Virtual and in-person exchanges: Student perspectives on advantages and disadvantages

Rob A. Martinsen¹ and Gregory L. Thompson²

Abstract

Interacting with target-language speakers online has become an important way for many second language students around the world to improve their skills in their target language. These types of learning interactions can take place on a wide range of online platforms, whether paid or unpaid, one-on-one or in small groups. Although research on these types of activities, often called virtual exchanges (VE), has increased, relatively little research has compared students’ experiences across different platforms. The present study compared the experiences of first and second-year university students with native speakers in in-person interactions as well as through several online services that connect language learners. Results indicate that students claimed to learn more in the in-person interactions than in the online settings. They also claimed to feel less anxiety in the in-person interactions. However, they also felt that certain online services improved their language learning in ways that were similar to the in-person interactions. In addition, each online or in-person setting offered unique advantages and disadvantages in terms of practicality and learning.

Keywords: language education, second language, virtual exchange, computer mediated communication, telecollaboration, intercultural communication

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1. Introduction

Second or foreign language instructors have long sought ways for students to interact with native speakers of the target language (TL). As internet access has greatly expanded, language teachers and students have taken advantage of rich opportunities to engage with authentic texts, gain cultural insights, and interact synchronously with native speakers of the target language (Commander et al., 2022; Dooly & Vinagre, 2021; Gilmore, 2007; Jauregi et al., 2012).

The benefits of virtual exchanges have fueled an increase in participation over the past decades. Benefits include enhanced motivation, willingness to communicate, as well as increased language and culture learning (Canals, 2020; see also a meta-analysis by Çiftçi & Savaş, 2017). To meet the demand for such interactions, a large number of online platforms have appeared (e.g., HelloTalk, Tandem, italki, LinguaMeeting, FluentU, Busuu, TalkAbroad), each of which has unique features such as interacting with trained or untrained interlocutors, paid and free services, built in video and/or audio features, group or one-on-one lessons, offering an accompanying app, etc. However, current research has not yet clarified how different platforms used for virtual exchanges, each with their unique set of features, might affect students’ learning. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to examine students’ perspectives on learning through interacting with native speakers in a variety of in-person and online contexts including, face-to-face, paid, and free services.

2. Review of literature

2.1 Virtual exchanges and CMC/SCMC

Virtual exchange (VE) is considered by some within the world of foreign or second language teaching to be its own pedagogical approach (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). From a technological perspective, VE is a form of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) (Canals, 2020). Research on the nature of CMC and Synchronous Computer Mediated Communication (SCMC) in language learning indicates that students engage in interaction and negotiate meaning in ways that are similar but not identical

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3. In the context of this article, the term ‘native speaker’ is employed in its linguistic sense, referring to individuals who acquired the target language as their first language through natural, immersive exposure in childhood in a country where that language is the majority language. The use of this term is not intended to endorse or perpetuate ‘native speakerism,’ a concept associated with bias favoring native speakers in language education (Jenkins, 2014). Rather, it serves as a linguistic descriptor to delineate individuals based on their language acquisition background, recognizing the importance of diverse language experiences and avoiding the reinforcement of discriminatory practices within educational settings.
to face-to-face interactions (Smith, 2003). Research comparing the interactions in various modalities within SCMC as well as face-to-face communication, such as text only, audio, and video, found that oral SCMC and face-to-face interactions were similar in their turn taking patterns, but that the turn taking patterns in written SCMC were very different (Yanguas, 2010).

Similarly, research comparing language learning in SCMC with face-to-face communication has found that both SCMC and face-to-face interactions have a positive impact on students’ language learning (see Ziegler, 2016 for a meta-analysis of research on SCMC and face-to-face studies). In some studies, SCMC has been shown to confer advantages in the development of productive and written skills, while face-to-face interactions may be somewhat better for the development of receptive skills (Lin et al., 2013; Ziegler, 2016).

2.2. Language and culture learning in VE

As a type of CMC and/or SCMC, VE can foster opportunities for language and culture learning by bringing together target-language speakers and students that might not otherwise be able to interact (Martinsen & Thompson, 2019). In a recent study, university students in Spain studying English and students in Canada studying Spanish interacted synchronously and asynchronously in an online environment, while a control group engaged in similar activities face-to-face. Findings indicated that students’ participation in this VE improved their speaking skills as measured by pre- and post-test oral exam grades as well as improved motivation over the control group (Canals, 2020). An additional study examined the effects of a virtual exchange where students interacted with native peers through video, compared to students who completed the same activities face-to-face with their classmates (Canto et al., 2013). Students in virtual groups experienced significantly more improvement in speaking skills compared to the face-to-face group.

2.3. Attitudinal variables and VE

Virtual exchanges can also influence important attitudinal variables such as motivation. Ockert (2015) asked one group of elementary school students in Japan to interact with native speakers of English from Australia in online while a control group interacted face-to-face with fellow students. Results indicated that the students who interacted with native speakers experienced increased motivation. Donnery (2022) examined the experience of students of English in Japan who were connected with other English learners in Colombia. From the researchers’ perspective, these students experienced increased motivation through VE due to the opportunity to use the language and learn about the culture and lives of the Colombian students. In another similar study, students of English
in China felt that their motivation increased substantially as they participated in VE claiming that VE was “innovative”, “interesting”, and “enjoyable” (Luo & Yang, 2022, p. 44).

2.4. Challenges of VE

Virtual exchanges, as with any intervention in education, present their own set of challenges and pitfalls. Despite the increase in motivation, studies have found that some students experience increased anxiety when interacting with online partners (Pakpahan & Gultom, 2022; Russell, 2020). A study on SCMC (Satar & Özdener, 2008) found that students who engaged in one-on-one voice chat with a partner experienced anxiety and that this anxiety did not decrease over the course of their experience. Fondo et al. (2017) examined the experiences of users on a website where learners could engage in videoconferencing with speakers of their target language. Users shared several reasons for not using the video chat. They found that 40% of their learners chose not to initiate a conversation via videoconference claiming to be too shy and 70% stated they did not use the video chat because of the difficulty in finding a conversation partner. The same study also found that a large majority of learners felt that they would be more willing to participate in VE if their assignments and interactions were more scaffolded. Fondo et al. interpreted this as a sign of anxiety that their language skills would be insufficient to maintain the conversation.

In addition to the communicative challenges of VE, learners may also feel anxious due to the “heightened learner responsibility” because VE is more student centered requiring greater participation on their part (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021, p. 398). However, Alqarni (2021) found quite different results with a group of Saudi EFL students where she saw an increase in willingness to communicate (WTC) in online interactions. These mixed results suggest that there are different factors that impact a student’s WTC in both online and in-person settings that need to be addressed.

Of course, within the category of VE, there are a great variety of styles and affordances, and limited research has examined how differences between synchronous videoconferencing tools may enhance or detract from students’ learning experiences. With that in mind, this study seeks to refine the current understanding of VE and ultimately improve learning outcomes by comparing the experiences of students across a variety of videoconferencing tools as well as in-person interactions.

Our research question is:

• How do specific interactive contexts (online and in-person) impact the experience of virtual/in-person exchanges for language learning students?
3. Methods

3.1. Participants

A total of 216 undergraduate students participated in this study. All participants were students from beginning to intermediate level Spanish courses at a private, religious university in the western United States. Lower-level Spanish courses at this institution divide beginning levels into courses for those with little to no prior experience from those with some formal or informal experience with the language. The initial sequence is titled Spanish 101 and 102 and the subsequent sequence is titled Spanish 105 and 106. Students from both sequences were included in this study. All of the students in these classes were assigned to one of the research conditions as part of their regular curriculum. The average age of the students was 18-25 years old with 167 females (77.3%) and 49 males (22.7%).

The 101-102 courses start from the assumption that students have had no previous experience in Spanish to a maximum of one year of previous study in Spanish at the secondary/high school level. Students in these courses receive a pass or fail grade instead of a traditional letter grade to dissuade students with higher skill levels from taking an easier course to boost their GPA. Students in Spanish 105-106 will often have had two to three years of prior study (typically at the high school level) or the equivalent in terms of informal contact with the target language. Students are guided into the most suitable course by interacting with instructors and reviewing a placement document.

These courses emphasize proficiency, especially oral proficiency, and the interpersonal mode of communication. Instructors and students are expected to adhere to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL) guidelines of using the target language 90% or more of the time in the classroom (ACTFL, n.d.). Additionally, assessments in the courses often focus on spontaneous conversational speech. Students who successfully complete the courses are estimated to have reached the Intermediate Low to Intermediate Mid level according to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (ACTFL, 2024).

3.2. Context of study

The emphasis on functional language use has led instructors to seek additional opportunities for their students to interact with more advanced speakers. Students in this study participated in one of five different contexts for interacting with native speakers depending on the section of the course in which they enrolled. These contexts included an on-campus option where students attended a conversation lab led by native Spanish speakers who were employed by the university.
attendants were given prompts and other aids that were designed to create conversation around
the content of the courses. Students attended the same session once a week where the maximum
number of students per session was ten with the average number attending being approximately
five to eight.

The other contexts included online platforms connecting native speakers with learners in a variety
of formats. The researchers’ goal was to determine if and how the unique features and options of a
particular context affected learners' experience. As a disclaimer, each of these services is described
according to the features and functions that were present while the research was taking place. It
should be noted that all of these services offered and promoted their conversations as taking place
with native speakers of Spanish and did not have an option for speaking with other advanced speakers
of the TL. With this in mind, the term native speaker is used occasionally throughout the paper where
appropriate, e.g., when quoting participants or previous research, or describing the features offered
by the various services. However, the authors of this study recognize that determining who a native
speaker is can be complicated, and further recognize that conversing with native speakers is not
necessarily more beneficial than conversing with other advanced speakers.

Due to consumer preferences and market demands, some of these platforms have made changes to
what they offer and the design of their services. The following descriptions and the findings of this
paper should not be taken as an endorsement or a critique of any of these services. All of the costs
for the paid services were covered by a grant received from the College of Humanities at Brigham
Young University. The following were the different services used and compared in this research
study.

TalkAbroad: This paid service was designed to connect students with Spanish-speaking conversation
partners residing in various countries across the Spanish-speaking world. These conversation partners
received training and were paid for their services. Students scheduled a session ahead of time and
interacted for thirty minutes. Afterward, a recording of the session was made available to both
instructors and students.

LinguaMeeting: LinguaMeeting had a similar structure to TalkAbroad with pre-scheduled paid
sessions where students met with native Spanish speakers who had received training and were paid
to interact with learners. One of LinguaMeeting’s unique features was the ability to schedule individual
appointments or small group sessions with two to three learners and one conversation partner.
WeSpeke: WeSpeke functioned similarly to free popular social media sites. Students created a profile with information such as college major, languages they were interested in learning, favorite pastimes, etc. Users could then seek out interactions with other users who had the appropriate first/target language pair and initiate conversations, either in the moment or to set up appointments in the future. When interacting, users would generally split the time between using their native and target languages.

Boomalang: This was a hybrid of a paid and free service that was founded in 2014. It offered the possibility of engaging with speakers who were compensated for their time. Paid conversation partners were available during certain times each day with whom the students could meet. Language students could also interact with other learners in a no-cost social media style exchange where interested learners could login and find other individuals with whom to interact in the target language and their first language. In the present study, students who used Boomalang interacted three times with paid conversation partners and the rest (9 additional no-cost interactions) with other language learners who were also there to improve their second language skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Summary of settings and features (from Martinsen &amp; Thompson, 2023, table 1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
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<td>In-person</td>
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<tr>
<td>LinguaMeeting</td>
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<td>Boomalang</td>
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<tr>
<td>WeSpeke</td>
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<td>TalkAbroad</td>
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The cost of using the paid services was covered through university funds. The nature of the various sites allowed students to approach the logistical aspects of the assignments in different ways. Sites that permitted free interaction between any users tended toward spontaneous unplanned conversation, even though users sometimes arranged to meet ahead of time. Other sites only allowed for pre-planned interactions.1

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1. As mentioned previously, due to a variety of factors, any of these services could be dramatically altered or discontinued at any time, but an effort has been made to offer an accurate description of their offerings at the time the study took place.
3.3. Required activities and procedures

At the beginning of the semester, instructors explained the assignment to their students about participating in this project, and consent to use their data for research was obtained. The teacher explained how students were to log in or register for each of the virtual platforms as well as the in-person lab. The courses required students to complete one interaction with a native speaker each week for 12 weeks. Students in a given section used the same service each week. The interactions lasted approximately half an hour, apart from the on-campus interactions, which lasted for 50 minutes to compensate for the fact that there were more students present during each session. Each of the on-campus sessions had a maximum of ten students that were allowed to sign up but typically sessions had a total of 5-7 students.

For all the online services, students were required to have video on during the entirety of the conversation. While most students were able to do so, some reported problems with slow internet connections that they remediated by not using their cameras and using only audio to communicate.

To facilitate conversation, researchers provided a conversation guide each week consisting of a series of questions related to the topics being covered in class during that period. Students were encouraged to use the guide but were not required to do so to allow the interactions to flow naturally. Students assigned to the in-person conversation labs were not given prompts as the lab attendants were given instructions regarding how to generate relevant conversation. Each week participants completed a brief summary and reflection in English or Spanish on their conversations explaining the topics covered and what they may have learned as well as completing a brief survey at the end of the semester.

3.4. Data collection/instruments

The data source for this study consisted of a Google Forms online survey containing the following questions:

- Do you feel that your language skills improved through participation in the online/in-person exchanges? Why or why not?
- What was the best aspect of the online/in-person exchanges?
- What was the most challenging aspect of the exchanges?
These open-ended questions yielded prose data and students’ responses were grouped according to setting. Since these assignments were part of each student's grade, the responses were not anonymous so that the instructors could grade them. The researchers then examined the responses looking for patterns both within and across the groups. Researchers went through a rigorous process of analyzing students’ responses using the constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). They identified themes within students’ responses and then noted the themes contained in each response. Doing so allowed the researchers to see patterns on a qualitative level and calculate simple descriptive statistics noting the occurrence of themes across the different settings.

4. Results

4.1. Positive aspects of interactions across settings

After analyzing students’ responses, researchers calculated the most mentioned positive aspects of students’ experiences for both the in-person and online settings (see Figure 1). This information was then followed by a prose analysis highlighting possible explanations for the findings and contrasting the most frequently mentioned positive aspects between the online and in-person settings.
Students across the online platforms and in-person exchanges noted many similar positive aspects in their experiences. In what was perhaps an unsurprising result, a large portion of students mentioned learning in general and/or learning language skills, with a somewhat higher percentage of students in the in-person setting mentioning learning as a benefit of these experiences (68% in-person, 41% online). Students noted the joy of “watching my Spanish skills grow” or stated, “I learned a lot from each person.” On a related note, students in all categories felt that these experiences provided valuable practice. One student remarked, “I had a lot of additional practice which was extremely helpful.” Another stated that it was “so nice to just sit and be able to practice specifically speaking in the Spanish language.” A third mentioned the benefit of being able to “speak and practice conversation with other people in real time.”
In a similar vein, students, across the settings, seemed to believe in the importance of interacting with native speakers of the target language. As mentioned, the authors recognize the polemic nature of the term native speaker. The term is used here to accurately reflect students’ perspectives, even though they may not align with prevailing viewpoints in the field of second language teaching. In the student comments, they suggest that “it’s always better to speak to natives” and “no other practice can really compare with speaking with an actual native speaker.” Others noted that “interacting with a native is a lot different than a professor.” In their comments on this topic, students noted three types of benefits: language use at a higher speed than in classrooms, opportunities for more authentic input and use of the language, and increased confidence in their language skills.

Many students indicated that the speed at which their speaking partners used the language benefited their learning. One student stated that these interactions helped her “to get used to hearing and responding to quickly spoken Spanish.” Another stated that “the practice was very helpful, especially as fast-paced as it becomes in a conversation with a native.” Another student noted, “It helps you get used to how much faster they speak” because they “did not slow down unless asked to.” The speed that students experienced may be related to students noticing the differences between the input they received in these interactions versus the classroom. Students felt that they were “learning the more casual and native-like way to speak.” They also recognized that they were “learning how native speakers say certain things” and felt that “sometimes that was different than what the textbook prescribed.” In these interactions, certain aspects of language became more salient, for example, they tended “to pick up on colloquial phrases” or “learn cool new vocab,” and “use more advanced vocabulary than maybe the teacher uses in a classroom.”

Students in the online experiences made particular mention of the motivation they felt by speaking to native speakers of the language in other countries as opposed to the communication with their own novice-level classmates. They believed that “working with natives in their language was a really good way to learn how to speak like them if I was in their country trying to get around. I felt like it was really practical and useful practice/learning” and the students enjoyed the “normal conversations in Spanish.” Indeed, for these students, interacting with “an actual native speaker” meant “learning that you really can communicate” in the target language, as opposed to “just practicing grammar as in class.” One student summarized this idea by saying that “speaking with a native speaker made learning Spanish a real thing for me.”

The nature of these interactions seemed to improve students’ confidence in their language abilities as indicated by statements claiming that the process “gave me experience and confidence”, and that “interacting with native speakers has helped me build more confidence.” Others used their feelings
about interacting with native speakers as a gauge of how much learning had taken place, commenting that “I feel that they [language skills] have improved because I’m less hesitant to speak with native speakers now.” Although students in all of the contexts felt that interacting with a native speaker was valuable, the online interactions expanded the students’ worldview while interacting with the native speakers. Many students noted that they were not just talking with a native speaker, they were “talking with a native in their country” and that it was “exciting to speak with somebody new from around the world every week” and “it was really cool to connect with someone living in another country” because they have “a different perspective.”

It also appears that the perceived value of these experiences was enhanced by the lack of English spoken by their interlocutors. As opposed to their class environment, they were forced to only use Spanish when interacting with the native speakers. Multiple students remarked on the benefits of not being able to turn to English when trying to express or comprehend something beyond their skill level. This may have been because “some of them didn’t speak English” which “forced me to use only Spanish.” One student claimed to benefit from “being forced to only talk Spanish ... it’s easier when I’m talking to Americans to switch back and forth when I get flustered.” A student in the in-person labs stated that “it is awesome to get to just speak Spanish once a week ... in class sometimes, we end up speaking a lot of English to make sure everyone is on board.” One student had experience in both the online and in-person environments and commented that “you have to have a real conversation with someone in Spanish.”

As mentioned, many students felt that not being able to turn to English helped their learning. However, others suggested that having some English ability was beneficial: “At this point it’s more comfortable for me to talk to someone that also knows English so they can help me if I don’t know a word.” Another student expressed a similar thought: “It is easier in the on-campus labs to have what you are doing wrong when speaking explained to you in English or Spanglish.” These students felt that the English competence helped them improve their Spanish.

4.1.1. In-person interactions

The participants in the face-to-face interactions often reported feeling more at ease, stating that they could “practice speaking Spanish in a place that was comfortable and nonjudgmental.” Another student was happy to be able to “speak Spanish in a comfortable, low-pressure environment.” One student even claimed that she “laughed more than I thought I ever would all while learning the language.” The more comfortable nature of the in-person interactions could have been due to the presence of other students, even though it was, as several noted, “a small group of people.” Participants indicated that in the in-person labs they would have conversations with fellow students in addition
to the native speaker partner, stating that they “liked talking with people from other classes who are at my Spanish level” and appreciated “talking in small groups.”

The increased comfort level may have resulted from a less intense or interactive experience or simply from having more people involved in the conversations. For example, the in-person students mentioned listening as an activity in and of itself in their interactions more often, for example, “listening to my instructor speak in her native accent and speed” or “listening to my teacher speak about her culture.” Whereas in the online groups, students mentioned listening more in the context of a conversation, such as “getting practice for speaking and listening,” “better listening and speaking skills” or “all aspects of speaking and listening and general conversation.” The comments on listening from the in-person group suggests, at least some of the time, the teacher was speaking to a small group with relatively less response required from the students, which makes this experience somewhat different from the one-on-one VEs but similar to some of the VEs where more than one student was connected at a time.

Additionally, students in the in-person setting mentioned culture learning as a benefit (20% of in-person students) more often than students in the online contexts (10% of online students). One student noted that in his interactions with native speakers in the in-person labs, he was “learning more about the culture as opposed to just learning the language,” seeming to imply that in class they learned language without culture. Some students narrowed in on a specific national culture, like the student who “loved learning about Mexican culture.”

4.1.2. Negative and/or challenging aspects of interactions

Despite the many benefits mentioned by students in the online and in-person interactions, there were challenging and even negative aspects of these assignments. The most frequently mentioned difficulties are summarized in Figure 2.
Very often students simply noted the intense mental effort that is part of trying to converse in a new language especially with more advanced speakers. One student commented, “I just couldn’t say what I wanted to say!” and it was challenging “understanding native speakers.” Another noted that “it takes a surprising amount of mental energy to really focus, understand, and participate.” The effort may have been related to the frequent anxiety-related emotions that students experienced. For several possible reasons, negative, anxious feelings were more common among students in online settings. One student in an online setting reported having “anxiety about the whole thing” and “dreading” the exchanges. Whether real or imagined, students worried about what their partner in the online exchanges would think. One student commented on “the pressure of not speaking well and the person getting frustrated... It never happened, but I felt that it would be like that.” Another student felt that “sometimes they would laugh at me when I would mess up and I didn’t like that.
very much.” These fears were summed up by one participant who had a difficult time finding “enough courage to say what I wanted to, when I wanted to.”

The one-on-one nature of the online interactions was both beneficial and challenging to students who reported that they enjoyed “having one on one time” and receiving “private, quality attention.” However, it often exacerbated students’ feelings of embarrassment, “it was hard to not have people to look around to when I got stuck and I had to say I don’t know, or I don’t understand; I felt dumb.”

Students in some online settings, in particular WeSpeke, were especially concerned because they often interacted with different people each week and felt: “It was a little stressful talking to strangers in a foreign language.” Or they felt that “because we are complete strangers ..., it was awkward at times.” This discomfort seemed particularly acute for female students, where 25.6% of female students reported anxiety or related negative emotions, compared to only 5% of male students. In fact, female students reported feeling so uncomfortable that they actually changed the way they interacted online. One female student wrote, “I mostly used audio because I felt self-conscious using video, especially with strangers.” Comments from female students even suggested a possible hierarchy of anxiety for each means of communicating: “Audio chat with strangers is extremely uncomfortable for me. Video a thousand times more so” or “I am comfortable speaking to internet strangers via instant messaging. Voice chat with internet folks is something that I am only comfortable strictly with people I have acquainted with previously ... or are the friend of a friend.” Another stated, “I used audio and text most often because I would be uncomfortable doing video chats with a stranger.”

These issues for female students seemed particularly acute on free, social media style sites where users could reach out to other users anytime. One student summarized her concerns this way:

A lot of questionable people tried to contact me through WeSpeke. They tried to get me to talk with them on other sites, tried to find me on Facebook, or constantly tried to do a video chat. Also, the comments they sent were not always the most appropriate...

Another remarked that on WeSpeke, “Much of the time it was ... men hitting on me, and it was mostly awkward and uncomfortable.”

The difference between male and female students’ experiences was also highlighted in their use of the terms “forced” or “pushed” to describe their learning. For example, the analysis revealed that five of the six male students that used TalkAbroad talked about being “forced” or “pushed” to improve
their skills due to the nature of the setting, but listed it as a positive for their learning, while a smaller number of female students, only five of 22, mentioned being “forced” to learn as a positive.

Another layer of difficulty and frustration was added by frequent technical problems. Students in the online settings often mentioned that “technical issues” such as “poor connections” and “getting the video to work” were the most challenging aspects of online exchanges. One student even believed that the “worst thing in the world was the connection” and that “it was extremely difficult to hold a lengthy conversation with a person because the site’s connection would fail every 5 minutes.”

In summary, each of the settings that were utilized in this study had characteristics that provided certain affordances, which ultimately affected students’ experiences. Students also mentioned specific advantages and disadvantages for in-person and virtual exchanges as well as for each of the individual settings that were used to bring learners into contact with native speakers. Table 2 below provides a summary of the findings presented in this section, highlighting important points from Figure 1 and Figure 2 as well as students’ comments.

**Table 2. Summary of pros and cons by setting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of interaction</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In-person with varying numbers of other students</td>
<td>• More learning on average</td>
<td>• Sometimes emphasized more passive skills</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Culture learning</td>
<td>• Less one-on-one interaction</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Conversation practice</td>
<td>• Inconvenient scheduling</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Authentic interactions</td>
<td>• More English used</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Listening to native speakers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Comfortable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online, free, find own partner (WeSpeke, Boomalang)**</td>
<td>• Culture learning</td>
<td>• Technical difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Conversation practice</td>
<td>• Finding speaking partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Authentic interactions</td>
<td>• Some anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Meeting new people</td>
<td>• Unwanted attention</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Search for partners by location</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Flexible scheduling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online, paid, assigned partner (TalkAbroad, LinguaMeeting)</td>
<td>• Culture learning</td>
<td>• Some anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Conversation practice</td>
<td>• Occasional tech issues</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Authentic interactions</td>
<td>• Somewhat less variety of regional accents and cultures</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Efficiency</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• More stable technology</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Little to no use of English</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Flexible scheduling</td>
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**Notes on online platforms:** When this study was carried out, Boomalang provided both a paid and free service. In this study, only 3 of the 12 interactions were through the paid portion of the site, thus it is listed above as a free service. However, Boomalang has now shifted to a paid only model. WeSpeke is no longer in operation.
5. Discussion

In attempting to gain insight into the research question, “How do specific interactive contexts (online and in-person) change the experience of virtual/in-person exchanges for language learning students?” researchers compared the experiences of students who interacted with native speakers in in-person contexts versus a variety of online platforms. The contributions of this study revolve around comparing multiple platforms for engaging in VE. Many previous studies compared the effects of a single online treatment where students interacted with native speakers to the effects of students interacting with other students face-to-face. Such designs made it difficult to parse out the effects of interacting with native speakers from the effects of online interactions. In this study, however, all students interacted with native speakers allowing researchers to determine what effect each setting had on students’ experience independent of the TL skill level of their conversation partner. Despite having its own limitations, the present study does allow for general trends to emerge regarding how the experience of intercultural exchanges changes based on the use of different settings both online and in-person. The following sections explain how specific findings relate to prior research.

5.1. Types of interactions and language learning

In this study, the results indicate that the individual settings did seem, at least by the students’ estimation, to change the amount of learning they experienced. Overall, as noted in Figure 1, students in the in-person setting felt that they learned more than students in the online settings. This differs from previous research which generally showed that VE, where students interacted with native speakers online, induced more language or culture learning than the controls who spoke face-to-face with classmates either in person (Pérez Cañado, 2010; Schenker, 2017) or online (Canals, 2020; Canto et al., 2013). This may be because, as mentioned, this study asked students in both online and in-person interactions to speak with native speakers, whereas prior studies compared face-to-face with peers to online with native speakers. Additionally, other factors such as anxiety and the structure of the activities could also explain these results.

5.1.1. Anxiety

The difference in students’ perceptions of learning could also relate to the anxiety and related negative emotional states that students in the online groups frequently reported. It seems likely that when students experienced more anxiety their perceptions of learning decreased, mirroring prior research on VEs which also found that students in online exchanges often felt anxiety, particularly when using video to communicate (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). Research on anxiety posits a “language anxiety threshold”, which implies that a student can have anxious feelings and still learn if the anxiety stays
at a manageable level (Zheng, 2008, p. 8). These results suggest that many of the interactions in some settings may have pushed students past this threshold and led to a more negative experience.

Despite gender not being an initial focus of this research, it did emerge as an important mediator of students’ experiences especially related to their level of anxiety. For example, both males and females experienced anxiety, but women mentioned it more often than males (28% of females, 16.7% of males). Males and females also mentioned the discomfort and awkwardness of interacting with strangers, most commonly on free, social media type platforms where they interacted with different people each week, but females mentioned this issue more frequently (25.6% of females, 5% of males). However, some female students’ experiences interacting with strangers went beyond social awkwardness and approached harassment, leading them to mention it more frequently.

Although anxiety was a commonly mentioned theme, students in the online settings mentioned anxiety more frequently than the in-person students. In addition, in-person students mentioned feeling comfortable during their interactions much more than the online students. It seems likely that having several other students present during the in-person interactions played a role in reducing anxiety among that group.

5.1.2. One-on-one interactions
The results of this study seem to align with previous research on VE (Fondo et al., 2017; Satar & Özdener, 2008) which found that many students experienced increased anxiety through these interactions. Their results showed that the pressure of speaking one-on-one with a native speaker was motivating for some but caused others to be very stressed and likely affected their learning and overall enjoyment of the experience. Previous findings coupled with the present findings suggest that students may have equated the more comfortable in-person interactions, where multiple people were present, with more learning, regardless of whether that was the case.

The students also reported that one of the challenging aspects of the exchanges was the mental effort required to interact, especially one-on-one, with their conversation partners. While students saw this as a challenge, it was likely beneficial to their overall language and cognitive development. The mental effort required to interact with more advanced speakers likely enhanced their learning and better prepared them for more multifaceted language development.

5.1.3. Students’ proficiency and nature of activities
Students’ anxiety may also stem from the combination of their relatively low skill level and unscaffolded interactions. Students often mentioned that the most challenging part of the interactions
was the mental challenge of trying to spontaneously express oneself in a new language. In many of the studies on this topic, students had relatively high skill levels (Canals 2020; Fondo et al., 2017) or lower-level students participated in more scaffolded and teacher-directed activities (Ockert, 2015). Therefore, these results suggest that scaffolding activities in appropriate ways may lead students to feel more successful and perhaps improve learning.

5.1.4. Authentic learning

Students in all settings felt that these experiences provided excellent opportunities for learning, mentioning a variety of specific skills and enjoyment at watching them grow. Students seemed to believe that the quality of this learning was due to their partners being native speakers and that generally there was no English spoken in their conversations. These factors led students to feel that they were really, and even finally, using their language skills to communicate. Although these findings rely on self-report data, they do support previous research showing the value of interacting with native speakers in unfiltered conversations (Bateman, 2002).

6. Limitations

This study had several limitations that should be considered. Only the paid online services provided recordings of the interactions so the results of the other interactions in the free services and the in-person interactions were all self-reported. The researchers were also not able to control the interactions during the virtual exchanges and in-person conversations, so the quality and quantity of these interactions were likely very different. Technological challenges were reported by several of the participants, which may have caused them to have a negative experience independent of the actual interactions.

Because the present study was, in a sense, rooted in the authors' practice, there was a confounding variable that was difficult to eliminate. In this case, the in-person setting had multiple students present with just one native speaker, whereas the other students tended towards one-on-one interactions. Future research could compare the experiences of students who interact one-on-one with native speakers in person with one-on-one interactions in online environments.

Given that many languages have a large number of non-native speakers, future research should also consider the role of using native speakers of the TL versus using expert non-native speakers of the TL as interlocutors to determine the impact this may have on the participants' experiences. Ziegler (2016), in her meta-analysis, reviewed many studies and reports that a more methodical examination
of the impacts of context, setting, and interlocutor attributes is required to better maximize students’ experiences with VE. While data were not obtained for this topic in this current study, it would be valuable to replicate this study with different interlocutors.

7. Conclusion and implications

In conclusion, this study examined the nuanced dynamics of virtual language exchange experiences within specific contexts, comparing interactions between students and native speakers both online and in-person. Notably, the research design enabled a clear examination of how various settings impact students’ language learning experiences independently of their conversation partners’ proficiency levels. By engaging students across different platforms, this study offered valuable insights into the comparative effects of online versus face-to-face interactions.

The findings underscored the multifaceted nature of language learning environments, revealing how factors such as anxiety, proficiency levels, and the nature of activities influence students’ perceptions and learning outcomes. Contrary to some prior research, which suggested that online interactions with native speakers fostered more significant language acquisition, this study found that students in in-person settings perceived greater learning gains. This may be attributed to the prevalence of anxiety reported by students engaging in online interactions, highlighting the importance of managing negative emotional states to optimize learning outcomes.

Moreover, this study identified gender as a factor influencing students’ experiences of anxiety and discomfort, with female participants particularly vulnerable to these challenges. These findings underscore the need for educators to consider and address gender-specific concerns in VE programs to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Implications drawn from the study offer actionable strategies for enhancing the efficacy of VE experiences, including addressing technical issues, mitigating anxiety, tailoring assignments to students’ proficiency levels, and emphasizing safety measures for online interactions. By implementing these recommendations, educators can optimize the learning potential of virtual exchange programs while fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment. In summary, this study contributes valuable insights into the complex interplay between the affordances of in-person and online contexts in virtual exchange programs.
References


