

## TEACHING SPEAKING IN THE TIMES OF ZOOM: A REVIEW OF STRATEGIES TO MAINTAIN A GOOD LEVEL OF ORAL INTERACTION IN THE ONLINE SPANISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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### Abstract

Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions all over the world were forced to make the executive decision of quickly and effectively transferring face-to-face classes into an online format. Issues such as technical difficulties, varying degrees of digital literacy within a given team of teachers or the question of how to preserve the essence of face-to-face classes in an online environment are among the many challenges that have affected and hindered the practice of instructors all over the world. With a focus on the teaching of Spanish as a Foreign Language (*Español como Lengua Extranjera*, ELE) and video-conferencing platforms such as the software known as *Zoom*, in this paper we discuss the importance of continuing the practice of teaching speaking in an online environment. Subsequently, we present a number of strategies that we have put into practice in our online ELE classrooms in order to try and maintain the same or very similar level of interaction between our students when compared to face-to-face classrooms.

**Keywords:** Teaching speaking; Oral interaction; Communicative skills; Spanish as a Foreign Language; Video Conferencing Platforms



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### **Ensenyar llengua oral en temps de Zoom: revisió de les estratègies per mantenir un bon nivell d'interacció oral a l'aula d'espanyol com a llengua estrangera en línia**

**Resum:** A causa de la pandèmia global de COVID-19, les institucions educatives d'arreu del món es van veure obligades a prendre la decisió de traslladar, de manera ràpida i eficaç, les classes presencials a un format en línia. Qüestions com les dificultats tècniques, els diferents graus d'alfabetització digital dins d'un determinat equip de professors o la qüestió de com preservar l'essència de les classes presencials en un entorn en línia són alguns dels molts reptes que han afectat i obstaculitzat la pràctica docent de professorat de tot el món. Centrant-nos en l'ensenyament de l'espanyol com a llengua estrangera (Español como Lengua Extranjera, ELE) i en plataformes de videoconferència, com el programari conegut com *Zoom*, en aquest article es planteja la importància de continuar la pràctica de l'ensenyament de l'oral en un entorn en línia. Posteriorment, presentem una sèrie d'estratègies que hem posat en pràctica a les nostres aules d'ELE per intentar mantenir el mateix o molt similar nivell d'interacció entre els nostres alumnes en comparació amb les classes presencials.

**Paraules clau:** Ensenyament de l'oral; Interacció oral; Habilitats comunicatives; Espanyol com a llengua estrangera; Plataformes de videoconferència

### **Enseñar lengua oral en tiempos de Zoom: revisión de las estrategias para mantener un buen nivel de interacción oral en el aula de español como lengua extranjera en línea**

**Resumen:** Debido a la pandemia mundial de COVID-19, las instituciones educativas de todo el mundo se vieron obligadas a tomar la decisión de transferir rápida y eficazmente las clases presenciales a un formato en línea. Problemas relacionados con las dificultades técnicas, los diversos grados de alfabetización digital dentro de un determinado equipo de profesores o la cuestión de cómo preservar la esencia de las clases presenciales en un entorno en línea se encuentran entre los muchos desafíos que han afectado y obstaculizado la práctica de instructores de todo el mundo. Centrándonos en la enseñanza del Español como Lengua Extranjera (ELE) y en las plataformas de videoconferencias, como el software conocido como *Zoom*, en este artículo discutimos la importancia de continuar la práctica de la enseñanza de la lengua oral en un entorno online. Posteriormente, presentamos una serie de estrategias que hemos puesto en práctica en nuestras aulas de ELE para intentar mantener el mismo o muy similar nivel de interacción entre nuestros alumnos en comparación con las clases presenciales.

**Palabras clave:** Enseñanza de la lengua oral; Interacción oral; Habilidades comunicativas; Español como Lengua Extranjera; Plataformas de videoconferencias

## 1. Introduction

Output and interaction are crucial to develop a Second or a Foreign Language (L2/FL) (see Gass, 2013; Long, 1981, Swain, 1995 in González-Lloret, 2020). Even though Ur (1996) argues that speaking is one of the most important of all the four language skills (e.g., speaking, listening, reading, and writing), it has traditionally been one of the most neglected in the L2/FL classroom. In fact, it has frequently been pushed into the background, being one of the least taught of all four language skills. That being said, in recent years, communicative skills and the use of spoken language in authentic contexts and tasks that mirror real-life situations are definitely taking the center stage in the L2/FL classroom (see Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

In the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic, language classrooms around the world had to rapidly adjust to the ever-changing situation, transferring the traditional face-to-face FL classrooms into an online format and quickly drafting emergency teaching and learning plans. The practice of teaching online has presented many challenges for language instructors: technological difficulties, varying levels of digital literacy within a given team of instructors or the stress of preserving the essence of face-to-face classes. In addition, maintaining a good level of oral interaction between students in the online foreign language classroom has been a serious concern for educators around the globe.

González-Lloret (2020, p.261) states that in this new online environment «the provision of input is essential for language learning and that it is something that online learning can address most comfortably. » As she puts it, we have access to a wide array of resources that allow instructors to provide our students with rich input (e.g., *Youtube*, podcasts, websites, online articles, etc.). Moreover, the importance that output and interaction have in the L2/FL classroom cannot be obviated merely because we find ourselves in an online environment, which, up until recently, was uncharted territory for many language instructors.

With a focus on the teaching of Spanish as a Foreign Language (*Español como Lengua Extranjera*, ELE) and video-conferencing platforms such as the software known as *Zoom*, the main goal of this article is to highlight the importance of continuing the practice of teaching speaking and promoting oral interaction between students in the online ELE classroom. We believe that this is important for two reasons. First, because, after the global health crisis, some educational institutions have started to offer some of their courses online given the demand from students, and, second, because we, as educators, must be prepared to quickly and effectively switch our courses into an online format in the event of another global crisis. González-Lloret (2020, p.261) considers that, in the case that we have to face another event that forces educational institutions to go back to an online format, «it will not be sufficient to have an “emergency lesson plan” that can at least save part of our semester and that, in most cases, relies heavily on activities that develop learners’ listening, reading, and writing skills, but fail to address speaking skills.» Thus, following the author, when designing our curricula and planning our online classes, «it is important to uphold the same rigor and base our curriculum in methodological and pedagogic choices based on second language acquisition and educational research, and keep in mind that interaction is critical to developing second language skill.» (2020, p.261).

In the present paper, we review a number of strategies that we have put into practice in our Spanish as a Foreign Language classrooms (henceforth, ELE for its acronym in Spanish) in order to maintain the same or very similar level of interaction between our students when compared to face-to-face classes. It is important to mention that these strategies can be adapted to any CEFR level (Council of Europe, 2020) and any given topic. Additionally, we have decided to focus on *Zoom* as a platform. However, instructors can transfer these strategies to any video-conferencing platform of their choosing.

The paper is organized as follows: in Section 2, we provide a review of relevant studies that have emphasized the importance of teaching speaking and promoting oral interaction in the foreign language classroom. In Section 3, we address some of the challenges of online teaching. In Section 4, we review several strategies that we have implemented in our online ELE classes in order to promote oral interaction. Section 5 concludes this article.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Teaching speaking

Teaching speaking has been defined as the teaching of the appropriate words and sentences taking into account the context and the audience (Boldú, 2014). For a long time, language teaching has focused on the acquisition of written language because it was associated with the language of ‘literature and scholarship’ (Brown, Gillian, Brown & Yule, 1983:1) and most FL classrooms focused on the practice of grammar drills and translations. It was after the eighties with the introduction of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach that the importance of developing speaking skills was beginning to take shape. The main objective of CLT is for the student to be able to use the L2/FL effectively and, thus, teaching speaking became essential to language teaching (Agustín, 2006). Nowadays, the acquisition of speaking has become a central component in the L2/FL classrooms and more emphasis is being placed on teaching L2/FL learners how to communicate with others in the target language.

Since the advent of CLT, many authors have argued in favor of teaching speaking and practicing speaking in class. García (2007) states that we learn a L2/FL because we want to speak it and to listen to it. Thus, teaching speaking must be a central component to language teaching. In addition, according to Cabezuelo (2006), teachers and students give more importance to the spoken language than to the written language because in a L2/FL class, students are practicing their speaking most of the time. In addition, the communication between students and teachers is mainly oral.

For students, teaching speaking is also an important component in a L2/FL classroom. Agustín (2006) analyzed the importance that students gave to the spoken language in a L2 classroom. She distributed a survey among students of ELE. She asked them questions about their preferences on methods and activities when learning Spanish, and she also made them give their opinion about the most important aspects when learning a L2. She found that, for students, practicing speaking skills is the most important component of the language class. Furthermore, she also discovered that, for her students, ‘knowing and mastering Spanish’ means being able to have a conversation with native speakers. Agustín (2006) further adds that the ultimate goal of the students when learning a L2/FL is to develop the linguistic skills that allow them to communicate in the target language.

In addition, the benefits of teaching the spoken language are immense. Baralo (2004), for example, argues that when practicing speaking, students develop cognitive and linguistic skills because they need to be able to understand and interpret the sounds of a L2/FL in a given situation, pay attention to the quantity of information they must give and to the conversational and conventional implicatures they can give. Moreover, Cestero (2000) also mentions that learning the spoken language is not only acquiring the linguistic system of the target language, but it also helps students develop many other aspects such as the acquisition of pragmatic and social information.

Finally, we must add that many authors have developed and designed strategies and approaches in order to implement the teaching of the spoken language in the classroom (see Baralo, 2004; Cestero, 2000; Tremblay, 2017). All of them have one component in common: the importance of promoting oral interaction. In the next section we provide a review of the benefits of oral interaction.

## 2.2 Oral interaction

According to Kürüm (2016), speaking involves three areas of knowledge and it can be practiced in three different ways:

- (1) Practicing mechanics: According to the author, students practice pronunciation, word order and expressions.
- (2) Practicing interaction
- (3) Practicing pragmatics, Social and cultural rules and norms: knowing and practicing when to take turns, knowing the social and cultural rules and norms.

In this article, we are especially interested in the second component: oral interaction. The Council of Europe in its Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (2020) defines oral interaction as an exchange in which two speakers take part in an activity that involves oral comprehension and oral expression. In addition, they advocate for a teaching oriented to the spoken interaction since spoken interaction is connected to communication: «High importance is generally attributed to interaction in language use and learning in view of its central role in communication» (2020, p. 71).

Several authors claim that oral interaction plays a very important role in real life since we spend a lot of our time interacting with others (Agustín, 2006; Cabezuelo, 2006). Thus, teaching speaking, and especially promoting oral interaction among our students, should be a very important component in the foreign language classes (Bygate & Alonso, 2018; Van Batenburg, 2021). The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills Map, for example, states that the primary goal of today's language classroom is to teach language so that students can use it with other speakers of the language.

Other authors such as González (2008) state that the main goal of teaching a L2/FL is for students to become active users of the target language, that is, to be able to interact with other students and native speakers. Along the same lines, Agustín (2006) claims that the primary goal of a L2/FL classroom is for the student to be able to maintain a conversation, to communicate, and to interact with other students fluently in different situations and contexts. In fact, these authors emphasize the need to promote oral interaction in the classroom in order to achieve above mentioned goals. Furthermore, Tremblay (2017) claims that, in the majority of cases, the only place that students have to practice interaction is the language classroom and, thus, teachers must focus on developing activities in which students can practice it. When teaching a L2/FL, the use of authentic materials and the practice of activities and tasks that mirror real-life situations is one of the most important aspects, as dictated by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Finally, Nation (2007) also points out that student-to-student interaction is key for language learning. Therefore, the benefits and the importance of oral interaction in a foreign language classroom are undeniable.

Despite the above discussion, little importance is given to the development of mechanisms to promote and create oral interaction and conversation in a Spanish language classroom (Tremblay, 2017). As Tremblay (2017) states, oral interaction is seen as a “secondary skill”. She further adds that students find oral interaction skills the hardest to control (see Kremers 2001; Pinilla, 2004; Ibáñez, 2013) and this could be because students do not have enough opportunities to practice oral interaction activities in class. In addition to this, we have one more challenge to add to the list: the new online environments we are using to teach our L2/FL classes. As we discussed in the Introduction (see Section 1), following González-Lloret (2020), providing our students with input (e.g., videos, articles, podcasts, etc.) can be done with ease in an online environment. However, following our discussion in Section 2, the importance that output and interaction have in the L2/FL classroom cannot be obviated merely because we are now teaching online and providing opportunities for our students to interact and produce spoken language may seem like a daunting task. As the author states, when designing our curricula and planning our classes, «it is important to uphold the same rigor and base our curriculum in methodological and pedagogic choices based

on second language acquisition and educational research, and keep in mind that interaction is critical to developing second language skills. » (2020, p.1).

In the next section, we discuss the most important challenges of teaching speaking and maintaining a good level of interaction between our students using video-conferencing platforms such as *Zoom*.

### **3. Teaching in the times of Zoom: what are the challenges?**

In Section 2, we discussed the fact that an increasing number of studies have pointed towards the need to implement a more communicative approach in our L2/FL classrooms and have also advocated in favor of classes in which oral interaction is promoted. However, the reality of the situation is that there is still a considerable amount of work to do in order to develop strategies to implement oral interaction in language classrooms. Moreover, we pointed out that, if we add the fact that during the 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 academic years most if not all L2/FL classes shifted from face-to-face lessons to an online format, we realize that promoting and developing oral interaction with students becomes an even bigger challenge for instructors.

In Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 many universities taught online for the first time. According to UNESCO (in Stefanile, 2020), over 900 million learners have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (including 1,184,126,508 affected learners in 143 country-wide closures as of May 2020) causing closures of educational institutions worldwide (see Stefanile, 2020). This transition from conventional face-to-face classes to entirely online classes was a daunting task that presented a great number of challenges for many language instructors, even for the most tech-savvy. Gustine (2021) conducted a study about pre-service teachers who carried out their teaching practice entirely online as a consequence of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Her findings showed that even pre-service teachers (supposedly digital natives (see Prensky, (2009)) were not free from technology-based difficulties in online classrooms.

In addition, there are many authors that have pointed out the difficulties that instructors have faced when online teaching. Kohnke & Moorhouse (2022), for example, mention that the paralinguistic cues that tell us if a student is interested or following the class are lost through online teaching. They also claim that during online sessions it is harder for instructors to keep students engaged and, as a consequence, students lose interest faster. Finally and most importantly, the authors argue that little student interaction is promoted when online teaching and the lectures become a lecture full of instructors' monologues.

De Oliveira, Lopes & Teles (2020) compared online teaching with face-to-face teaching. They found that online classes give students and instructors more anxiety than in-person classes and that this could be due to Internet connection issues or background noises, among other factors. The authors also mention that the most important drawback they see is that, in virtual classes, it is easier for students to avoid participation and that students' interactions with each other were less effective. Firstly, because in virtual interaction students miss visual and non-verbal cues and, secondly, because they are apart from each other. Thus, once again we see that oral interaction is affected by online teaching.

We also have to take into consideration that a generation of students started their first year of university right in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, in the Fall 2020 semester. Thus, the only contact that they were having with their fellow classmates in each of their classes was through a computer. It is therefore easy to imagine why this situation makes it hard for us instructors to create that sense of community inside the classroom that we strive for and, also, for our students to become comfortable with each other. We are definitely not saying that this is not attainable but, in an online environment, it can take longer or simply not occur. In fact, some authors have emphasized the idea that social interaction and the social aspect of learning is lost through online

platforms (Stefanile, 2020; Vegna, 2020). Vegna (2020) for example, states that «virtual environments through video conference platforms like *Zoom* hinder communication». Hence, we can conclude that oral interaction and producing output, key components in L2/FL classrooms, could easily be obviated by instructors given the challenges and the daunting task that they can entail.

Conversely, it is also true that, during the last ten years, the use of computer-based learning and the introduction of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) tools has increased in order to support the teaching-learning process inside classrooms. Think for example of well-known ICT tools that introduce Gamification (e.g. *Kahoot*, *Quizizz*, *Educaplay*, *Genial.ly*), opportunities for collaborative writing (*Google Jamboard*, *Padlet*, *Google Docs*) or that facilitate classroom management (e.g. *Class Dojo*, virtual learning environments such as *Canvas*, *Moodle* or *Blackboard*). Moreover, during the COVID-19 global pandemic, endless webinars promoting various ICT tools and providing tips and tricks for online teaching took place. As a result, both instructors and students are now more educated and their level of digital literacy has increased. In addition, we now know that, in the current post-pandemic situation, many universities and non-university institutions (such as *Instituto Cervantes* or language schools) will continue to offer some of their courses in an online format given the freedom that studying online represents for students. We thus need to accept that online teaching is here to stay and that it is a new way of teaching L2s/FLs. As a result, we must develop strategies in order to provide and promote skills such as oral interaction as well as communicative activities when teaching through video-conferencing platforms such as *Zoom*. Instead of thinking that virtual environments might hinder communication (Vegna, 2020), we should exploit the endless possibilities that they offer.

Finally, we cannot forget that there exist advantages for students when using these types of video-conferencing platforms in the L2/FL classroom. De Oliveira et al. (2020) argued that since classrooms can be recorded and stored, this helps students be more focused on the class. Students also tend to be less worried about note-taking because classes can be watched afterwards. In addition, some other authors have also argued that video-conferencing platforms such as *Zoom* have tried to develop functions in order to create opportunities for students to interact and produce meaning-focused output such as the use of Breakout Rooms (see Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2022), which can be exploited to promote group work, collaboration and interaction between our students.

#### 4. Teaching speaking and promoting oral interaction through video-conferencing platforms

In Section 3, we presented several studies that have shown that video-conferencing platforms such as *Zoom* promote very little communication and interaction among students. Nevertheless, in this article, we argue that, since we now know that, after the global health crisis, many universities have started to offer some of their courses in an online format, we need to learn how to make the best of the available video-conferencing platforms in order to promote oral interaction in L2/FL classrooms. González-Lloret (2020, p. 267) states that with this technology as the medium to support and facilitate our teaching, we must create a “well-developed and methodologically sound curriculum, based on language acquisition research findings.” This should be the foundation for all of our language courses. In this Section, we offer and evaluate several strategies that we have put into practice in our ELE classrooms in order to try and maintain the same or very similar level of interaction between our students when compared to face-to-face classes. Every strategy can be adapted to any CEFR level (Council of Europe, 2020) and to any topic. Most of these strategies are used to substitute face-to-face interaction. However, some of them can also be incorporated into face-to-face classes.

## 4.1 Breakout rooms

*Zoom* (and other video-conferencing platforms such as *Teams* or *Google Meet*) allows the videoconference host to create Breakout Rooms, which are essentially virtual rooms that the instructor can use to divide up the students into smaller groups. The participants inside each Breakout Room are also completely isolated in terms of audio and video from the main session (Montgomery, 2022). When creating a meeting, the instructor/host also has the chance to pre-assign the students to a particular Breakout Room, if he/she wants to be the one to decide how to group the participants. Once Breakout Rooms are started, the instructor/host can move one participant from one room to another, simply by selecting their name and assigning them to a different room, broadcast a message to all groups or respond to help requests (see Montgomery, 2022). The instructor can decide how many rooms to create, and this will determine how many of the total number of students in the class will be part of each room.

*Zoom* also gives the opportunity for instructors to assign the groups randomly or to assign them manually. This can be very beneficial for students because students can work with a different student every day and get to know all of their classmates. In addition, instructors can pair more timid students with the more talkative ones very easily. This can be sometimes difficult to implement in an in-person class because students tend to sit in one specific place and work in pairs or in groups with the students that are sitting close to them. Sometimes if there is not enough time, instructors do not make students move and thus, students end up working with the same students during the whole semester. *Zoom* also allows the instructor/host to remain in the main session and to visit any of the Breakout Rooms as frequently as he/she sees fit. Inside the Breakout Rooms, students can talk amongst themselves and a volunteer can share his or her screen, if necessary for the activity or discussion at hand.

Kohnke & Moorhouse (2022, p.3) argue that when using Breakout Rooms «teachers can create opportunities for students to use language productively, produce meaning-focused output and engage in student-to-student interaction», and argue that this is key for successful learning. In addition, Breakout Rooms can be recorded very easily by the student and thus, students can perform any kind of activity that involves a conversation that can afterwards be graded by the instructor. *Zoom* also allows the use of a timestamp so that students do not record the conversation several times.

Breakout Rooms give instructors the opportunity to easily reconstruct role-playing activities (e.g. activities in which students have to obtain their partner's information) exactly like in a traditional class by combining these activities with collaborative documents in *Google Forms*, *Jamboard* and *Google Docs*. As Kohnke & Moorhouse (2022) argue, «when combined with other tools such as *Google Forms* and *Google Docs*, students can co-construct texts and complete language exercises in groups. This negotiation of meaning is an important factor for successful L2 acquisition» (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2022, p.3). One aspect that we must remember and that facilitates the completion of a particular task in *Google Docs* or *Google Jamboard*, for example, is to ask one student in each Breakout Room to be in charge of sharing their screen with the rest of the group members.

The use of Breakout Rooms has, in our experience, been very successful in maintaining the level of interaction between the students. One of the keys is to visit each Breakout Room periodically, in order to double-check that students are interacting in the target language, negotiating meaning and using the target language to complete the task at hand. This strategy is a clear substitute for the more traditional face-to-face group or pair oral interaction. However, we should also bear in mind that some universities offer classes through *CourseShare*, for example, which allows for a hybrid class format. With *CourseShare*, students can attend face-to-face classes online. This means that instructors can resort to Breakout Rooms so that the students who are attending the session online and students who are physically in the classroom can interact in pairs or in small groups.



## 4.2 Facilitating active learning and oral interaction

The “share screen” function inside *Zoom* (also in *Teams* or *Google Meet*) means that instructors can use any ICT tool, website or software in their computer and easily and automatically share it with their students. As Kohnke & Moorhouse (2022), Moorhouse & Kohnke (2020) and Kohnke (2021) argue, this very act facilitates active learning and interaction. The instructor can also use the poll function inside *Zoom* and provide students with a situation. Then, the instructor can ask students what they would do in that situation by showing them a poll with three options to choose from. Students then choose their own answer and see other students’ responses as well. Finally, everyone’s choices are open for discussion. An activity of this kind means that students are engaged and that oral interaction is promoted. In our experience, this kind of activity has proven to be very effective and has increased students’ engagement and interaction.

Another strategy is to use *Flip* (previously known as *Flipgrid*) to promote the production of output and a good degree of interaction between our students. *Flip* is a platform that allows students to respond to activities created by the teacher in a video format. In order to use *Flip*, the instructor must simply create an account. Then, he or she must add a task containing detailed instructions and, if needed, audiovisual materials. The instructor can add the class’ student list to *Flip* so that students can see all of the upcoming tasks or, alternatively, he or she can provide students with a code to access an individual task. Once students are in, they will have the opportunity to read through the instructions. Finally, they will record their own video and will also be able to access and watch all fellow classmates’ videos, provided that the instructor has made them all visible to all participants within the topic. Some or all of the videos can be shared during class in order to promote a debate, for example. In order to see how a task would look like on *Flip*, you can visit our sample here<sup>1</sup>.

Apart from providing opportunities for collaborative writing, sites such as *Padlet*, *Google Jamboard* or *Google Docs* can also be exploited to promote oral interaction. The teacher can choose any of these sites and prompt students to write a few sentences anonymously. Subsequently, students can comment on their peers’ contributions, give opinions or guess who wrote what.

Additionally, the instructor can simply set apart a certain amount of time per week simply to converse in the L2/FL. The instructor can decide whether an “authentic” conversation should take place, whether he or she wants a structured-conversation or whether students can benefit from a combination of the two.

Conversation time can also be the perfect opportunity to discuss current events or previously read articles, short stories, movies, etc. depending on the level of the students. It is true that some of our students may be tempted to run away from conversation time and not come to class on the day that they know that oral interaction will be taking the center stage. Thus, it is important to inform our students about the importance of acquiring communicative skills in the L2/FL and that the online class is the only space that they may currently have to do so. Another strategy, a stricter one, would be to make conversation time obligatory and an important percentage of the final grade.

Radio shows or podcasts can also be a fantastic opportunity for your students to practice speaking in the L2/FL language. Students can be asked to create a podcast or a radio show in groups using the software that websites such as *Podomatic* offer. By creating a free account in *Podomatic*, each group can record their podcasts directly on the website and store 20 episodes for free (Podomatic, 2021). They will even have the chance to publish their podcast or radio show on *iTunes*, *Spotify* or *Google Play*, if they so desire. The instructor can decide how the different classroom podcasts

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<sup>1</sup> Visit “ <https://flip.com/0ee2d566>” and access the task by using the username “sampleflip”.

must be shared with the rest of the class, and each group can come up with debate questions or even comprehension questions for the rest of the groups.

Virtual exchanges with partner schools or partner universities can also be very beneficial. In this case, the instructor must partner up with a colleague who is interested in their students speaking Spanish as a Foreign language regularly with our students in exchange for English, the native language of our students. The partner instructors can design tasks for students to complete together, decide how much time they will speak Spanish and how much time they will devote to English, when and how they must meet, how big the groups should be and if groups should always have the same members, etc. At the end of the exchange, which we recommend should last at least a few weeks, the different groups can present a small project or give a presentation through a video-conferencing platform. A good example of how to put a virtual exchange into practice is Vinagre, Wigham & Giralt (2020). The authors carried out an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange between three universities in Spain, France and Ireland over a six-week period. Vinagre et al. (2020, pp.113-114) state that they received a very encouraging and positive response from the students that participated and that, overall, students reported an increase in self-confidence and self-reliance when communicating in the FL.

Radio shows or podcasts and virtual exchanges are a great opportunity to introduce peer-assessment for example through the use of rubrics previously agreed upon with our students. According to Falchikov (2005), peer-assessment increases the possibility of students listening actively as they have been given the responsibility to assess their peers, and this will be then shared with the rest of the class. In our case, through *Zoom*.

Some other times, finding a partner school can be difficult. That is why some colleges are using a platform called *TalkAbroad* (also see *Tandem Mooc*, which focuses on partnerships between ELE and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) tandems). *TalkAbroad* allows students to purchase 30 minute-conversations with native speakers of the language. Likewise, the platform offers students a wide variety of tutors to choose from. These tutors come from different Spanish-Speaking countries, they offer wide range of appointments, and also provide a small description of themselves (i.e., their jobs, hobbies, their likes/dislikes) so that students can choose the most suitable tutor for them. Instructors can design and assign the task the students and the tutors have to practice through the platform itself. This way, the tutors will know what the task is about at all times and they can be prepared beforehand. Although the conversation between the student and the tutor happens outside of the allotted class time, it provides a very good opportunity for students to discuss their experience with their tutors. Students can talk to the rest of the class about what they discussed during their conversation and what they learnt from their tutor's culture. From our perspective, students very much enjoyed this activity and the afterward discussions in class were highly gratifying.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that all of the strategies reviewed in this section can be incorporated in both online and face-to-face classes. Likewise, we consider that they provide a good opportunity for implementing ICT in the ELE classroom.

## 5. Conclusions and avenues for further research

In this article, we have highlighted the benefits and the importance of promoting oral interaction in the L2/FL classroom. Additionally, we have also argued that, although these benefits are undeniable, speaking, and oral interaction have traditionally been regarded as a “secondary skill” within the L2/FL classroom (Tremblay, 2017), where more emphasis has been put on the other skills: reading, listening and writing. In spite of this, thanks to the introduction of the Communicative Language teaching approach (CLT) in the eighties, more importance is increasingly being placed on being able to communicate effectively in the L2/FL, and the acquisition of speaking has become a central component in language classrooms.

Despite the importance of oral interaction when learning a L2, oral interaction and producing output, key components in L2/FL classrooms, are sometimes obviated when teaching a L2 online. However, we agree with González-Lloret (2020) in that the importance that output and interaction have in the L2/FL classroom cannot be ignored simply because we are or may be teaching online. As she states, «it is important to uphold the same rigor and base our curriculum in methodological and pedagogic choices based on second language acquisition and educational research, and keep in mind that interaction is critical to developing second language skill.» (2020, p.261).

We have also argued that, in the current post-pandemic situation, universities have started to offer some of their courses in an online format given demand from students who wish to benefit from the freedom of E-learning. Thus, we need to come to terms with the fact that online teaching is here to stay and we, as instructors, must develop strategies in order to promote essential skills such as oral interaction and communicative activities when teaching through video-conferencing platforms such as *Zoom*.

Even though *Zoom* offers a wide array of possibilities, we have mainly concentrated on two. Namely, Breakout Rooms and facilitating active learning and oral interaction via *Zoom* in combination with other ICT tools, software or websites that are broadly used in education. These are *Flip*, *Podomatic*, *Padlet* or *TalkAbroad*. By making use of the “share screen” function inside *Zoom*, we discussed how instructors can use these ICT tools, websites or software in their computer and share it with their students. Following Kohnke & Moorhouse (2022), Moorhouse & Kohnke (2020) and Kohnke (2021), this very act facilitates active learning and interaction. Besides, we pointed out that, based on our experience, activities of this kind can contribute to an increase in engagement, motivation, and oral interaction between our students.

We are very well aware that, even though these strategies have important benefits, they do require more preparation on the part of the instructor. First of all, the instructor needs to master the tools that he/she is going to use in order to be able to set them up for their students and also be prepared to assess their students’ use of the former. For example, if we decide to use *Flip*, we must set it up and test it in advance. Additionally, if our courses are based on Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) such as *Moodle*, *Canvas*, *Blackboard* or *Google Classroom*, we must make sure that the students have all of the materials available in a timely manner so that they can have an overview of the course and prepare for what is coming up. Furthermore, if we are going to manually assign our students to Breakout Rooms, we need to make sure that we have completed this task well in advance, for example.

In addition, following González-Lloret (2020, p. 267), we need to consider the technological contexts of the students and teachers, as most of these activities require a stable and strong Internet connection. According to the author, potential difficulties “can be solved by conducting a needs analysis to find out the participants’ technical capabilities, digital literacies, and institutional support” (see González-Lloret, 2014). González-Lloret (2020, p.267) further argues that, if need be, “we need to give students (and/or teachers) extra support and training so that technology is not the reason they fall behind. As educators, we should do everything in our power to narrow the digital divide and make online learning accessible and equitable.”

Moreover, we must bear in mind that, as Jiang (2020, in González-Lloret, 2020) argues, video-conferencing platforms such as *Zoom*, although they facilitate our work (and study), require more focus and energy than a face-to-face conversation because we cannot read the body language as easily as in face-to-face, the different rhythm of pauses and conversation feel unnatural, and we are aware that we are being watched on camera. Thus, González-Lloret (2020) proposes that, if possible, “a combination of synchronous and asynchronous work may be key to find balance and keep learners cognitively engaged in the task.”

To conclude, we would like to point out that the present paper serves as the base for an experiment that we will be conducting in the near future. In this experiment, we will have the chance to critically examine the degree of effectiveness of the aforementioned strategies by comparing a group of students that is attending an online class and a group of students in a traditional classroom.

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