asynchronous learning

Asynchronous learning is not time bound nor place bound, and students can learn the class materials at their own pace anywhere they want as long as there is internet availability (Perveen, 2016). Students can have access to learning materials that are available at their convenience in the form of pre-recorded audio/video lectures, discussion forums, handouts, links to resources, and quizzes/tests via a Learning Management System (LMS) that provides a virtual platform to store all the learning materials and assignments. Without doubt, this flexibility is one of the main advantages of the asynchronous mode when students cannot attend in-person classes regularly due to a tight job schedule or work, family obligations (Ragusa & Crampton, 2017), and even social distancing recommended during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to flexibility and convenience, asynchronous learning can also provide students with an opportunity to develop higher-order learning skills and promote critical thinking processes, (Aviv et al., 2003) as they have more time to respond and construct oral and written responses than F2F classes and synchronous online classes (Perveen, 2016). This self-monitoring and self-assessment process that can be experienced in students' delayed responses can create student-centered, independent learning environments (Murphy, Rodríguez-Manzanares & Barbour, 2011; Goertler, 2019). It was also pointed out that the affective filter (Krashen, 1986) can be lower in asynchronous learning environments than F2F and synchronous classes, as L2 learners can feel less anxiety and fear to perform right on the spot (Murphy & Coleman, 2004; Perveen, 2016).

At the same time, there are challenges for both students and instructors to face in asynchronous classes. Students sometimes find it difficult to keep up with the assignments and due dates on their own unless they are self-disciplined and motivated. Some students wait until the last minute to complete and submit assignments online, and thus the quality of learning could be less than desired. Delayed feedback can also make students feel frustrated and less motivated (Huang & Hsiao, 2012), which can lead to students no longer fully engaging themselves in class activities and assignments, or even

dropping out of the class entirely. Moreover, the lack of sufficient opportunities for socializing with peers can create a sense of isolation and insufficient input and negotiation of verbal and non-verbal communications (Gacs et al., 2020). Likewise, instructors are faced with challenges to carefully plan and design a self-paced system that will lead to students being interested in the class subject, being engaged in class activities and assignments by participating actively, interacting with peers in a virtual setting, and enhancing their analytical and critical thinking skills (Perveen, 2016). Indeed, it has been pointed out that the clarity of the course design, interaction with instructors, and active discussions among peer students are considered key components of students' satisfaction towards asynchronous online learning (Swan, 2001). It can be even more demanding and challenging for instructors to create a successful asynchronous class if the subject is a second/foreign language in which the goal of the class is for students to improve their L2 language proficiency, which requires interactions and oral practice (Murphy & Coleman, 2004; Dlahunty, 2018).

2.2 Synchronous learning

Synchronous learning, on the other hand, refers to learning/teaching that takes place real time in a virtual classroom. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the widely used delivery methods in the United States, for example, has been Zoom (Lieberman, 2020), a digital communication platform and video conferencing tool in which instructors and students can have real-time interactions. Since a synchronous virtual classroom mimics a traditional face-to-face classroom through direct interactions, students can become more motivated and engaged in activities than asynchronous classes (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). Instant feedback, rather than delayed replies and feedback, also provides students with an opportunity to clarify any questions and doubts on the spot (Ene & Upton, 2018). In online language teaching in particular, synchronicity is considered important as it can enhance interpersonal verbal and non-verbal communication skills (Arispe & Blake, 2012). By using a feature such as Breakout Rooms on Zoom, for example, students can actively learn by doing something (i.e., speaking, writing, discussing) instead of simply listening (Brennan, 2020). A synchronous video conferencing tool was also found useful. Han (2013) found that including the instructor's video casting helped students feel more connected to the instructor than a course without this synchronous component.

Although a synchronous delivery method has been widely used for virtual learning in general and also for language learning, there are challenges and limitations. The greatest challenge is the need for students to be available at set times and days, thus limiting their flexibility of when and where to take classes (Gacs et al., 2020). This is especially true for those who have other obligations to their jobs or families, and also for those who inevitably have to miss classes at a set time due to unforeseen circumstances such as illness amid the ongoing pandemic. Internet access and availability is another challenge that some students and instructors may be faced with. As pointed out by Gacs et al. (2020), internet access and time constraints are considered key factors that determine

the levels of interpersonal synchronicity. In addition, fostering interactions in a synchronous class setting is not nearly the same as in a F2F classroom: the instructor is usually the one who talks in a synchronous virtual setting, thus being more teacher-oriented (Murphy et al., 2011; Brennan, 2020), while students (of size 20 and more for a typical language class) remain muted until they participate individually or in break-out rooms in a smaller group (in the case of Zoom). It can also be challenging for instructors to oversee a large group of students on Zoom using Gallery View on a small computer screen, as this can create visual overload and “Zoom fatigue” (Brennan, 2020). Furthermore, managing emotional dynamics in a virtual classroom can pose even greater challenges to instructors due to reduced verbal and non-verbal emotional cues that would be easily detected in a F2F class (Brennan, 2020).

2.3 Blended synchronous and asynchronous learning

Given that both synchronous and asynchronous learning modalities offer different benefits with their own limitations, educators created a mixed approach to online learning, namely, blended synchronous and asynchronous learning to optimize learning outcome (Pflaum, 2020). The term ‘blended learning’ has originally been referred to as a mix of both a face-to-face class and online learning, but it has become common to understand this term to include a mix of synchronous and asynchronous online learning (Pflaum, 2020). Another term for such a learning modality is “bichronous” online learning (Martin et al., 2020). One of the advantages of the blending is that students can still enjoy the flexibility of learning and participating in anytime and anywhere for the asynchronous parts of the course while they can also interact with the instructor and peers and participate in real-time online activities during the synchronous sessions (Martin et al., 2020). Finding a happy middle ground can still be a challenge for the instructor when designing a blended online course, as figuring out the right balance and the logical and efficient flow of the activities that optimizes learning outcomes requires a great deal of familiarity with different technologies and a good understanding of how each activity will contribute to different learning objectives (Martin et al., 2020; Pflaum, 2020). As pointed out by Martin and colleagues (2020), blended online learning can be conceived as a “*continuum between synchronous and asynchronous online learning*,” and how much of each modality is to be integrated into the course design varies depending on courses and course objectives. The integration of synchronous and asynchronous modalities, therefore, can be either including synchronous components in an asynchronous online class or conversely, incorporating some asynchronous components within a synchronous online class. Previous research supports the effects of synchronous activities incorporated into an asynchronous online course and shows that real-time discussions added into an asynchronous course can enhance learning outcomes (Farros et al., 2020). Similarly, in examining a 100% online course equally using both synchronous and asynchronous technologies, Yamagata-Lynch (2014) discovered that synchronous whole class meetings and well-structured small group sessions could help students feel a stronger sense of belonging to the class community and stay engaged in class activities.

2.4. Research questions

The present study examines a blended asynchronous and synchronous Advanced Spanish Conversation course for L1 English students during the in-person class suspension caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and explores students' perception about a variety of teaching methods employed in this course.

The research questions of this study are as follows:

- Do students perceive that they have improved their conversation skills and communication abilities in Spanish after an intensive 5-week blended online class?
- Which online activities and teaching methods do students perceive more enjoyable and helpful than others in enhancing communication skills in Spanish as L2?

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Participants

Twenty undergraduate college students (7 male and 13 female) taking a third-year intensive Advanced Spanish Conversation class during 5 weeks of summer 2020 were recruited from a major-sized public university in the United States. Ages ranged from 18 to 26 with the mean age of 21.5 years. Most of them completed four-semester Spanish courses (beginner and intermediate) or they were tested out prior to taking this course. The native language was English for most participants ($n=15$), while a few reported Spanish ($n=3$) and both Spanish and English ($n=2$) as their home languages. Most of the participants also reported that their perceived level of Spanish was intermediate ($n=15$) while there were 2 beginners, 1 advanced, and 2 native speakers of Spanish. Almost everyone ($n=19$) had some prior exposure to formal instructions of the Spanish language experience in college by taking classes. Half of them ($n=10$) had taken 4 semesters of college-level Spanish prior to taking this course while others had taken fewer semesters or none (1 semester ($n=1$); 2 semesters ($n=2$); 3 semesters ($n=4$); never taken a class ($n=1$). The majority of them ($n=14$) had not taken any Spanish online courses before while only 6 of them had experience with such classes before. Among these 6 students, most of them reported to have taken an asynchronous online Spanish class while only 1 had a synchronous Spanish class. As for online courses in general (not limited to Spanish), 75% of participants ($n=15$) responded they have taken at least one asynchronous online course of any subject before. The majority (13 out of 15) said they had positive experience with that/those asynchronous online class(es) that they have taken. The most common reason (11 out of 13) for their positive experience with the asynchronous online classes was due to the flexible schedule that allowed them work at their own pace. Two students reported that they did not have positive experience with their prior online asynchronous classes because the instructor expected them to teach themselves or he/she would have preferred a classroom lecture. Most of them ($n=17$) reported that in general they are comfortable with technology and online learning, and nearly all of them ($n=19$) responded that they have easy access to the internet at home and/or where they currently stay. Procedures and questionnaires were approved by the Institutional Review Board.

3.2 Questionnaire and procedure

Participants completed a survey about student perceptions towards learning Spanish as a second language in their intensive Advanced Spanish Conversation Class during five weeks of summer as a blended online class. The survey focused on the question of how students perceived a variety of teaching methods that are employed in the blended asynchronous and synchronous online conversation class to enhance their conversation and communication skills in Spanish. The questionnaire asked participants to rate their perceptions about the course and the learning, using a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly agree) (cf: Stepp-Greany, 2002). There were four categories of questions that were grouped together: i) course design conducive to learning; ii) perceptions regarding course components: Video Reports, Small Group Conversation via Zoom; Discussion Board; iii) instructor feedback and communication to enhance learning; and iv) student collaboration and interaction/rapport. In addition, there were three overarching open-ended questions to which students were asked to write free responses about the activities that were 1) most enjoyable and 2) most helpful in improving their listening and speaking skills, and why they perceived that to be the case; and 3) what was the goal in taking this course and if they achieved this goal. Since the course was an intensive five-week summer course, they were asked to complete the survey at the end of the five weeks after completing the course. The anonymous surveys were completed electronically and they were collected using randomly assigned participant identification numbers such as S1 (subject 1), S2, S3, etc.

3.3 Instructional materials and resources

As this was an asynchronous conversation course for the majority with a smaller portion of synchronous activities integrated in the course, a Canvas platform served as a central point for students to visit daily to submit assignments and engage in learning.

Four days a week during five-weeks of summer, they regularly watched introductory short video clips (e.g., YouTube) related to the topics of each chapter (e.g., tourism and travel, education system, health, transportation and airport, restaurants and social life), a series of instructor's pre-recorded audio or video lectures about vocabulary, cultural topics, and grammar, practiced conversation and writing via discussion forums, and regularly checked updates and announcements in Canvas. In addition to these asynchronous components, this course included some additional synchronous activities to provide students with opportunities to practice conversations with peers and the instructor in a real time: semi-guided, unsupervised small group conversations with peers via Zoom and oral interviews with the instructor via Zoom. The following is the outline of the course components and grade percentages, indicating their asynchronous and synchronous nature.

In terms of the number of assignments, asynchronous components occupied most of the class activities (86% [54 out of 63 activities]) while the number of the synchronous activities was much less, occupying 14% (9 out of 63 activities). Note that the participation

was not included in the total count since this was an overall class component that was based on a daily completion and performance. The assessment of the student performance for giving grades was also based mostly on asynchronous elements (70%) and a smaller portion was based on synchronous activities (30%). Among the synchronous components, the activity that students regularly engaged in was the small group conversations done via Zoom meetings while the mid-semester and final interviews with the instructor via Zoom occurred only twice, at a midpoint of the five-week program and at the end, respectively. Therefore, the delivery format of this course can be considered a mix: blended asynchronous and synchronous learning with a heavier emphasis on asynchronous elements to accommodate students' varied needs and situations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1: Course components and asynchronous vs. synchronous delivery formats

Course components	Number of assignments	Percentage of grade allocated	Delivery format
Video reports / Video mini-presentation	7	20%	Asynchronous
Discussion forums	10	25%	Asynchronous
Homework	8	10%	Asynchronous
Mini quizzes	6	10%	Asynchronous
Watching instructor's pre-recorded class lectures	23	No grade assigned	Asynchronous
Small group conversation (Zoom)	7	15%	Synchronous
Mid-semester conversation with the instructor (Zoom)	1	5%	Synchronous
Final oral interview (Zoom)	1	5%	Synchronous
Participation / Preparation	1	10% (5%: Asyn; 5%: Syn)	Asynchronous / Synchronous

The structure of the course for each chapter of the textbook was organized in such a way that i) students were introduced to the theme of the chapter through the instructor's daily pre-recorded video/audio lecture about the cultural reading, vocabulary, and grammar, ii) students completed written homework from the textbook to review concepts they have learned; iii) they recorded themselves on video in Spanish to share it on Canvas with classmates and the instructor; iv) they also reacted to the classmates' video reports and other videos posted by the instructor either in written or oral formats for asynchronous virtual interactions; v) students took weekly chapter quizzes remotely in Canvas at their own pace and convenience before the due date to reinforce learning for new vocabulary and grammar; and vi) at the end of each week/each chapter, they had semi-guided small group conversation meeting via Zoom to engage in more spontaneous, real-time conversations with peers about the assigned topic they have learned throughout the week.

The typical online activities of the week are shown in Figure 1.

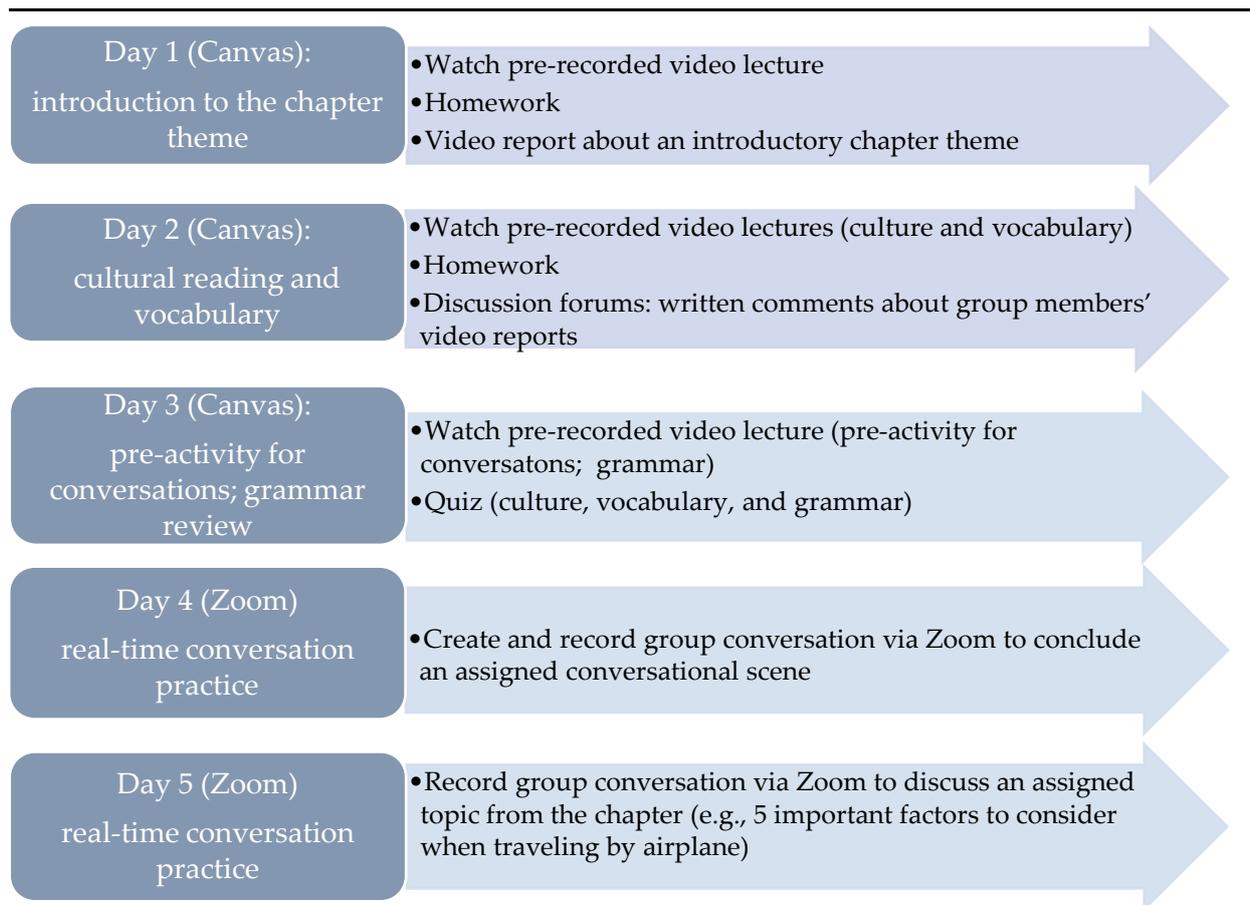


Figure 1: Blended online activities in an advanced Spanish conversation class for a typical week

Among all the didactic materials to manage remote learning, some further descriptions about three instructional resources are in order: video reports (asynchronous), discussion forums (asynchronous), and group conversations via Zoom (synchronous). These three components were designed for students to develop their communication skills through listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

3.4 Video reports / Video mini-presentation

Each student recorded a total of 7 three-minute video reports that addressed different topics assigned from the chapters. The required length of the video was 3 minutes and they were graded based on their content, vocabulary use of the chapter, grammar/structure, fluency/engagement and use of Spanish. Video reports were uploaded onto Canvas to be viewed by either the whole class or by each student' assigned group of 3-4 people for comments and meaningful discussion. Students were required to use at least 3 new vocabulary words learned in the new chapters in their recorded report. For a chapter about health, for instance, students were asked to talk about their experience with health and illness as well as their recommendations to their friends to avoid getting sick. All instructions were written in Spanish in Canvas with the aim to introduce key vocabulary and expressions for the topic.

3.5 Discussion forums

Discussion Forums were one of the asynchronous ways for students to engage one other about the course topics of each chapter in the Canvas platform in either oral (i.e., video) or written formats as indicated in the syllabus and Canvas. This activity was designed for students to exchange their views and reactions about classmates' video reports, written posts, and other video resources such as YouTube posted by the instructor. In order to get full credit for each discussion, students needed to post a thoughtful, well-written and articulated response to the question and make thoughtful comments on the video reports and/or discussions posted by their classmates. For a chapter about health for instance, students were asked to write comments of 5-6 sentences long about each of two video reports of their group members, such as their reactions to the health-related episodes narrated by their peers and any similarities and differences they found between the experiences of their own and their classmates. They were also asked to write any advice to their classmates to promote good health. The purpose of this asynchronous activity was to create meaningful conversations and connections between classmates in a more flexible time-set at their own pace. All instructions were written in Spanish on Canvas.

3.6 Group conversation via Zoom

For each week students were randomly assigned to a group of 3-4 students to practice their conversation skills in Spanish synchronously via Zoom. One of the students in each group was randomly assigned as a group leader to host a Zoom meeting at a time that works for every member to complete a given oral task. The student hosting the meeting was also responsible for recording the group conversation in Spanish and sending the Zoom recording link or the audio file to the instructor by the due date. The group conversation in Spanish that was recorded via Zoom was expected to be about 10-15 minutes for each conversation assignment. Students, however, were still given an option to keep practicing their Spanish with their group beyond this time limit without recording that portion for the instructor. Each student was expected to participate and contribute to the conversation/the oral task equally without one or two students dominating the entire conversation. Each student was graded on their individual effort and performance based on participation and contribution to the conversation, efforts to communicate with others in meaningful way in Spanish, preparation for the given task prior to the meeting as well as on their performance as a group, content and completeness of the task, and vocabulary use.

For example, for an assigned topic about *cinco factores importantes cuando se viaja por avión* "Five important factors when traveling by plane," students were asked to engage in pre- and post-conversation activities in order to prepare themselves well for new vocabulary, stimulate their thinking for the conversation, and maximize their learning in a real-time setting. For their pre-conversation activity, students were asked to watch the instructor's pre-recorded video presentation which provided warm-up and stimulus questions such as *¿Te importa ahorrar dinero?* "Do you care about saving

money?" and *¿Te interesa alimentarte bien y entretenerte mientras viajas?* "Are you interested in eating well and entertaining yourself while traveling?". During the Zoom meeting for each group, students had specific questions to answer (e.g., five factors that matter to them when traveling by air and why they are important; any positive and negative experiences). After each student shared his/her own view, the whole group had to find some similarities or differences between the factors and experiences they have mentioned. They were instructed to use new vocabulary from the chapter about the theme. As a post-conversation activity, students as a group were to write the summary of their responses (e.g., five most common important factors for the whole group when traveling by air), and the group leader was responsible for uploading the Zoom recording link as well as the written summary of their responses onto Canvas.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions elicited students' responses about how they felt about the online class activities and the learning outcome in the blended Spanish Advanced Conversation class. The responses gave insight about the students' overall perception regarding the class. They also served to answer the research question of "Which online activities and teaching methods do students perceive more enjoyable and helpful than others in enhancing communication skills in Spanish?" (responded in Questions #1 and #2) and the research question of "Do students perceive that they have improved their conversation skills and communication abilities in Spanish after an intensive 5-week blended online class?" (responded in Question #3). There were a few additional open-ended questions that prompted responses about any general positive comments about the course and the instructor as well as any challenging aspects and suggestions, which will be mentioned in other sections of this study when relevant.

Question #1. Which of the following online activities / components did you enjoy most in this class and why? Mention two (2) activities and why. (list of activities: 1) video reports and discussions; 2) group conversation via Zoom; 3) instructor's audio or video class lectures; 4) quizzes; 5) homework; 6) oral interview; 7) instructor's audio or written feedback)

The first question focused on what they enjoyed most. Figure 2 shows that the activity that the students enjoyed most was the group conversation done via Zoom (14 out of 20 students), followed by the video reports and discussions (8 out of 20 students). Instructor's audio and written feedback was also perceived enjoyable by 6 students while 4 students chose the instructor's audio or video pre-recorded lectures as an enjoyable activity. The least enjoyable activity was homework (only 1 student perceived it as enjoyable), followed by quizzes (2 students) and an oral interview with the instructor (3 students). It is clear that students enjoyed semi-guided free conversations most; that is, the unsupervised small group conversation of 3-4 people that was conducted synchronously via Zoom at the end of each lesson every week. The second most enjoyable

activity (i.e., video reports and discussion) was also an activity that involved interactions with peers even if asynchronously. In contrast, more traditional activities or assignments such as homework and quizzes that did not require any peer interactions were perceived least enjoyable.

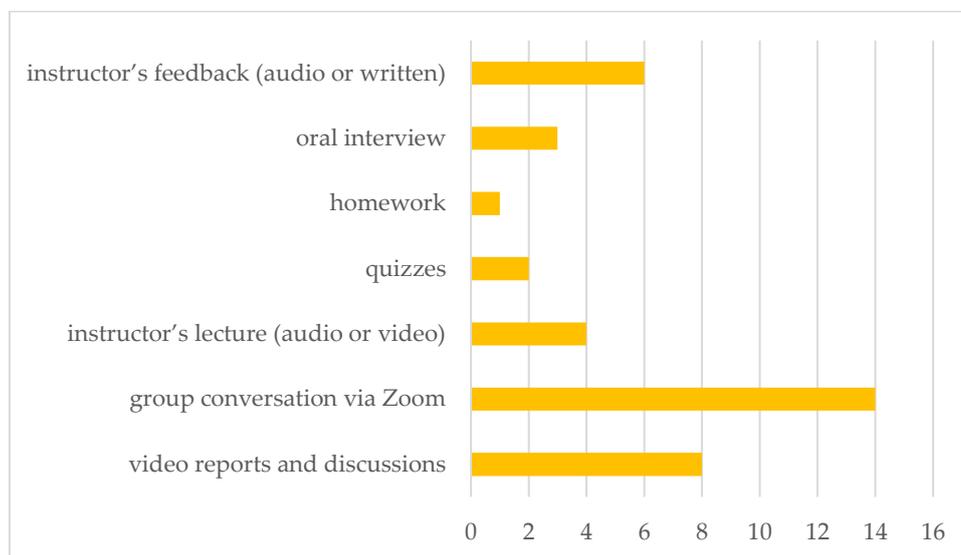


Figure 2: Activities that students enjoyed most

Some of students' comments indicated that the reason they liked the small group conversation via Zoom was because it gave them the opportunity to interact and practice Spanish in an informal real-time setting. A student (identified as S3), who liked the group conversation and the instructor's audio/video lectures most, mentioned that *"I enjoyed the group conversations via Zoom and the instructor's audio and video lectures. I liked the Zooms because it gave me the opportunity to interact with my classmates and practice Spanish in an informal environment. I enjoyed the lectures because it was helpful to have the professor walk us through each chapter and section of the class with in-depth explanations."* Another student (identified as S11) also commented that *"My favorite online activity was group conversation via Zoom because this allowed me to meet face-to-face with other students and carry out a more normal conversation."* A student (identified as S7) also pointed out the interactive nature of the group conversations while mentioning some difficulty as well: *"Although the group conversations via Zoom were a little daunting and could be inconvenient at times, I felt as if that I was not the only one taking the class. I really enjoyed interacting with my fellow classmates."*

On the other hand, several students also enjoyed the asynchronous interactive assignment of video reports and discussions most along with the synchronous small group conversations. A student (identified as S13) commented that *"I enjoyed the video reports and the group conversations because I think those two components push you to speak more. The more you practice orally the more it becomes easier to have the new vocabulary stuck in your head. Since this class is based on conversation, these two elements are the foundation to succeed."* Another student (identified as S15) also reported that the asynchronous video reports and discussions were the key for success: *"I really liked the video reports and discussions. If*

it weren't for these specific assignments, I feel as though I wouldn't have learned as much Spanish because of the course being online."

Question #2. Which of the following online activities / components do you think have helped you improve your listening and speaking skills in Spanish most and why? Mention two (2) activities and why. (list of activities: 1) video reports and discussions; 2) group conversation via Zoom; 3) instructor's audio or video class lectures; 4) quizzes; 5) homework; 6) oral interview; 7) instructor's audio or written feedback)

The second open-ended question was about students' perception about activities that helped them improve their conversational skills, particularly listening and speaking. Figure 3 shows that group conversations via Zoom and video reports/discussions were tied for (11 students each) the most helpful activities that improved their listening and speaking skills in Spanish. The second-most helpful activities were the instructor's audio or video lectures and homework, both of which had a tied number of students (4 students each). The least helpful activity was quizzes: only 1 student selected this activity as being helpful to improve their listening and speaking.

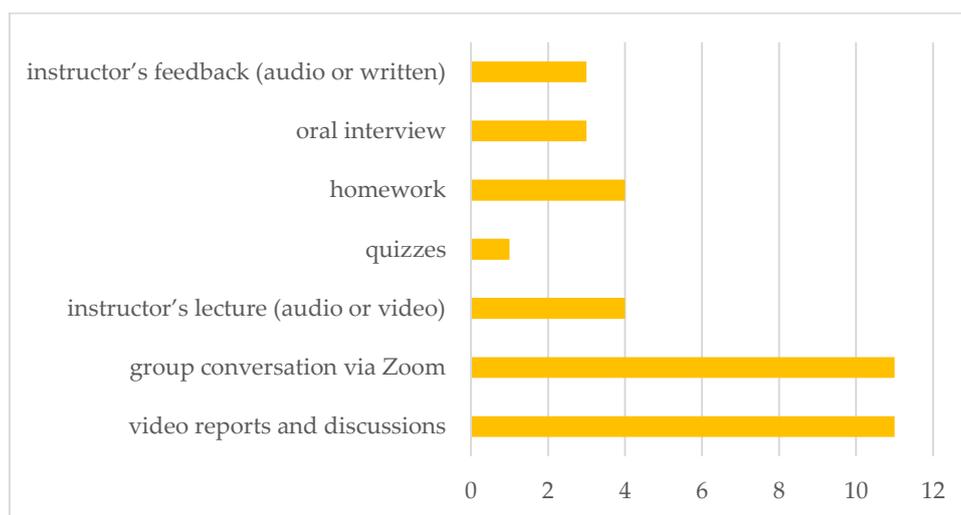


Figure 3: Activities that students perceived helpful in improving listening and speaking skills the most

Several students commented that the group conversation via Zoom forced them to communicate and negotiate among themselves the meaning of the conversations in a real-time setting. A student S7 mentioned that *"The group conversations via Zoom improved my listening and speaking skills because I engaged with my classmates in Spanish conversations. It forced me to ask questions when I did not understand what was occurring."* Another student identified as S6 reported that *"The group conversations via Zoom helped with my listening because I had to pay close attention in order to reply appropriately [...]"*. A student S17 pointed out the helpfulness of the group Zoom conversation in a real-time setting when collaborating with peers to produce a group video to submit in Canvas as an assignment: *"The group Zoom videos also really helped me improve my listening skills since we had to speak*

and respond to other group members. If we messed up, we could pause the video, adjust, and then try again. It was very beneficial to me."

Many students also reported that the individual video reports and discussions improved their listening and speaking in Spanish because these activities required them to rehearse and practice their speaking by watching their own video multiple times before uploading it onto Canvas and sharing it with classmates. A student S8 commented that *"The video reports and discussions are what made me feel like my Spanish was improving. At first, the videos and discussions were hard and required a lot of practice/review for me to get a decent video or post. After the first week I stopped using a script and by the last two weeks, I just recorded my submissions in one take. It was a big sign of my improvement."* Another student S17 also pointed out the importance of listening to others in the recorded videos, which eventually helped them improve their listening comprehension: *"Listening to other students' video comments really helped me in understanding verbal Spanish. Although it was hard at times to understand what they were saying, I did catch bits and pieces of their sentences."* A similar comment was observed by student S19: *"The activity that had helped my Spanish the most was the video reports and discussions because I was able to re-watch myself speaking and work on my pronunciations and dialect."*

At the same time, several students who thought that either the group conversations via Zoom or the video reports and discussions improved their listening and speaking skills most, also mentioned that the instructor's audio/video pre-recorded lectures were helpful in improving their listening skills and pronunciation. A student S9 reported that *"The video reports/discussions and the instructor's audio/video lectures helped me improve my listening and speaking skills the most. I felt that the video reports/discussions helped improve my speaking skills the most, and the audio/video lectures helped improve my listening skills the most."* A student S7 commented that *"The instructor's audio/video class lectures were helpful with understanding the topics better because I was listening rather than reading. Also, when the instructor said words that I did not recognize, I spoke them aloud to understand them better."* Another student S13 also pointed out the useful aspect of the instructor's audio/video lectures for listening and practicing new vocabulary words to pronounce them correctly: *"The two components that helped me improve my listening and speaking skill in Spanish were the group conversations and the instructor's audio or video class lectures. Most of the time my biggest problem is new vocabulary and pronouncing words and in the lectures we would go over the vocabulary which helped to say it correctly. The group conversations were a good way of listening to others and knowing how to respond."*

In summary, the two open-ended questions show that students enjoyed the synchronous small group conversation via Zoom most and also thought that this was the activity that helped them improve their proficiency of listening and speaking most. The asynchronous video reports and discussions were students' second favorite activity even though students still perceived this activity as equally effective and helpful in enhancing their speaking skills as the small group Zoom conversation.

On the other hand, an open-ended Question #3 (stated below) gave insight into the research question of "Do students perceive that they have improved their

conversation skills and communication abilities in Spanish after an intensive 5-week blended online class?" The result of the open-ended Question #3 indicates that most students felt that their speaking skills were improved.

Question #3. What was your goal in taking this course, and were you able to achieve that goal?

The responses of the open-ended Question 3 indicate that most students (15 out of 20 students) reported that the goal was to improve their Spanish speaking skills and that all of them said that they have achieved the goal. Four students mentioned somewhat different goals such as refreshing vocabulary and Spanish, having experience of taking a non-native Spanish class for L2 learners, and practicing his/her Spanish dialect, and all of them reported that they achieved the goals. For instance, a student S4 wrote *"My goal was to learn and experience what it was like to take a non-native Spanish class. Turns out I learned more than I thought I knew,"* and a student S14 reported that *"My goal was to refresh my vocabulary and I definitely achieved that!"* Only one student mentioned that the goal was to learn more words and comprehend Spanish (rather than speak better Spanish) and he/she commented that his/her Spanish has gotten better a bit but not too much, because it was still somewhat hard *"when Spanish is spoken to me fast"* (student identified as S2).

Among those 15 students whose goal was to improve their Spanish speaking skills, it is noteworthy that many students mentioned the words 'fluent' and 'comfortable.' For example, a student S1 commented that *"My goal was to gain more comfort and fluency in speaking Spanish. I definitely achieved this goal to a satisfying extent,"* and similarly, a student S3 also reported that *"My goal was to improve my Spanish speaking skills and become more comfortable speaking Spanish and I feel that I have achieved that goal."* A student S11 also agreed that *"My goal while taking this course was to become more comfortable speaking Spanish. I think I was able to achieve this goal because I felt very prepared and able in comparison to other students during group conversations."* In addition to 'comfort' and 'fluency', the word 'confidence' also appears often in students' comments. For instance, a student S10 wrote *"This class helped me along the path to fluency. I wouldn't say I had a particular goal, maybe to improve my spoken Spanish. Regardless, this class has given me a bit more confidence when it comes to speaking Spanish with native speakers. It has also helped me realize that speaking Spanish is fun!"* Another student (S12) also mentioned gaining confidence after taking this class even if she/he might still have preferred an in-person class for a better outcome: *"My goal for taking this course was to improve my Spanish speaking skills. I think I have accomplished gaining the confidence to speak even if my speech is not perfect. Moreover, I also learned new patterns of speech and improved my thought process when speaking Spanish. (I can talk faster than before) However, I do feel that I still would have gotten more from a face-to-face classroom interaction but considering the situation I am satisfied with the result of the course."* In summary, Question #3 revealed that overall, 19 out of 20 students perceived that they have achieved their goal by improving proficiency in speaking and listening ($n=15$) or by building vocabulary and refreshing their own Spanish dialect ($n=4$).

4.2 Five-point Likert scale questions

The questionnaire contained 51 statements and students were asked to indicate whether they strongly disagree (1 point), disagree (2 points), are neutral (3 points), agree (4 points), or strongly agree (5 points), using a 5-point Likert scale. An average score was calculated for each statement, being 1, the lowest possible score and 5, the highest possible score.

Category 1. Perceptions about course design conducive to learning & learning outcomes

The first category of survey questions consisted of 17 statements about the course design and effectiveness, students' perception about the improvement of four communication skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) and the ability to interact with others, their overall participations and comparisons with face-to-face classes.

A glimpse at Figure 4 shows that students overwhelmingly strongly agreed (dark blue) or agreed (yellow) with most of the statements as indicated in the larger portion of the dark blue and yellow colors occupying for each bar (i.e., each question). Table 2 shows a complete list of questions under this category along with the number of student responses for each statement. The average value for each statement was calculated based on points given for each scale (SD = strongly disagree [1 point]; D = disagree [2 points]; N = neutral [3 points]; A = agree [4 points]; SA = strongly agree [5 points]).

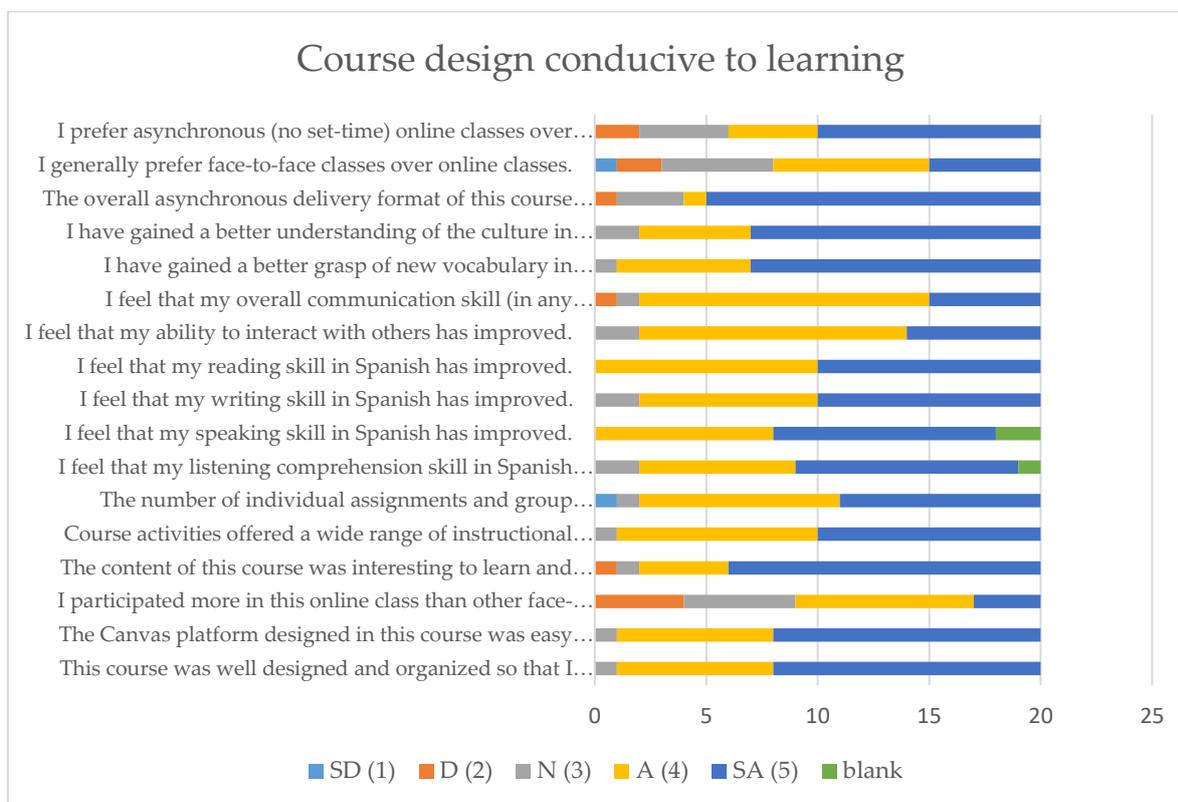


Figure 4: Perceptions about course design conducive to learning
[Note: SD = strongly disagree (1 point); D = disagree (2 points); N = neutral (3 points);
A = agree (4 points); SA = strongly agree (5 points)]

There were 4 questions about the format of the online classes. For Question #16 *"I generally prefer face-to-face classes over online classes,"* 60% ($n=12$) of the students agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (average value: 3.65 out of 5.00, as in Table 2). This means that more than half of the students were taking an Advanced Spanish Conversation class online as this was the only delivery format available due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but they might have preferred to take this class face-to-face if this class were offered in person. As for the asynchronous vs. synchronous online format (Question #17), in turn, 70% ($n=14$) of the students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *"I prefer asynchronous (no set-time) online classes over synchronous online (e.g., Zoom) classes"* (average value: 4.10 out of 5.00). The reason most students preferred an asynchronous format over a synchronous format appears to be the convenience as stated in Question #15, *"The overall asynchronous delivery format of this course was convenient for my schedule and situation,"* with which 80% ($n=16$) of the students agreed or strongly agreed (average value: 4.50 out of 5.00). For the participation level compared between this particular online course and face-to-face classes (Question #3), about half (55%, $n=11$) of the students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that *"I participated more in this online class than other face-to-face Spanish classes that I have taken"* (average value: 3.50 out of 5.00), with 20% ($n=4$) of the students disagreeing and 25% ($n=5$) selecting the response 'neutral.' This result indicates that the overall perception regarding the amount of participation that the students did in this online class was slightly more than a regular face-to-face class that they could have taken.

The second sub-group of questions were about general perceptions about the course design, content, and activities, which consisted of 5 questions. Students strongly perceived that this course was well designed and organized so that they could easily follow through the required assignments (Question #1) and that the Canvas platform designed in this course was easy to navigate (Question #2). Nearly all of them (95%, $n=19$) agreed or strongly agreed with the statements in both questions with the average value of 4.55 (out of 5.00). Likewise, most students (90%, $n=18$) agreed or strongly agreed that the content of this course was interesting to learn and stimulated their thinking (Question #4; average value: 4.55 out of 5.00), and that almost all of them (95%, $n=19$) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that *"Course activities offered a wide range of instructional materials and techniques to help me move progressively towards a higher level of linguistic proficiency"* (Question #5; average value: 4.45 out of 5.00). As for the number of required assignments, most students (90%, $n=18$) agreed that the number of individual assignments and group assignments was adequate and balanced (Question #6; average value: 4.25 out of 5.00). In summary, the result of these five questions about the course design and content demonstrates that most students perceived that this online Spanish conversation course was thoughtfully designed, as it allowed for easy navigation of class materials on Canvas, had an adequate number and logical sequence of activities, and contained interesting content to stimulate their learning.

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Table 2: Questions and number of responses for course design

Questions	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	Blank	Avg. value
1. This course was well-designed and organized so that I could easily follow through the required assignments.	0	0	1	7	12	0	4.55
2. The Canvas platform designed in this course was easy to navigate.	0	0	1	7	12	0	4.55
3. I participated more in this online class than other face-to-face Spanish classes that I have taken.	0	4	5	8	3	0	3.50
4. The content of this course was interesting to learn and stimulated my thinking.	0	1	1	4	14	0	4.55
5. Course activities offered a wide range of instructional materials and techniques to help me move progressively towards a higher level of linguistic proficiency.	0	0	1	9	10	0	4.45
6. The number of individual assignments and group assignments was adequate and balanced.	1	0	1	9	9	0	4.25
7. I feel that my listening comprehension skill in Spanish has improved after taking this course.	0	0	2	7	10	1	4.42
8. I feel that my speaking skill in Spanish has improved after taking this course.	0	0	0	8	10	2	4.56
9. I feel that my writing skill in Spanish has improved after taking this course.	0	0	2	8	10	0	4.40
10. I feel that my reading skill in Spanish has improved after taking this course.	0	0	0	10	10	0	4.50
11. I feel that my ability to interact with others has improved after taking this course.	0	0	2	12	6	0	4.20
12. I feel that my overall communication skill (in any language) has improved after taking this course through practice and indirect/direct interactions with classmates.	0	1	1	13	5	0	4.10
13. I have gained a better grasp of new vocabulary in Spanish after taking this course.	0	0	1	6	13	0	4.60
14. I have gained a better understanding of the culture in Spanish-speaking countries after taking this course.	0	0	2	5	13	0	4.55
15. The overall asynchronous delivery format of this course was convenient for my schedule and situation.	0	1	3	1	15	0	4.50
16. I generally prefer face-to-face classes over online classes.	1	2	5	7	5	0	3.65
17. I prefer asynchronous (no set-time) online classes over synchronous online (e.g., Zoom) classes.	0	2	4	4	10	0	4.10

The third and last sub-group of 8 questions dealt with students' perception about the effect on learning (Questions #7-14). Overall, nearly all or most students perceived that they have improved their four language proficiency skills in listening comprehension (Question #7; 85% of the students, $n=17$; average value 4.42), speaking (Question #8; 90%

of the students, $n=18$; average value 4.56), writing (Question #9; 90% of the students, $n=18$; average value 4.40), and reading (Question #10; 100% of the students, $n=20$; average value 4.50) after taking this online class. This positive perception concerning the learning outcome is also in line with their comments provided in the open-ended questions that were analyzed in the previous section of the present study. In addition to the language proficiency, students were asked about their perception regarding their ability to interact and communicate with others (Questions #11 and 12), since there is a tendency for an online class with heavy asynchronous components to lack interactions with peers and lead to lacking a sense of community (Sung & Mayer, 2012). Findings indicate that most students felt that their ability to interact with others has improved after taking this course (Question #11; 90% of the students, $n=18$; average value 4.20) and that their *“overall communication skill (in any language) has improved after taking this course through practice and indirect/direct interactions with classmates”* (Question #12; 90% of the students, $n=18$; average value 4.10). It is interesting to note that even in the virtual setting (not in a face-to-face setting) students felt that the asynchronous and synchronous interactions they had with the peers were beneficial in developing their communication skills. In this context, synchronicity, in particular, seems important in online language learning, as it provides an environment to practice interpersonal communication skills in real-time (Arispe & Blake, 2012). On the other hand, in response to questions about the learning outcome of vocabulary and culture, most students believed that they had gained a better grasp of new vocabulary in Spanish after taking this course (Question #13; 95% of the students, $n=19$; average value 4.60) and had also gained a better understanding of the culture in Spanish-speaking countries (Question #14; 90% of the students, $n=19$; average value 4.55).

Category 2. Perceptions about course components: Video reports and discussion forums, and small group conversation via Zoom

There were questions about two course components to which students were to respond: video reports and discussion forums, and small group conversations via Zoom. These components were important in the success of this online conversation class, as these were activities in which students interacted with peers in either asynchronous or synchronous way.

a. Video reports and discussion forums

There were 10 statements about students' perceptions about the video reports and discussion forums. Figure 5 shows the distribution of students' responses for each statement with the color coding [(SD = strongly disagree (light blue); D = disagree (orange); N = neutral (grey); A = agree (yellow); SA = strongly agree (dark blue)]. Overall, students overwhelmingly strongly agreed (dark blue) or agreed (yellow) with most of the statements, except for a couple of questions that geared at eliciting a variety of responses rather than ideal 'agreed' and 'strongly agreed' responses. Those were

questions #25 and #26 (Table 3) that asked about students' preparation for this activity rather than their perceptions.

Table 3 shows that for Question #25, 35% ($n=7$) of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed that they normally wrote a script and practiced/memorized it in order to speak naturally for video reports while 40% ($n=8$) of the total respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (average value 3.00). On the other hand, the result for Question #26 shows that only 10% ($n=2$) of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they tended to rely on looking at the pre-written script while speaking for video reports, with a more than half (60%, $n=12$) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (average value 2.30). The responses for these two questions about students' preparation reveal that most students did not read a script but tried to speak naturally even though some students (40%, $n=8$) prepared a written script ahead of time to memorize it for the video recording.

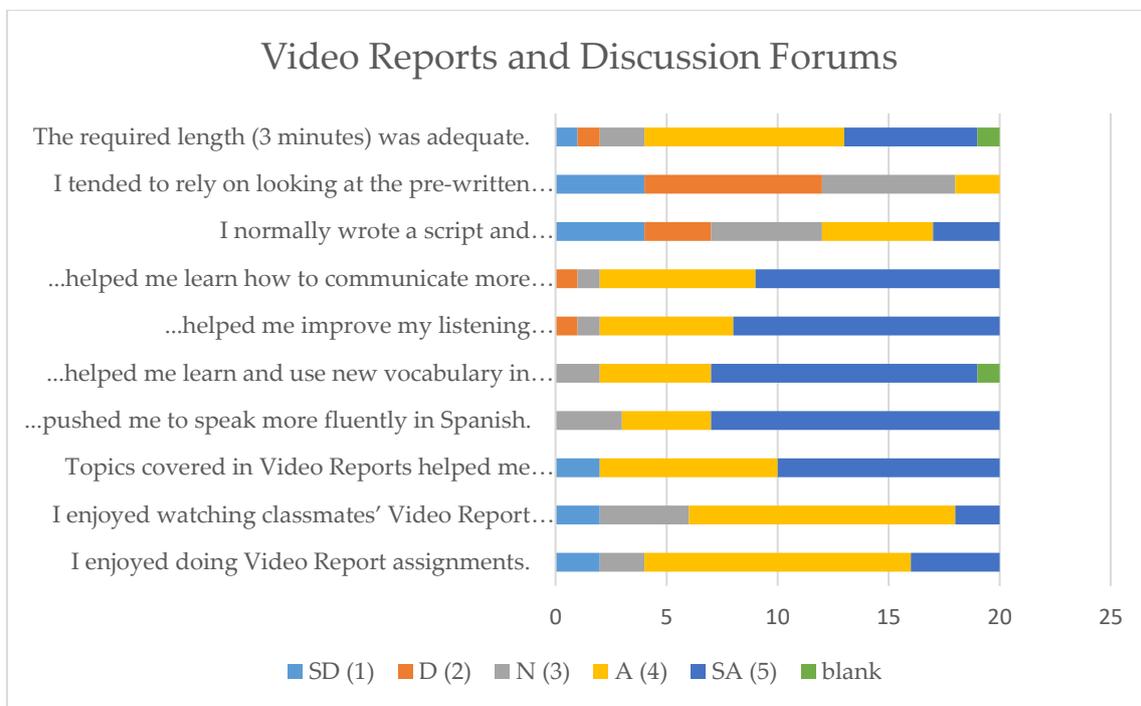


Figure 5: Perceptions about video reports and discussion forums

[Note: SD = strongly disagree (1 point); D = disagree (2 points);

N = neutral (3 points); A = agree (4 points); SA = strongly agree (5 points)]

Overall, most of the students (80%, $n=16$) enjoyed doing video report and discussion forum assignments (Question #18; average value 3.80) and 70% ($n=14$) of the students also enjoyed watching classmates' video report assignments (Question #19; average value 3.60). A closer look at the bar graph (Figure 5) and the number distribution in Table 3, however, reveals that the majority (60%, $n=12$) of the respondents chose a response of "agreed," not a response of "strongly agreed." The average values under 4.00 for these two questions also seem to reveal that students liked the video report and discussion activity to some degree, but not to an extreme degree.

Questions #20-24 were concerning students' perceived learning outcome about the proficiency in listening and speaking, vocabulary, overall communication skills, and cultural understanding. Most students agreed or strongly agreed that video reports and discussion in this class helped them improve their listening comprehension skills in Spanish (Question #23; 90% of the students, $n=18$; average value 4.45), pushed them to speak more fluently in Spanish (Question #21; 85% of the students, $n=17$; average value 4.50), helped them learn and use new vocabulary in Spanish (Question #22; 85% of the students, $n=17$; average value 4.53), and helped them learn how to communicate more effectively (Question #24; 90% of the students, $n=18$; average value 4.40). Most students (90%, $n=18$) also agreed and strongly agreed that topics covered in video reports and discussion forums helped them better understand and learn Hispanic cultures (Question #20; average value 4.20). In summary, the findings are in line with what was discovered in students' responses in open-ended questions: most students perceived that video reports and discussion forums helped them improve their proficiency in listening and speaking and enhanced their learning new vocabulary, culture, and communication skills.

Table 3: Questions and number of responses for video reports and/or discussion forums

Questions	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	Blank	Avg. value
18. I enjoyed doing video report and discussion assignments.	2	0	2	12	4	0	3.80
19. I enjoyed watching classmates' video report assignments.	2	0	4	12	2	0	3.60
20. Topics covered in video reports and discussion forums helped me better understand and learn about Hispanic cultures.	2	0	0	8	10	0	4.20
21. Video reports and discussion forums pushed me to speak more fluently in Spanish.	0	0	3	4	13	0	4.50
22. Video reports and discussion forums helped me learn and use new vocabulary in Spanish.	0	0	2	5	12	1	4.53
23. Video reports and discussion forums helped me improve my listening comprehension skill in Spanish.	0	1	1	6	12	0	4.45
24. Video reports and discussion forums helped me learn how to communicate more effectively.	0	1	1	7	11	0	4.40
25. I normally wrote a script and practiced/ memorized it in order to speak naturally for video reports or discussions.	4	3	5	5	3	0	3.00
26. I tended to rely on looking at the pre-written script while speaking for video reports.	4	8	6	2	0	0	2.30
27. The required length (3 minutes) for video reports was adequate.	1	1	2	9	6	1	3.95

The asynchronous activities such as video reports and discussion forums presented here are often taken to be 'hit or miss' due to the asynchronous nature of interactions as

pointed out by Delahunty (2018); however, well-designed asynchronously interactive activities can promote students' L2 proficiency as well as their motivation to learn as was observed in the findings of the survey.

b. Small group conversations via Zoom

The small group conversation was the only conversation activity that regularly took place synchronously, so it was important to find out how students felt about this activity. A group of 3-4 students were to set up a time on their own to meet via Zoom, which might have been somewhat challenging to coordinate due to their other summer classes and job schedule if they also work. As shown in Figure 6 and Table 4, the result of the survey reveals that most students enjoyed this activity (Question 28; 80% of the students, $n=16$; average value 3.95) and felt more connected to their classmates and class through the small group conversation activities via Zoom (Question 29; 90% of the students, $n=18$; average value 4.25). In addition, Questions #35, 36, and 41 asked whether students preferred not to have this synchronous activity in order to find out if the inconvenience of scheduling made them perceive this activity as less preferable. The results indicate that students indeed perceived that the small group conversation activity formed an essential part in their learning. Most students (85%, $n=17$) agreed or strongly agreed that without small group conversations via Zoom this class might have been less interesting (Question #35; average value 4.00) and 90% ($n=18$) of the students felt that without this synchronous activity, they might have not had enough opportunities to engage in real-time conversations in Spanish (Question #36; average value 4.40). Question #41 specifically asked them about the scheduling inconvenience of the Zoom meeting: most students (75%, $n=15$) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that "*I wish this class would not have had small group conversations via Zoom because meeting in our own time was inconvenient,*" with only 10% ($n=2$) of the students agreeing with this statement and 15% ($n=3$) being neutral about it. This finding indicates that despite the potential challenge of scheduling their own small group meetings, students perceived them as beneficial and enjoyable.

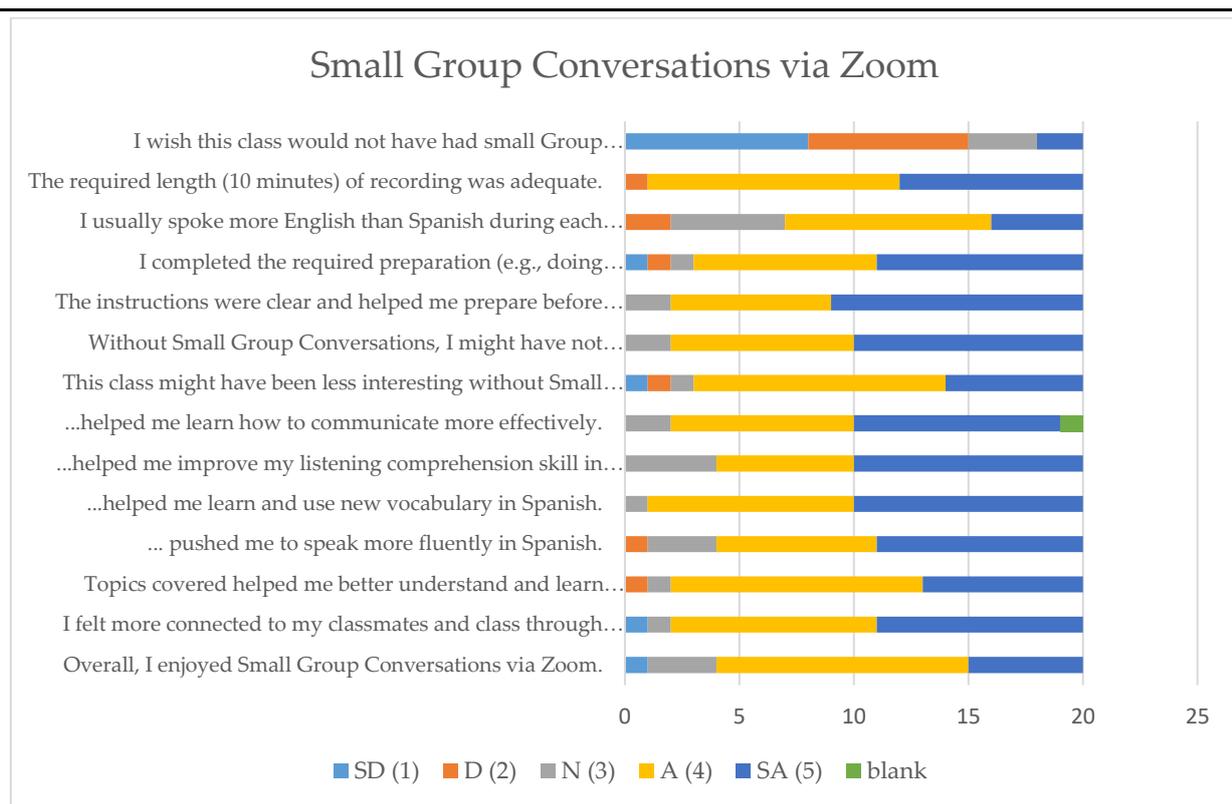


Figure 6: Perceptions about small group conversations via Zoom

[Note: SD = strongly disagree (1 point); D = disagree (2 points); N = neutral (3 points); A = agree (4 points); SA = strongly agree (5 points)]

Most students agreed or strongly agreed that the synchronous small group conversation activity helped them improve the language proficiency level: they felt that this activity pushed them to speak more fluently in Spanish (Question #31; 80% of the students, $n=16$; average value 4.20), helped them improve their listening comprehension skill in Spanish (Question #33; 80% of the students, $n=16$; average value 4.30), helped them learn and use new vocabulary (Question #32; 95% of the students, $n=19$; average value 4.45), and helped them learn how to communicate more effectively (Question #34; 85% of the students, $n=17$; average value 4.37).

Table 4: Questions and number of responses for small group conversations via Zoom

Questions	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	Blank	Avg. value
28. Overall, I enjoyed small group conversations via Zoom.	1	0	3	11	5	0	3.95
29. I felt more connected to my classmates and class through these small group conversation activities via Zoom.	1	0	1	9	9	0	4.25
30. Topics helped me better understand and learn about Hispanic cultures.	0	1	1	11	7	0	4.20
31. Small group conversations via Zoom pushed me to speak more fluently in Spanish.	0	1	3	7	9	0	4.20

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32. Small group conversations via Zoom helped me learn and use new vocabulary in Spanish.	0	0	1	9	10	0	4.45
33. Small group conversations via Zoom helped me improve my listening comprehension skill in Spanish.	0	0	4	6	10	0	4.30
34. Small group conversations via Zoom helped me learn how to communicate more effectively.	0	0	2	8	9	1	4.37
35. Without small group conversations via Zoom, this class might have been less interesting.	1	1	1	11	6	0	4.00
36. Without small group conversations via Zoom, I might have not had enough opportunities to engage in real-time conversations in Spanish.	0	0	2	8	10	0	4.40
37. The instructions were clear and helped me prepare before meeting my group.	0	0	2	7	11	0	4.45
38. I completed the required preparation (e.g., doing brainstorming exercise in the textbook) before meeting my group.	1	1	1	8	9	0	4.15
39. I usually spoke more English than Spanish during each meeting of small group conversations.	0	2	5	9	4	0	3.75
40. The required length (10 minutes) for the recording was adequate.	0	1	0	11	8	0	4.30
41. I wish this class would not have had small group conversations via Zoom because meeting in our own time was inconvenient.	8	7	3	0	2	0	2.05

Regarding the design of the activity, most students felt that topics covered in the small group conversation activity helped them better understand and learn about Hispanic cultures (Question #30; 90% of the students, $n=18$; average value 4.20), and they agreed that the instructions were clear and helped them prepare before meeting their group (Question #37; 90% of the students, $n=18$; average value 4.45). Nearly all of them agreed that the required length (10 minutes) of recording was adequate (Question #40; 95% of the students, $n=19$; average value 4.30).

Students also self-assessed their own preparation and use of Spanish during the small group Zoom conversation meetings. 85% ($n=17$) of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they completed the required preparation (e.g., doing brainstorming exercise in the textbook) before meeting their group (Question #38; average value 4.15) and 65% ($n=13$) of them reported that they usually spoke more English than Spanish during each small group conversation meeting (Question #39; average value 3.75). It appears that students used English occasionally when not recording their required conversations in Spanish in order to clarify meanings of unknown words and instructions and also just to chat with peers in their L1.

In summary, the findings of the perception questions corroborate the result of the open-ended questions that the small group conversation activity was the activity that students perceived as not only the most enjoyable but also helpful in improving their conversation skills. Despite some challenge in scheduling the synchronous meetings on their own, most students believed that this activity was beneficial and gave them

opportunities to interact with peers in a fun way. As noted in Delhunty (2018), this type of interaction has been demonstrated to be beneficial for online learners, as they are able to develop a learning community and form social relationships to reduce feelings of isolation.

Category 3. Perceptions about Instructor feedback and communication to enhance learning

In response to questions about the instructor feedback and communication to enhance learning, all of the students believed that instructor feedback was timely and informative and helped them feel more engaged and connected to the class, as shown in Figure 7 and Table 5 (Question #42; 100% of the students; average value 4.70). Nearly all the students (95%, $n=19$) felt that the mid-semester oral interview with the instructor conducted via Zoom helped them feel more comfortable about the class (Question #46; average value 4.80). It is noteworthy, as indicated in the dark blue color in the bar graph for this particular question (Figure 7), that nearly all of the students (85%, $n=17$) strongly agreed with this statement. It seems that this synchronous meeting via Zoom with the instructor played an important role for students in feeling more connected to the class and having a sense of community. In addition, 100% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the instructor's pre-recorded video lectures were helpful in regards to learning new vocabulary and themes of the chapter (Question #43; average value 4.55); thus, the virtual presence of the instructor not only as facilitator but also as provider of rich instructional materials for chapter themes, vocabulary, culture, and grammar seems to be an important factor in offering a successful e-learning experience.

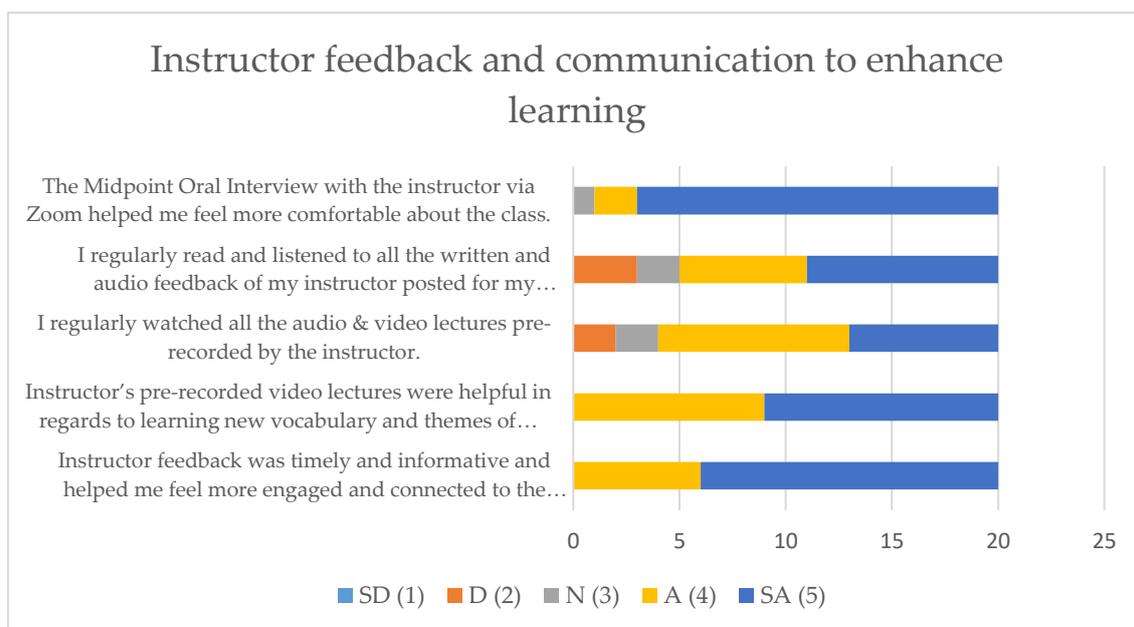


Figure 7: Perceptions about instructor feedback and communication to enhance learning
[Note: SD = strongly disagree (1 point); D = disagree (2 points); N = neutral (3 points);
A = agree (4 points); SA = strongly agree (5 points)]

As for the students' involvement in the instructor's feedback, comments, and recorded lectures, most students reported that they regularly watched all the audio and video lectures pre-recorded by the instructor (Question #44; 80% of the students, $n=16$; average value 4.05) and regularly read and listened to all the written and audio feedback of the instructor posted for their assignments (Question #45; 75% of the students, $n=15$; average value 4.05); therefore, it appears that most students maintained their interest in learning materials and improving their performance by paying attention to the instructor's feedback (cf: Borup et al., 2015).

Table 5: Questions and number of responses for instructor feedback and communication

Questions	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	Blank	Avg. value
42. Instructor feedback was timely and informative and helped me feel more engaged and connected to the class.	0	0	0	6	14	0	4.70
43. Instructor's pre-recorded video lectures were helpful in regards to learning new vocabulary and themes of the chapter.	0	0	0	9	11	0	4.55
44. I regularly watched all the audio and video lectures pre-recorded by the instructor.	0	2	2	9	7	0	4.05
45. I regularly read and listened to all of the written and audio feedback of my instructor posted for my assignment.	0	3	2	6	9	0	4.05
46. The mid-semester oral interview with the instructor via Zoom helped me feel more comfortable about the class.	0	0	1	2	17	0	4.80

In summary, the instructor's virtual presence and interactions with students through a variety of means such as immediate, individualized written or video feedback, pre-recorded video lectures, and synchronous oral interviews, all helped create a positive virtual learning environment for students. As noted in Gacs and colleagues (2020), instructors' immediate and meaningful (and even individualized) feedback about asynchronous assignments is considered one of the most important conditions to have a successful asynchronous online class. This is witnessed by a student S17 who commented that *"The personal video feedback and the clear assignment instructions made this class not so formidable to me."* Indeed, the instructor's social presence is what can make a virtual space more connected as a learning community, as social presence is closely linked with *"individual's perceptions of each other's immediacy, intimacy, and a sense of group cohesion"* (Sung & Mayer, 2012).

Category 4. Perceptions about student collaboration and interaction rapport

In response to how students felt about their collaboration and interaction in a virtual setting, nearly all the students felt positive about the small group discussions and Zoom conversation sessions as these activities provided them with opportunities to interact and collaborate with peers more actively. 90% ($n=18$) of the students reported that the small

group discussions and Zoom conversations helped create more personal interactions (Question #51; average value 4.50) and all of them felt that the group size (of 3-4 people) for these activities was adequate (Question #50; average value 4.6).

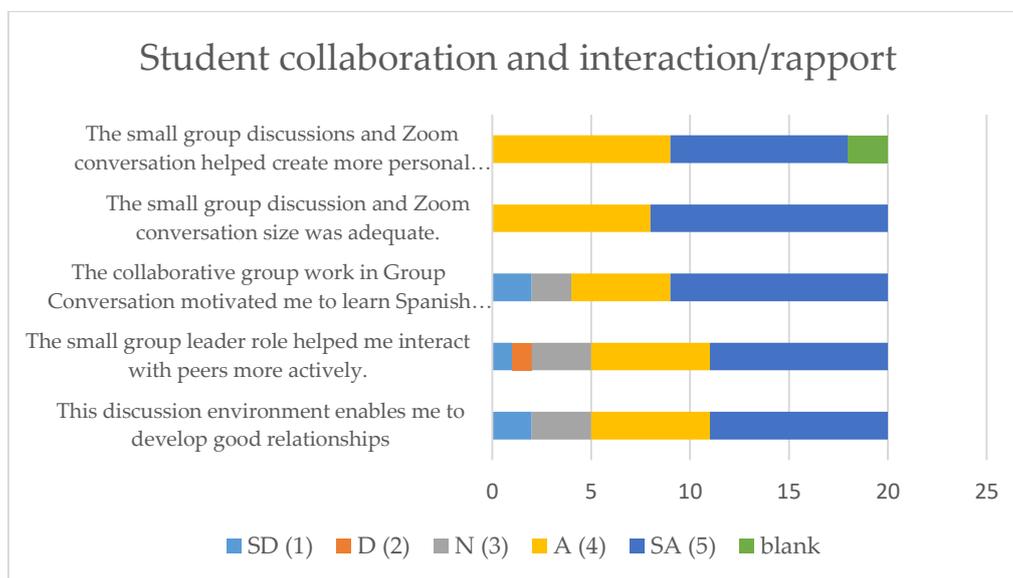


Figure 8: Perceptions about student collaboration and interaction / rapport
[Note: SD = strongly disagree (1 point); D = disagree (2 points); N = neutral (3 points); A = agree (4 points); SA = strongly agree (5 points)]

Most students (75%, $n=15$) also reported that the discussion environment provided by small group discussions in Canvas as well as group conversations via Zoom helped them develop good relationships with their classmates (Question #47; average value 4.00). This sense of collaboration and rapport is key to student success, learning, and motivation (Farmer, 2020). In fact, 80% ($n=16$) of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the collaborative group work indeed motivated them to learn Spanish more (Question #49; average value 4.15); thus, the presence of the peer support and interaction appeared to be closely linked with the success in this online class (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016), especially during the period of isolation due to the pandemic. Question #48 asked if the small group leader role that was randomly assigned to students on a rotation basis for the Zoom conversations helped them push themselves out of their comfort zone and interact with peers more actively. 75% ($n=15$) of the students agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Initiating contact, sending the assigned group members a Zoon invite link, organizing the Zoom meeting and uploading the video recording of the group conversation onto Canvas, all required a leadership role from each student, which most students thought helped their active engagement and participation in class.

Table 6: Questions and number of responses for student collaboration and interaction / rapport

Questions	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	Blank	Avg. value
47. The discussion environment (i.e., small and the whole group discussions in Canvas and group conversations via Zoom) enabled me to develop good relationships with my classmates.	2	0	3	6	9	0	4.00
48. The small group leader role that I had for the Zoom conversations helped me push myself out of my comfort zone and interact with peers more actively.	1	1	3	6	9	0	4.05
49. The collaborative group work motivated me to learn Spanish more.	2	0	2	5	11	0	4.15
50. The small group discussions and Zoom conversations size was adequate.	0	0	0	8	12	0	4.60
51. The small group discussions and Zoom conversations helped create more personal interactions.	0	0	0	9	9	2	4.50

In summary, the survey results suggest that there seems to have been a strong sense of learning community created through asynchronous group discussions in Canvas as well as synchronous small group conversations via Zoom. This sense of 'belonging' is important for a successful online learning experience, as establishing social connections is a human need (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016) and social interaction is not only closely linked with learning outcomes (Mayer, 2005) but also student satisfaction (Richardson & Swan, 2003; Borup et al., 2012). The size of the group for online discussions and conversations was also deemed important in influencing students' participation, motivation, and perceptions of connectedness with peers (Aragorn, 2003; Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016). The present blended online L2 conversation course combined both the whole-group and the small group activities (of 3-4 students), and students' responses in the survey clearly indicates that the group activities with a smaller number of people (e.g., small group discussions and Zoom group conversations) rather than the whole group activities helped create more personal interactions; thus, a stronger sense of social presence of peers in the virtual space. A student S7, for example, mentioned in the open-ended responses that *"I enjoyed the small group discussion due to the intimacy and connectivity. Also, I think that the large group discussions are good because I see a lot of different perspectives, but I enjoyed the small groups better."* The intimacy and connectivity that was mentioned by this student is one of the key factors in making online learning successful.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has illustrated the perceptions of a group of college students about the blended online language learning in an intensive advanced Spanish conversation course. The online asynchronous learning complemented by synchronous activities in this class

promoted students to stay engaged in learning Spanish. Overall, both open-ended questions and 51 Likert-scale questions revealed that the overwhelming majority of students perceived that they have gained proficiency in speaking, listening, reading and writing along with improved vocabulary and cultural knowledge, and they felt more comfortable and confident in communicating in Spanish after taking an intensive 5-week summer blended course. The activities that students perceived more helpful than others in enhancing communication skill in Spanish were both the synchronous, unsupervised group conversations via Zoom and the asynchronous video reports and discussions, while the small group Zoom conversations were perceived as the most enjoyable. As a student (S13) commented, *"The group conversations and video reports are vital for the experience for this class,"* as these were two main activities in which students had to actively engage themselves in speaking and listening to peers in both real-time and asynchronous settings, respectively.

Students' overall positive perceptions and satisfaction about this blended course were achieved through a combination of several factors: the clarity of the course design and instructions, the right combination of asynchronous and synchronous online activities that provided students with enriched materials to learn as well as ample opportunities to practice their Spanish, the interactions and support with peers that created a sense of learning community and connectedness, and the instructor's timely and constant feedback, rapport, and social presence to motivate students to learn. Therefore, the findings of this study show that it was not only one factor or just one activity that made the online learning experience positive and satisfactory for students, but multifaceted components that needed to be taken into account for a successful online class. In fact, Swan (2001) pointed out that clarity of the course design, interaction with instructors, and active discussions among peer students are considered as key components of students' satisfaction for asynchronous online learning. By the same token, Gacs and colleagues (2020) confirmed this view of multifaceted factors to be considered for good online teaching, such as careful planning of the syllabus that embraces instructors' and students' needs (e.g., technology, workload, and accessibility), effective communication, connection and engagement, virtual presence of the instructor, and a supportive learning environment.

How to design the course in terms of the delivery format of the course (i.e., fully asynchronous, fully synchronous, and a mix of the two) (Meskill & Anthony, 2015; Gacs et al., 2020) is, in fact, one of the main decisions to make for a successful online class. Determining levels of synchronicity in a blended online modality can be a complex task that needs to take into consideration the instructor's knowledge about technology, internet access and availability (Gacs et al., 2020), schedules of students (e.g., classes and jobs), and even crisis-prompt situations like the COVID-19 pandemic in which a flexible schedule rather than set-time is often preferred for any unexpected emergency situations (e.g., sickness, taking care of sick family members, helping with their children's online learning happening at home). At the same time, for a L2 conversation class like the present study, synchronicity turned out to be essential in creating an environment that

would foster real-time interactions with peers and the instructor (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014) and practice communication skills (Arispe & Blake, 2012) to enhance not only speaking and listening skills but also to bolster L2 pragmatics; that is, how to use Spanish appropriately while taking turns and reacting in a real-time setting. Gacs and colleagues (2020) noted that *"the most challenging to include is interpersonal speaking activities,"* and one of the ways of doing it is *"reserving synchronous class-time for such interactions."* In the present study, the real-time conversation activities were scheduled at each small group of students' convenience with a set due date to complete Zoom conversation activities, which was a creative option of integrating semi-guided synchronous interpersonal speaking activities into the asynchronous modality of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the survey results have demonstrated that this approach was successful in eliciting very positive perceptions about this blended L2 Spanish conversation course, in all areas of the questionnaire about the course design, course components and activities, peer interactions and rapport, and instructor feedback and presence.

While the present study tackled an L2 Spanish conversation class designed and offered during 2020 while the COVID-19 pandemic was in full swing, further research needs to be done to find out the optimal portion of integration of synchronous online components in the asynchronous modality, or vice-versa, for an L2 conversation class offered online in general. Finding a balance between these two online modalities is challenging and it depends on the students and instructor' needs and situations for each class (Moorehouse & Wong, 2021). As pointed out by Yamagata-Lynch, in order to create meaningful online learning environment that includes synchronous learning spaces, the instructor needs to *"balance the tension between embracing the flexibility that the online space affords to users and designing deliberate structures that will help them take advantage of the flexible space"* (2014: 198). In addition, the nature of the synchronous activities themselves in a blended model need to be further examined for an optimal e-learning environment. It has been suggested that most individual processing of the course content should preferably be carried out asynchronously while most social interactions and group processing should be done in synchronous contexts (Shank, 2020). However, it is not still completely clear how to blend and how much to blend in order to gain unique benefits from both asynchronous and synchronous modalities that can optimize the learning outcome of each unique course.

The present study has several limitations. The survey result is based on a small sample of participants; thus, it is descriptive (rather than statistical) in nature. Therefore, findings may not be generalized to other blended L2 online classes. In addition, this L2 advanced conversation class of Spanish was an intensive five-week summer course, thus findings may not be equally generalized to the same type of course offered during a regular semester which is stretched over more weeks and is typically comprised of 15 weeks. Nevertheless, since little research is available for L2 blended online conversation courses, the present study can provide insights to researchers and educators into an optimal blended course design for L2 classes that can motivate students' online learning.

Furthermore, more empirical studies should be conducted that can measure students' actual learning outcomes rather than just their subjective perceptions. Post-COVID era is expected to rely more on curriculum and instructions mediated by technology and online learning, and figuring out various degrees of digital integration will help educators and students prepare for the foreign language teaching/learning in its transition and future.

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Conflict of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

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