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ASSESSED REAL-TIME LANGUAGE LEARNING TASKS ONLINE

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#05 ASSESSED REAL-TIME LANGUAGE LEARNING TASKS ONLINE:
HOW DO LEARNERS PREPARE?

ABSTRACT

One of the affordances of asynchronous computer-mediated communication is that it allows users to reflect on both the content and the form of their messages before they send them. In contrast, synchronous CMC requires users to react spontaneously and to “think on their toes” and, therefore, can provide foreign language learners with the opportunity to engage in interactional exchanges they are likely to encounter in oral conversation. This paper will report on one aspect of a study conducted to gauge the effectiveness of assessed student-led language learning tasks carried out on a synchronous audio-graphic conferencing tool.

In previous research on the use of synchronous conferencing for language learning, a tendency was noted for students not to do preparatory work prior to sessions. These studies, however, were based on optional non-assessed tutorials. In contrast, in this study participation in the online tasks was compulsory and performance was assessed. In post-task interviews, it was revealed that students spent a considerable amount of time preparing for the synchronous sessions. The strategies used by these learners will be discussed, along with the effect this had on the interaction.

KEYWORDS

Synchronous computer-mediated communication; Distance language learning; Online speaking tasks; Learner preparation

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INTRODUCTION

Asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) is frequently employed in language teaching to provide students with practice in both receptive and productive competences in a second or foreign language. For example, tasks designed using discussion forums, blogs, and wikis can be used to improve learners' reading and writing skills. Similarly, audio blogs and voice boards can be used for giving students practice in listening comprehension and oral expression. A main drawback of asynchronous CMC, however, is that it does not allow learners to interact orally with other interlocutors in real time. In other words, it does not provide students with the opportunity to develop their competence in what the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) refers to as "oral interaction." In face-to-face or blended learning situations, this limitation does not pose a major problem as real-time speaking practice can be provided during class time. This does, however, represent one of the major challenges for learning languages at a distance. Indeed, various authors (e.g., Felix, 2004; Wang & Sun, 2001; White, 2006) have pointed to the lack of opportunities to engage in interactive speaking as one of the main weaknesses of distance language courses.

To meet this challenge, distance language programs have increasingly turned to synchronous Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technologies to provide students located remotely with real-time speaking practice. Typical applications include Skype and Google Talk, which allow users to see and hear one another, as well as communicate via text chat. More sophisticated synchronous audio-graphic conferencing (SAC) tools have additional features such as whiteboards, document sharing, application sharing, etc. Examples of these are Adobe Connect, Elluminate, and FlashMeeting.

In this paper we will first look at findings from the available research on SAC environments used for language learning. We will then present the basic information about a study carried out using FlashMeeting as a platform for assessed speaking tasks. Finally, we will focus on an element that emerged from post-task interviews conducted with various participants, namely, the issue of preparation prior to the online synchronous sessions. For an in-depth analysis of students' perceptions of the SAC tool and the tasks utilized, see Hopkins (2010)

BACKGROUND

In terms of interaction, research has found that participation tends to be greater and more balanced in text-based CMC environments (i.e., less likely to be dominated by a few outspoken learners) when compared to analogous face-to-face language learning contexts (e.g., Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1996). Although little empirical research has been

conducted comparing SAC with face-to-face interaction, Kötter et al. (1999) observed that students participating in audio-conferences were less likely to talk freely than in face-to-face classrooms, possibly because they felt inhibited or because they did not wish to step on other participants' toes. The authors also reported that students were less likely to



divulge personal information or to take risks. These observations indicate that the “democratizing effect” often attributed to written CMC does not apply to SAC, which in this respect may have more in common with face-to-face learning environments. Further research, however, is needed to substantiate this claim.

An oft-cited characteristic of discussions taking place in SAC environments is a general lack of spontaneity and frequent prolonged pauses (Duensing et al., 2006; Hauck & Haezwindt, 1999; Rosell-Aguilar, 2006). This may be due in part to the fact that with most SAC tools turn-taking is complicated by the fact that participants cannot see their interlocutors. As stated by Hampel (2003):

...online discussions can still seem less spontaneous as no visual signals are available to help when more than one person wishes to speak. ...this can result in several users starting to speak simultaneously and then stopping altogether when they realize this. The result can be awkward silences. (p. 30)

Furthermore, some SAC environments require participants to press a talk button in order to be heard. In these online contexts, therefore, also absent are paralinguistic cues which help to move conversations along, such as “uh-huh” to indicate the speaker is being followed. According to Hampel (2003), this lack of immediate feedback from interlocutors may lead to higher levels of learner anxiety and lower motivation in SAC.

Empirical evidence of the delaying effect of the talk button is provided in a study by Stickler et al. (2007) comparing telephone tutorials with tutorials held in the Lyceum SAC environment. The researchers found that pauses in the telephone conferences lasted 2-3 seconds, whereas silences in the online sessions lasted 3-14 seconds. The authors

speculate that, in addition to the delaying effect of the talk button in the Lyceum conferences, other contributing factors could have been slow network connections, technical difficulties, and the fact that participants were less accustomed to communicating via a SAC environment than they were to using the telephone. This latter view is partially supported by studies that have found that prolonged silences also appear to be common in other SAC environments with continuous audio feeds, which do not require users to press a button to speak (Kötter et al., 1999; Wang, 2004; Wang, 2006). Similarly, in a comparison of text and voice chat (also without a talk button) interactions, Jepson (2005) noted that pauses were considerably longer in the audio context, occasionally lasting up to one minute. This author calls for more research which “might illuminate conventions for pauses in voice chat, whether they are related to the technology or to language proficiency, and how they affect the social and cognitive factors of language development.” (p. 85)

In terms of benefits for second language acquisition, a substantial amount of research has been conducted on interaction in text-based CMC environments. This, however, is not the case for synchronous audio environments, where research of this type is only just beginning to appear. One recent study along these lines was conducted by Wang (2006), who analyzed one-on-one interaction in online videoconferences for instances of negotiation for meaning (Varonis & Gass, 1985). Such conversational sequences are triggered by breakdowns in communication and are viewed as beneficial for language acquisition to the extent that they make linguistic input comprehensible for the learner. In addition, the occurrence of negotiation for meaning sequences indicates that learners are attending to language they are exposed to and

reacting to instances of non-comprehension. Wang found that the online environment supported interaction beneficial to SLA insofar as there was negotiation for meaning resulting in modified output and correction of linguistic errors.

In a similar study, Jepson (2005) analyzed interaction amongst learners participating in text and voice chats within the framework of Long's models of negotiation for meaning (Long, 1983) and negative feedback (Long, 1996) (see Table 1). The following repair moves, all of which are believed to be beneficial to SLA, were identified in the two

online environments: clarification requests, confirmation checks, self-repetitions, incorporations, recasts, and explicit corrections. No instances were found, however, of comprehension checks, questions, and self-corrections. In general, few instances of negative feedback were detected, and there were significantly more instances of negotiation of meaning in the voice compared to the text chats. The author attributes this last finding to the fact that pronunciation inaccuracies were responsible for many conversation breakdowns in the spoken mode.

Table 1 : Typology of repair moves utilized by Jepson (2005, p. 86)

| Negotiation of meaning (based on Long, 1983): | Negative feedback (based on Long, 1996): |
|---|--|
| <p>Interlocutor</p> <p>Clarification requests: "What do you mean by X?"</p> <p>Confirmation checks: "Did you mean/say X?"</p> <p>Speaker</p> <p>Comprehension checks: "Do you understand?"</p> <p>Self-repetition or paraphrase: "Which /pli:s/ [place] uh, /pli:s/, uh which landmark can I visit?"</p> <p>Incorporations (speaker repairs utterance based on interlocutor cues): "Yes, I mean X?"</p> | <p>Interlocutor</p> <p>Recasts: Interlocutor corrects speaker's word or utterance by repeating it in its correct form.</p> <p>Explicit correction: Interlocutor tells speaker he/she has made a mistake.</p> <p>Questions: Interlocutor asks question in order to prompt the speaker to make a correction.</p> <p>Speaker</p> <p>Incorporations: Speaker repairs utterance based on interlocutor's feedback.</p> <p>Self-corrections: Speaker initiates repair without the assistance of interlocutor.</p> |

In sum, it is clear that interaction in SAC environments is fundamentally different from face-to-face or other computer-mediated learning environments. Firstly, research to date suggests that participation in synchronous audio-graphic environments is less egalitarian and may actually have more in common with conventional face-to-face classroom settings than with written synchronous or asynchronous forms of CMC.

Therefore, in this light authors should use caution when making sweeping claims about "interaction in CMC." So-called "democratizing effects" may be applicable to written forms, but not necessarily to real-time spoken computer-mediated interaction. Secondly, interaction appears to be less spontaneous and characterized by long periods of silence, which may be largely due to the specific technological properties of the SAC platform



being used, but also to other factors such as the learners' language proficiency and their familiarity with the software. Finally, Wang (2006) and Jepson (2005) provide early evidence that interaction beneficial to SLA

can take place in SAC, although further research in this direction is needed to shed light on how the medium can be utilized to maximize its language learning potential by instructors.

RATIONALE

Whereas there is a growing body of knowledge regarding the type of interaction that takes place in SAC environments, little is known about what students do prior to synchronous sessions to prepare, although various authors have noted a tendency for students not to do the required preparatory work (Hampel & Hauck, 2004; Kötter, 2001). This latter finding is not surprising, however, given that most studies have been based on the use of SAC for teacher-fronted, non-

assessed language tutorials (Hopkins, 2010).

To shed light on this issue, a study was carried out to answer the following research questions:

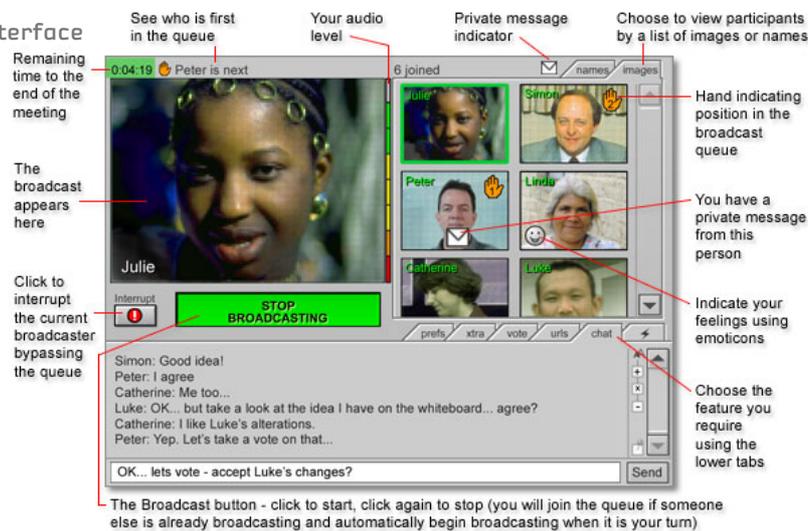
- ▶ How do students prepare for non-teacher-fronted, assessed speaking activities conducted in a SAC environment?
- ▶ How does this preparation affect the type of interaction taking place in terms of negotiation for meaning?

THE STUDY

Firstly, a number of SAC tools were examined in terms of their appropriateness to support a small group speaking activity which would not require the presence of the teacher. Among a number of critical criteria identified, a built-in recording feature was deemed crucial to allow teachers to listen to the recordings in order to assess students and

provide them with feedback on their speaking. The tool ultimately chosen was FlashMeeting, a SAC tool developed by the Knowledge Media Institute at the UK Open University (see Figure 1). Detailed information about the criteria used for selecting the platform is provided in Hopkins (in press).

Figure 1: The FlashMeeting interface



Two speaking tasks, one on time management and the other on survival on a desert island, were designed to be carried out on FlashMeeting by students in groups of three or four. These were directly related thematically to the unit in the course materials being covered at that particular point in the term and were carefully structured so that students could do them autonomously without the presence of the teacher. The outlines of the two tasks are provided in Figure 2 and 3. Before doing the assessed speaking activity, students attended an online induction session with their teachers to familiarize themselves with the FlashMeeting tool. Students were then provided with optional speaking tasks to allow them to practice with the other members of their groups prior to the assessed speaking

activity. The rubrics for the assessed tasks were sent to students a few days in advance as documents in pdf format. For more information on the design of the tasks, see Hopkins (2010).

Participants in the study were enrolled in the subject English III at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, an all online distance learning institution based in Barcelona, Spain. This course is the last of three compulsory English courses for students doing undergraduate degrees and corresponds to level B2 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). A total of 138 students participated in the study in 39 sessions on FlashMeeting. 68 of the students participated in the time management task; 70 participated in the survival task.

Figure 2: Outline of Task 1

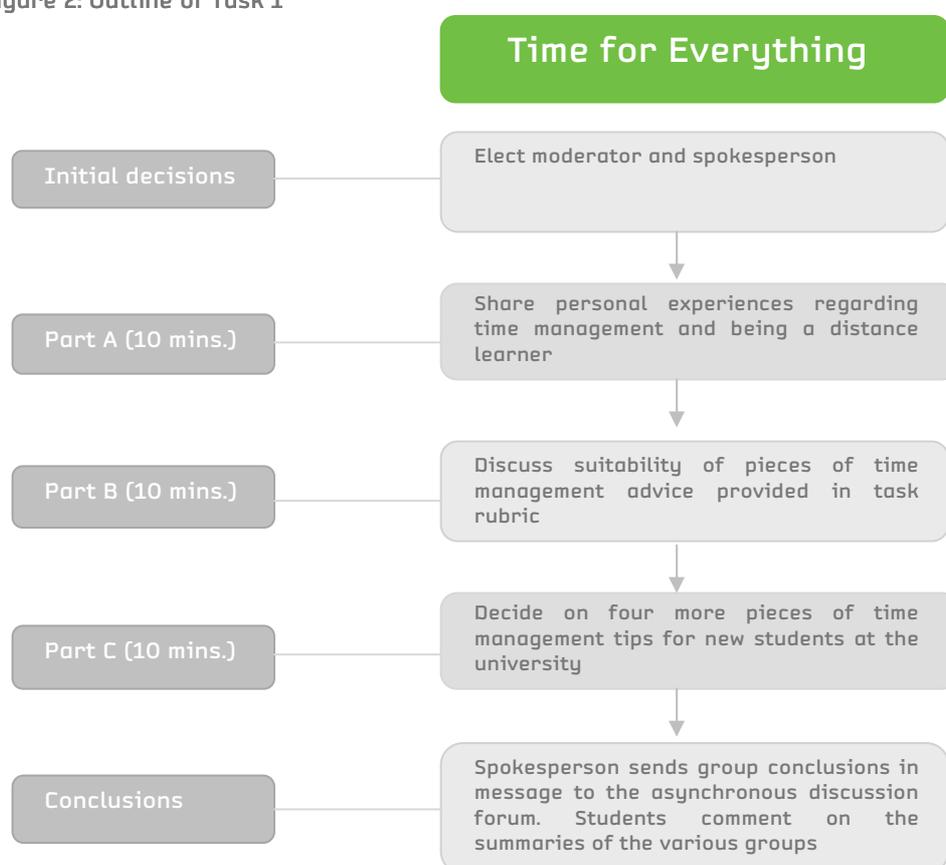
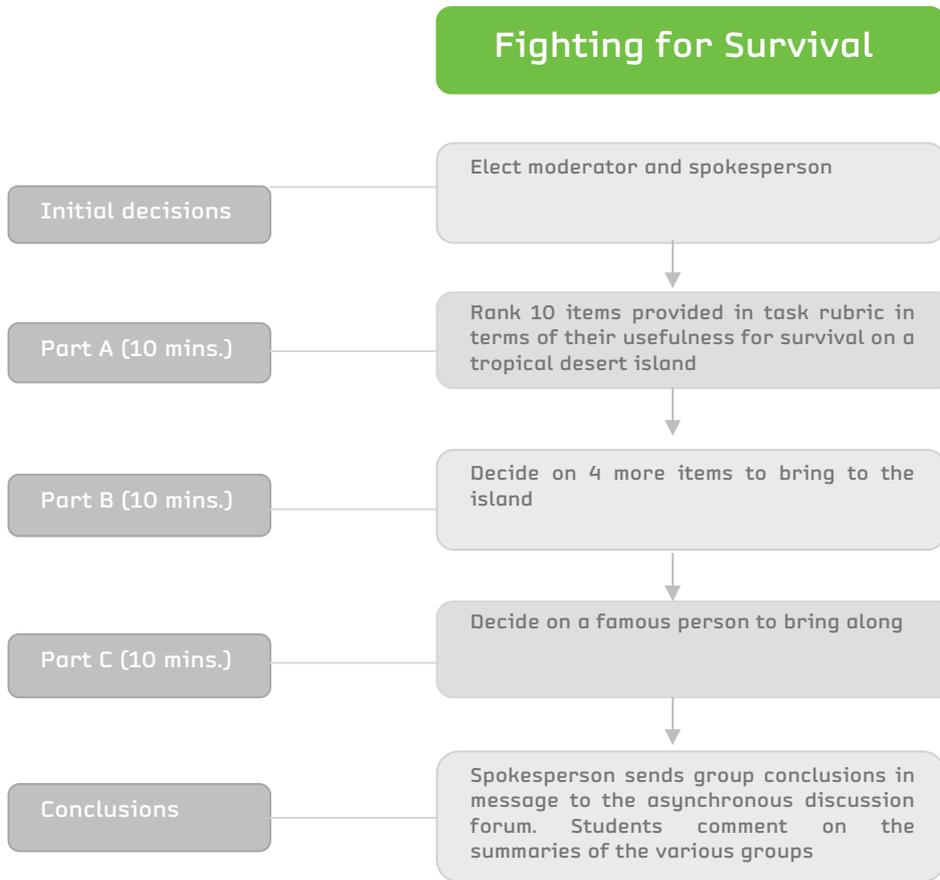




Figure3 : Outline of Task 2



METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate how students had prepared for the sessions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 of the participants after the speaking activities had been carried out. All of the interviewees were self-selected volunteers. Interviews were carried out via Skype and recorded with the PowerGramo recording application. Further data included observations made by the teachers participating in the study.

With the purpose of analyzing the interaction taking place during the synchronous speaking activities, 10 recordings of students doing the time management task and 10 with students

doing the survival task were chosen at random. Following the taxonomy used by Jepson (2005), the recordings were scrutinized for the following negotiation for meaning sequences (i.e., clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, self-repetition or paraphrase, and incorporations). Each of the recordings was reviewed separately by the researcher and an assistant using an observation worksheet, and the data were then compiled. The rate of agreement between observers was 82%. All discrepancies were reviewed and resolved by the researcher.

RESULTS

STUDENT PREPARATION

The post-task interviews revealed that students employed a number of strategies when preparing for the speaking activities (see Table 2). These included doing the exercises in the course materials, revising these immediately prior to the synchronous session, reading carefully and printed out the task rubric, and preparing notes with vocabulary and expressions that they thought

might be useful to have on hand. 6 of the 18 students interviewed said that they had written out scripted answers for portions of the task. Of these, 5 had participated in Task 1, which required students to share their experiences with time management as distance learners.

Table2 : Preparation strategies used by students interviewed

| Did exercises in course materials | | Reviewed course materials prior to session | | Read and print out task rubric | | Prepared notes with vocabulary and expressions | | Prepared scripted answers | |
|-----------------------------------|----|--|----|--------------------------------|----|--|----|---------------------------|----|
| Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| 16 | 2 | 12 | 6 | 17 | 1 | 13 | 5 | 7 | 9 |

The following quotes from the interviews illustrate the above strategies¹:

➤ Mar: I did the exercises in the materials and read through the instructions for the activity. I wrote down vocabulary and expressions that I thought I might need and I had these notes next to me during the speaking activity.

➤ Dolors: I had an idea of that I was going to say ahead of time. I had prepared a script with what I was going to say and used that during the session. It was not spontaneous.

➤ Natàlia: I had some papers next to my computer with some notes. I had prepared

what I was going to say for the first intervention and then had some possible responses written down for the other questions.

➤ Rosa: I had studied the materials and noted down vocabulary. Before the session I went back to the materials and reviewed the vocabulary that I thought I might need for the session. Then using a dictionary I prepared a list of formulas... useful expressions... in the first place, in the second place, etc.



Other students stressed the importance of having notes on hand and the instructions printed on paper in order to ease their anxiety. For example:

➤ Eva: I printed out the instructions ahead of time. During the training session I hadn't printed them out and I found it very difficult to deal with multiple windows open at the same time on my screen. I realized that it was crucial to have the instructions on paper in front of me so that I could concentrate on speaking.

➤ Esther: I studied the materials and went to the website with additional survival stories. During the session, as I didn't have a webcam, I had papers with notes with vocabulary, expressions, etc. spread out all over my desk. The fact is that I was really nervous and this helped me feel more secure

Another element revealed in the interviews was pre-task (and in one case post-task) communication amongst group members. For example, one interviewee described how the members of her group had phoned one another before and after the session:

➤ Natàlia: Before doing the activity we talked to each other over the phone... in Catalan... to organize ourselves a bit. Because if you have to record yourself for an activity and it's supposed to be a fluent conversation, it's a bit complicated if you haven't first established with the others what you're going to say. Right after the session we called each other again to talk about how we thought it had gone.

Indeed, group preparation appeared to play an important role in a number of instances. Aside from the example illustrated in the above quote, one teacher found that a group in her class had done something unexpected in the recording of their practice session held the day before their assessed speaking activity. Instead of using one of the practice

tasks provided, they used the task designed for assessment and then repeated what was essentially the same session the next day. In other words, this particular group performed a "dress rehearsal" before carrying out the task for a mark.

One interviewee, Martina, whose speaking skills were extremely weak, provided a particularly interesting insight into how stressful an activity of this nature can be for some students and the lengths that some might go to prepare. Prior the assessed activity, she claimed to have spent many hours revising the course materials, doing the exercises various times, and preparing extensive notes to have on hand during the session. In the end, however, she did not use them. According to her:

➤ When the moment of truth arrived, I didn't even look at them... I was too overcome by nerves to think straight... I had no control over what came out of my mouth... I just followed along like a parrot.

When asked about the cause of her anxiety, she responded that her main worry was her grade. As she put it:

➤ I was thinking more about how I was going to get a failing grade than how to speak... I couldn't think of anything else besides what I could do to pass.

Martina also explained that during the induction session she had used a webcam, but that after the initial experience she decided against using it for the assessed activity. According to her, that fact that others could see her had caused her to be more nervous, although the fact that during the session she suddenly asked the following in Spanish indicates that she may have decided not to use her webcam for another reason:

► *¿Qué es lo que tengo que hacer ahora? Ay... sorry! (What am I supposed to do now? Oh... sorry!)*

Given that instances of extended use of the L1, such as this one, were extremely rare in the FM sessions, that this question did not seem to

be directed at the other members of her team, and that Martina did not seem to realize at first that she was broadcasting, it is likely

that the question was directed at someone with her in the same room. Thus, after her extremely stressful experience in the FM induction session, Martina may have decided to have someone present to assist her for the assessed speaking activity. Obviously, this could not have been done if she was using a webcam. For more on learner anxiety in this study, see Hopkins (2010).

INSTANCES OF NEGOTIATION FOR MEANING BY TASK

In order to compare the interaction occurring with the two tasks utilized in the study, instances of negotiation for meaning were tallied for each of the 74 participants in the 20 sessions scrutinized (10 using the time management task and 10 using the survival task). Descriptive statistics are provided in Table 3. A Mann-Whitney U test, with task as

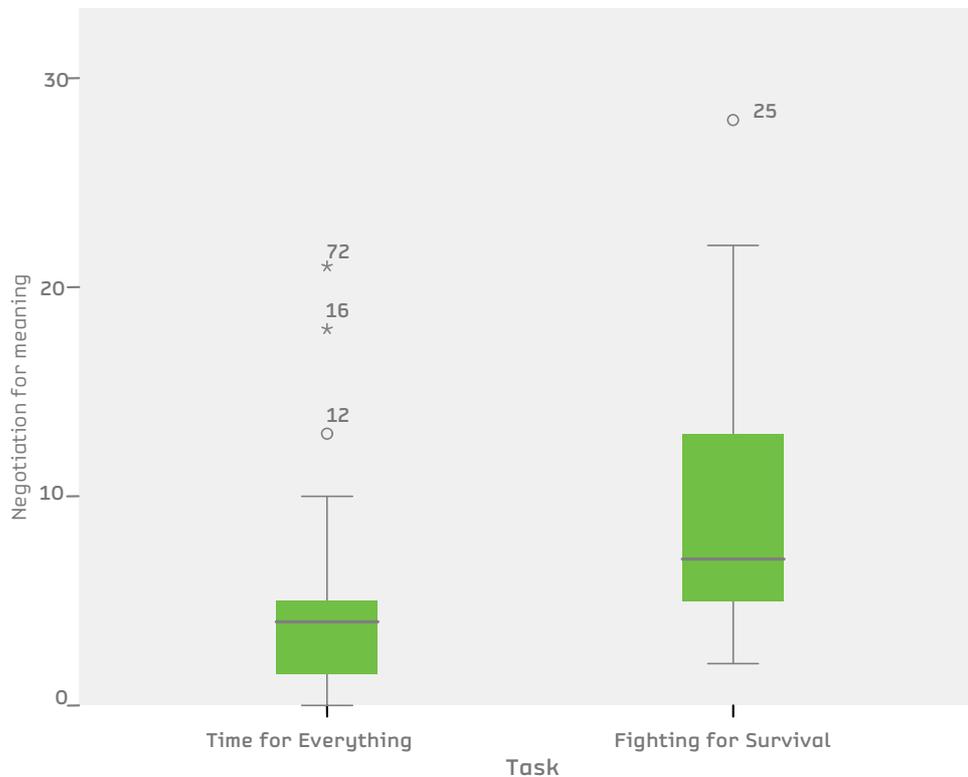
the independent and instances of the negotiation for meaning as the dependent variable, yielded the following result: $U = 293.5$, $p < .000$, $r = -.49$, indicating a significant difference between the two groups and a strong effect size. This difference is displayed graphically in Figure 4.

Table 3: Measures of central tendencies of negotiation for meaning by task

| Task | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Median |
|-----------------------|------|----|----------------|--------|
| Time for Everything | 4,47 | 36 | 4.693 | 4,00 |
| Fighting for Survival | 9,13 | 38 | 5.896 | 7,00 |
| Total | 6,86 | 74 | 5.803 | 5,00 |



Figure 4: Box plot showing distribution of negotiation for meaning by task



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

One of the main aims of this study was to examine how students had prepared for the speaking activities designed to be carried out in a SAC environment. Interviews with some of the participants indicate that students in general did a significant amount of preparatory work prior to the synchronous session. Strategies used by individual participants included studying and revising course materials, taking notes on vocabulary and expressions, and preparing scripted interventions. For most of the interviewees, it was important to have something on paper, i.e., something which they could use as a crutch to compensate for a perceived lack of proficiency in speaking and to help ease their anxiety. To what extent notes and scripts were actually used during the sessions, however, is a subject for further research. In the case of

students with a low level of proficiency, as exemplified by Martina, individual students might go to great lengths to prepare, even enlisting the assistance of someone more competent in the language to sit beside them and provide coaching during the session. In addition to what students did individually, group preparation played an important role in some of the sessions, with members contacting one another before their sessions to plan, and in one case actually rehearse, what they were going to say.

These findings contrast sharply with previous studies, which, as mentioned earlier, found that students tended not to prepare before sessions (Hampel & Hauck, 2004; Kötter, 2001). This difference can be accounted for by the assessed, obligatory nature of the tasks

utilized in this study, as opposed to the voluntary speaking tutorials that were the object of the bulk of prior research. A further element to consider is the autonomous, student-led nature of the activities. In other words, whereas students may not view preparation as extremely important for typical online language learning tutorials with a teacher, it becomes crucial in an activity where no teacher is present and the onus is on the students to organize and to do all of the talking themselves. All of these elements certainly contributed to learner anxiety and provided a strong impetus to prepare carefully prior to the sessions.

A second aim of this study was to explore how preparation affected the interaction taking place in the two tasks designed. Coinciding with Jepson (2005) and Wang (2006), instances of negotiation for meaning were found, providing further evidence that such conversational sequences can be supported in SAC environments, thereby fostering language acquisition. More importantly, though, this study found that task design had an important effect on the interaction that took place. Indeed, in the two tasks compared, there were significantly fewer instances of negotiation of meaning for the task on time management. It is important to note that for this activity students were asked to share their experiences and opinions on various aspects related to the topic, much of which could have been prepared by students ahead of time. In contrast, the survival task contained a ranking task, something which is much more difficult to script and which requires

participants to listen more attentively to one another (i.e., process the linguistic input they are being exposed to) and to react in consequence when communication breaks down. In light of the findings of this study with regard to learner preparation prior to the synchronous online activities, the extent to which interventions can be scripted ahead of time is an element task designers should take into consideration.

This study has identified a number of preparation strategies used by students prior to participating in assessed speaking activities online. One should bear in mind, however, that insights were obtained by speaking to participants who had volunteered to be interviewed, which may have been the most enthusiastic about the subject or the speaking activity. Thus, it is possible that the strategies mentioned by the interviewees were not utilized by the majority of participants. Further research is therefore needed to explore to what extent these are used in general, as well as to reveal more preparation strategies employed by learners. In terms of interaction, the findings of this study suggest a strong relationship between the degree to which the speaking tasks utilized could be pre-prepared by learners and instances of conversational sequences believed to foster language acquisition. This conclusion is based, however, on a comparison of only two task types. Hence, more studies focusing specifically on the design of online speaking tasks and its effect on interaction, an area largely ignored up until now in the research on SAC, is sorely needed.

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Footnotes

¹ Quotes have been translated by the author from the original Catalan or Spanish.
