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The Use of Videoconferencing for Learning Spanish as a Foreign Language: Perspectives, Challenges and Implications at the Undergraduate Level

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Abstract

Many studies have focused on videoconferencing as a tool for foreign language teaching in the recent years after COVID-19. Nevertheless, challenges faced by students have not been paid much attention to outside the western world. This paper presents the results of a survey-based study aimed to assess how learners of Spanish as a Foreign Language at the undergraduate level felt about the usage of videoconferencing in their classes. Data was collected through a researcher-designed questionnaire covering attitudes toward Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), tool preferences, challenges experienced and the specific capabilities of Zoom. It was found that Zoom was the preferred platform among the majority of respondents, who valued it primarily for peer interaction features such as breakout rooms and dynamic group activities. The majority of learners were in favour of ICT integration as a supplementary medium rather than a replacement for conventional classroom instruction. The present study contributes empirical evidence from a context that has received little research attention in CALL so far, with implications for the design of blended and hybrid ELE curriculum in settings where resources are limited.

Keywords: CALL, videoconferencing, Zoom, Spanish as a Foreign Language, ICT

Introduction:

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) research has, over the course of six decades, built up a substantial body of evidence on the affordances and limitations of technology for language instruction. Videoconferencing tools have occupied an important place in this body of work, being valued for their capacity to facilitate synchronous interaction between geographically separated learners and to provide learners with access to communication with speakers of the target language outside formal classroom settings (Jauregi, de Graaff, & Canto, 2011; Storck & Sproull, 1995). Notwithstanding this body of research, the adoption of videoconferencing in everyday language teaching practice has been uneven across different institutional contexts, and the experience of learners in non-Western settings has

The Use of Videoconferencing for Learning Spanish as a Foreign Language.... Veer Kartik & Nabiel Ansari remained relatively under-researched in this regard (Golonka, Bowles, Frank, Richardson, & Freynik, 2014).

This research attempts to address this gap by looking at the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language in the Indian higher education system. It is also known as ELE (Español como Lengua Extranjera). It is noteworthy that Spanish is increasingly popular as a foreign language in Indian universities. This is due to economic relations with Latin America and the demand of the IT industry. There is little study on CALL in the Indian ELE context and thus no practical evidence of how learners feel learning a foreign language in this context. The study was conducted in 2020 when Indian colleges moved to totally online classes. This allowed for the study of videoconferencing tools use across the whole student community, not just in a few experimental situations (Dhawan, 2020; Fidalgo, Thormann, Kulyk, & Lencastre, 2020). These study findings tell us about students' opinions about videoconferencing in the context of ELE. They have substantial implications for the development of technology-rich English language classes in resource-constrained locations. The following three research questions guided the present study:

- Should ICT be incorporated in ELE instruction in the Indian higher education context, and to what extent?
- What challenges do students encounter when attending online ELE classes?
- Does Zoom, as an alternative to face-to-face instruction, allow adequate interaction between participants?

Literature Review:

(i) CALL and ICT Integration in Foreign Language Teaching:

The use of ICT in foreign language teaching is not a new development. It started in the 1960s when instruction with computers was used to conduct language drills (Ahmad, Corbett, Rogers, & Sussex, 1985; Warschauer, 1996). The subsequent development of communicative CALL in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by the integrative CALL paradigm associated with multimedia and the internet from the 1990s onward, reflects a gradual convergence of technological affordances with communicative language teaching principles (Levy, 1997). At present, CALL is a well-theorised and empirically researched field, though its adoption in everyday classroom practice continues to be uneven, more so in lower-resource and non-Western institutional contexts.

Effectiveness of ICT integration in teaching languages depends on a lot of factors such as technical support, digital literacy, and learner attitudes, planning by the teacher, course structure (Golonka et al., 2014; Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). Research conducted throughout the Asian continent concludes that access to adequate devices, quality of internet, conditions at home and income backgrounds have to be sorted out. It is evident that technology integration is by no means a pedagogically neutral choice and carries significant implications for equity in higher education (Agung, Surtikanti, & Quinones, 2020; Rasmitadila, Aliyyah, Rachmadtullah, Samsudin, Syaodih, Nurtanto, & Tambunan, 2020).

(ii) Videoconferencing in Language Teaching:

Videoconferencing has been in use for language teaching purposes since the mid-1990s, with initial research focusing on desktop video systems for intercultural language exchange (Storck & Sproull, 1995). The most widely cited theoretical foundations in this area are constructivist and social constructivist in nature. As per the social constructivist view, language acquisition takes place through active meaning-making in social contexts

The Use of Videoconferencing for Learning Spanish as a Foreign Language.... Veer Kartik & Nabiel Ansari (Vygotsky, 1962), and videoconferencing is seen as being capable of approximating some of the interactional conditions of co-present communication. As has been pointed out by Jauregi, de Graaff, & Canto (2011), video-mediated interaction between language learners confers linguistic, cultural and motivational benefits comparable to those obtained in face-to-face interaction, while at the same time revealing new forms of scaffolding behaviour specific to the online setting.

Research across different language teaching contexts has identified various recurring patterns in the use of videoconferencing for language learning. Initial technical and affective challenges among learners tend to diminish with growing familiarity with the medium. Synchronous modes of communication have been found to be better in the development of speaking and listening skills as compared to asynchronous modes because of the quality of interaction where the function of continuous interaction is fulfilled (Nguyen, Netto, Wilkins, Broomé, Insula, Tobi, & Huber, 2021; Sun & Gao, 2020). Learners attending synchronous online sessions have reported higher levels of engagement and perceived learning as against those in asynchronous-only settings (Perveen, 2021), a finding that is in keeping with earlier research on the importance of real-time interaction in the development of oral proficiency. Technological barriers such as unreliable connectivity, inadequate devices and limited familiarity with platforms have nonetheless been consistently identified as the principal obstacles to effective and sustained participation, particularly for learners in settings with limited resources (Dhawan, 2020; Fidalgo et al., 2020).

Studies have documented certain inherent limitations of videoconferencing platforms that are not present in physical classrooms, including the absence of ambient spatial cues, the flatness of on-screen representation, and what some researchers have described as videoconferencing fatigue arising from sustained screen-based interaction (Bailenson, 2021). These concerns are of particular relevance to language learning, wherein the multimodal richness of face-to-face communication, including gestures and shared environmental context, contributes in ways that are difficult to reproduce through a screen. Videoconferencing tools may or may not be able to fulfil these requirements depending on the number of students, tasks provided to them and familiarity of the tool through which the class is being taken.

(iii) Zoom for Teaching and Learning:

Among the videoconferencing platforms widely used in educational settings, Zoom has attracted considerable research attention. Founded in 2011 and originally intended for business users, Zoom came to be widely adopted in educational settings on account of its relatively low technical requirements, stable performance across different bandwidth levels, and a set of features, including breakout rooms, screen sharing, whiteboard functionality and session recording, that correspond reasonably well with the interactional demands of language teaching (Guzacheva, 2020). In her study with medical English students, Guzacheva (2020) found that the breakout room feature of Zoom was effective in replicating pair and small-group work, thereby enabling the peer interaction that communicative language teaching requires. Similar findings have been reported in EFL contexts in Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2021) and in general higher education settings in Indonesia (Rasmitadila et al., 2020).

(iv) The Indian Context:

Spanish has grown considerably as a foreign language in Indian universities since the early 2000s, driven by economic ties with Latin America, growing demand from the information technology and business process sectors, and student interest in European study and mobility opportunities. JNU's Centre for Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Latin American Studies and the Department of Germanic and Romance Studies at the University of Delhi are among the largest Spanish programmes in the country. The broader higher education technology infrastructure in India, however, remains uneven. Urban institutions tend to have adequate connectivity and device access, whereas students from rural or lower-income backgrounds, who constitute a considerable proportion of JNU's student body, are frequently constrained in their capacity to participate fully in technology-mediated instruction (Dhawan, 2020). Research on CALL in the Indian ELE context is limited, and the present study seeks to contribute to an area of research that remains small in relation to the size and diversity of the Indian higher education system.

Methodology:

(i) Research Design:

The present study adopted a quantitative survey design with supplementary open-ended items. Survey research is well suited to describing the attitudes and perceptions of a defined population and to identifying response patterns that can inform pedagogical practice (Pinsonneault & Kraemer, 1993). The methodology was descriptive and interpretative in nature. Frequency data from closed items were used to identify response patterns, while open-ended responses were used to contextualise the same. No inferential statistical tests were applied. The data are reported as descriptive evidence pertaining to the distribution of learner perceptions at a specific point in time.

(ii) Participants:

The participants of this study comprised of 56 undergraduate students enrolled in the B.A. (Honours) Spanish programme at JNU, New Delhi. They were in the second and third year of this programme and had already been taught in the offline mode during their previous semesters. 35 participants were male and 21 were female. Their ages were between 18 and 24 years. All these students were attending online classes and were invited to participate in this study. The participants of this study hail from different parts of India and were connected through different devices for classes. Due to the diversity of the group, there was difference in technology access, connectivity and familiarity with different videoconferencing tools.

(iii) Instrument:

In the present study, the questionnaire was designed through Google Forms, which helped in distributing the questionnaire online to students who could not be accessed in person due to university closures. This instrument was split into two parts. The first part deals with attitudes towards ICT in ELE education encompassing the chosen tools, the preferred modes of material distribution, the desired level of ICT integration, problems experienced and the opinion on the pedagogical function of technology. The second segment covered Zoom, including perceived engagement, motivation, interaction methods, and advantages over face-to-face education. The questionnaire included Likert-scale items, multiple choice questions and open-ended questions.

(iv) Procedure:

The questionnaire was circulated through a Google Forms link, during a time when JNU was carrying out everything online. Distribution was done by the faculty members within the programme who distributed the survey link to the students enrolled in the program. 56 students filled in the questionnaire.

Results:

The findings of this study address all research questions. For close-ended questions, Likert scale items show overall trends of the participant group. The open-ended responses explain what the opinions of the students are. Both provide a complete interpretation of the results.

(i) ICT Integration in the ELE classroom:

• Tool preferences:

On asking which videoconferencing tool was preferred, 62% participants pointed toward Zoom. Other options like Skype and Google Hangouts were chosen by 18% and 11% respectively. WhatsApp as a preferred choice was opted only by 5% of the respondents. Google Meet and Google Classroom were only chosen by around 2% participants each due to their limitations and newness in conducting online classes. This tells us that the margin was very much high when compared to Zoom. This result is very much in sync with other similar studies conducted in other countries. Rasmitadila et al. (2020) suggested a strong inclination toward Zoom among student populations, which also tells us that there is a wider acceptance of certain digital tools when offline instruction is not possible.

Table 1

Participant tool preferences for online ELE classes (N = 56)

Platform	Frequency	Percentage
Zoom	35	62.0
Skype	10	17.9
Google Hangouts	6	10.7
WhatsApp	3	5.4
Google Meet	1	1.8
Google Classroom	1	1.8
Total	56	100.0

• Materials exchange:

When asked which platform they preferred for receiving and exchanging course materials, 85.7 per cent of participants selected Google Classroom, with email and WhatsApp accounting for 8.9 per cent and 5.4 per cent respectively. The predominance of Google Classroom for asynchronous material exchange, notwithstanding WhatsApp's ubiquity in Indian everyday communication, suggests that learners had already begun making functional distinctions between platforms suited to different purposes, using Zoom for synchronous instruction and Google Classroom for document-centred tasks. This kind of functional differentiation has been noted in research on blended tool use in technology-integrated instruction more broadly (Fidalgo et al., 2020).

• Desired level of ICT integration

Three quarters of participants were in favour of ICT integration above 25 per cent of curriculum time, with 39.3 per cent preferring a 50 to 75 per cent level and 35.7 per cent preferring 25 to 50 per cent. Only 7.1 per cent were of the view that ICT should not be incorporated at all. On the question of pedagogical positioning, 73 per cent favoured treating

ICT as a supplementary medium rather than the primary mode of instruction, while 14 per cent supported a full transition to technology-based teaching. This suggests that the majority of learners want ICT integration in their classrooms but the primary mode of teaching should remain in person.

(ii) Challenges in Online ELE Classes:

Respondents reflected on the challenges and difficulties they faced while attending classes online, where they could select as many challenges as possible according to their experience. Selecting multiple options allowed for a deeper understanding of student’s problems. The biggest obstacle across the group was devices or internet connectivity which was faced by 85.7% of all students. For the vast majority, the hurdle to effective language learning through online mode was infrastructural. Lack of motivation and scheduling of classes was also a problem for some participants as no other activity regarding the use of language outside the classroom was possible. Lack of digital skills was reported only by 2 students indicating that the group was mostly self-reliant on the basic use of videoconferencing tools.

Table 2

Challenges in online classes of Spanish (N = 56, multiple options could be chosen)

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
Technological problems (device or connectivity)	48	85.7
Lack of motivation	23	41.1
Class scheduling	19	33.9
Online workload demands	17	30.4
Lack of time	14	25.0
Classroom methodology	12	21.4
Lack of digital skills	2	3.6

It is very important to note that digital literacy or motivation were not the main reasons that contributed to the challenges but rather infrastructure. It is visible that the fundamental impediment to online teaching of Spanish could be imbalance of adequate ICT resources. Similar problems have been observed in other South Asian contexts (Agung et al., 2020; Dhawan, 2020), which suggests that investing in connectivity and devices at the institutional level is a very important if need arises. The results also indicate that functional experiences of participants have been different for different students. 80.4% students attended their classes online via smartphones. This can lead to differences in accessibility such as limitations on the size of screen where the content is being shown, inputs on the keyboard, documents shared, etc.

(iii) Capabilities of Zoom as a videoconferencing tool:

• *Participation and motivation of students:*

On asking whether Zoom helped in terms of active involvement in tasks assigned by the Professor, 33.9% agreed, 21.5% disapproved and the rest were neither in favour nor against the statement. The response can be compared to findings of other studies that concluded that task design is a key deterrent of quality of interactions and passive consumption of online material is very much possible instead of an active one (Nguyen et al. 2021; Sun & Gao 2020). They were later asked if Zoom inspired them to attend sessions online, 43% respondents replied yes. 26.8 did not feel the same and the rest were unsure. The main

factors of this motivation were the joy and desire to learn the language. Exam and possibility to interact with peers were also factors that contributed to the motivation.

• **Interaction mechanisms:**

A clearer pattern emerged when participants were asked specifically whether Zoom functioned as a platform for student-to-student interaction, with 78.6 per cent agreeing that it did and only 5.4 per cent disagreeing. Among the interaction mechanisms most valued by participants, breakout rooms were cited by 67.9 per cent and dynamic group activities organised by the teacher by 53.6 per cent. The chat function was also noted as a useful channel for sharing information and perspectives during class sessions.

These findings are consistent with CALL research on the utility of breakout rooms for communicative language teaching. The ability to divide a large synchronous session into smaller peer-interaction groups partially replicates the pair and group work that is central to communicative classrooms, and at the same time reduces some of the inhibitory effects of speaking in front of a large online audience (Guzacheva, 2020). It is noteworthy that 78.6 per cent of participants reported adequate student interaction, a figure considerably higher than the 33.9 per cent who reported active participation in teacher-directed activities. This suggests that peer interaction design may be the more productive focus for improving the quality of online ELE instruction.

• **Advantages over face-to-face instruction:**

When asked about the advantages of Zoom-based classes relative to face-to-face instruction, the dominant response was of a practical nature, with 39 per cent citing reduction in commuting time, a particularly salient benefit for JNU students many of whom travel substantial distances to attend classes. Learning autonomy was cited by 27 per cent of participants and a new challenge by 14 per cent. Smaller proportions cited maintenance of linguistic skills, personal time management and maintenance of personal relationships. The predominance of practical over pedagogical advantages in these responses is consistent with findings from comparable learner populations in other contexts (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020).

Limitations:

The sample for the present study is drawn from a single institution in New Delhi and comprises 56 participants, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other Indian universities, other regional contexts or learners of other foreign languages. JNU is a selective public university with a distinctive student demographic and is not representative of the full diversity of Indian higher education. Moreover, data was collected at a single point in time, and it is possible that the attitudes recorded may not reflect the more settled perceptions that emerged as learners and institutions accumulated experience with online instruction over subsequent years.

The survey instrument was researcher-designed and has not been independently validated. Responses to Likert items on technology-mediated instruction may be subject to social desirability effects, and the online instructional context in which the study was conducted may have shaped responses in ways that are difficult to disentangle from more stable underlying attitudes. The predominantly mobile access profile of the sample also means that differences in platform experience between smartphone and computer users were not systematically captured, which is itself a limitation in view of how central device access proved to be in the findings of the present study.

The findings are presented as they were collected in 2020 and are to be read as empirical evidence of learner perceptions at a specific point in time rather than as a general prescription for current practice. Subsequent developments in Indian higher education technology infrastructure and in the broader CALL field constitute relevant context that future research in this area should seek to build upon.

Conclusion:

The present study has examined the perceptions of 56 undergraduate ELE learners at JNU toward videoconferencing tools, and toward Zoom in particular, as a medium of foreign language instruction. Across the three research questions, a broadly consistent picture emerges. Learners showed a clear preference for Zoom as their synchronous instruction platform and were largely in favour of ICT integration as a supplementary rather than a dominant component of the curriculum. Technological infrastructure, as against motivation or digital competence, emerged as the dominant constraint on participation quality. Breakout rooms stood out as a feature that helped in productive interactive sessions. Most participants favoured a blended model to combine online and face to face components in teaching and learning.

For practitioners designing ELE courses in Indian higher education and in non-Western institutional contexts, the findings suggest several practical directions. Instructional design for synchronous online sessions should prioritise peer interaction tasks, making full use of breakout room functionality rather than relying predominantly on whole-class plenary formats. Materials are to be designed keeping mobile access in mind, inasmuch as the majority of learners engage through smartphones rather than computers, and documents, slide decks and shared resources should be formatted accordingly. ICT integration should be positioned as supplementary to face-to-face instruction rather than as a replacement for it, in keeping with the preferences expressed by the learners in the present study. Institutional investment in device access and connectivity support is likely to improve online learning outcomes more substantially than any pedagogical redesign that proceeds on the assumption of equal platform access across the cohort.

For the CALL research community, the present study underscores the importance of examining learner experience in non-Western foreign language contexts. The Indian ELE case, with its combination of structural resource constraints, motivated learner populations and limited prior research attention, warrants more sustained inquiry as hybrid and blended models become the established norm of language instruction across diverse institutional settings.

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