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Learners' Perceptions of the Benefits of Voice Tool-based Tasks on their Spoken Performance[1]

Las Percepciones de los Estudiantes sobre los Beneficios de Tareas Basadas en Herramientas de Voz para su Desempeño Oral

Astrid Wilches[2]*
Centro Colombo Americano Bogotá, Colombia

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate learners' perceptions of the benefits of tasks using voice tools to reinforce their oral skills. Additionally, this study seeks to determine what aspects of task design affected the students' perceptions. Beginner learners aged 18 to 36 with little or no experience in the use of technological tools for speaking practice were selected to participate in this study. The students' reflections were analyzed by following a combination of qualitative and quantitative research approaches based on classroom observation and two surveys. The findings show that tasks using voice tools are beneficial for students' oral performance as they can raise self-awareness and self-correction of speech patterns and provide extra practice of language features such as pronunciation, fluency, intonation and accuracy. The aspects of task design that affected the student's perception of those benefits were the opportunity to work on self-awareness of their spoken performance, to interact for comprehension purposes, and to exchange information. Students acknowledged that voice tool-based speaking tasks can be educational, personally meaningful, enjoyable, and beneficial for the reinforcement of their oral skills as long as they are carefully planned and integrated into the dynamics of the class. It can be concluded that the asynchronous anxiety-free nature of voice tool-based speaking tasks offers several benefits to practice speaking skills both collaboratively and individually.

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[2] astridwilches@hotmail.com

Keywords: voice tools, asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC), communicative tasks, task design, speaking performance and competence

Resumen

El propósito de este estudio es investigar las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre los beneficios de tareas basadas en herramientas de voz para reforzar su habilidad de habla. Adicionalmente, este estudio pretende determinar qué aspectos del diseño de las tareas generaron mayor impacto en sus percepciones. Estudiantes principiantes entre los 18 y los 36 años con poca o sin experiencia en el uso de herramientas tecnológicas para la práctica del habla fueron seleccionados para participar en este estudio. Las reflexiones de los estudiantes fueron analizadas siguiendo los enfoques de investigación que combinan aspectos cuantitativos y cualitativos basados en la observación de la clase y dos encuestas. Los resultados demuestran que las tareas basadas en herramientas de voz son beneficiosas para el desempeño oral de los estudiantes puesto que permiten elevar la auto-conciencia y la auto-corrección de los patrones del habla y proveen oportunidades adicionales para practicar aspectos del habla como la pronunciación, la fluidez, la entonación y la precisión. Los aspectos del diseño de las tareas que más impactaron la percepción de los estudiantes sobre esos beneficios fueron la posibilidad de trabajar en la auto-conciencia de su desempeño oral, de interactuar con fines de comprensión y de intercambiar información. Los estudiantes reconocieron que las tareas basadas en herramientas de voz pueden ser educativas, personalmente significativas, agradables y benéficas para el refuerzo de sus habilidades orales siempre y cuando estén cuidadosamente planeadas e integradas en la dinámica de la clase. Se puede concluir que la naturaleza asincrónica y libre de ansiedad de las herramientas de voz ofrece múltiples beneficios para practicar la habilidad de habla tanto cooperativa como individualmente.

Palabras Clave: herramientas de voz, comunicación mediada por computadora, tareas comunicativas, diseño de tareas, competencia y desempeño comunicativo

Resumo

O propósito deste estudo é pesquisar as percepções dos estudantes sobre os benefícios de tarefas baseadas em ferramentas de voz para reforçar a sua habilidade de fala. Adicionalmente, este estudo pretende determinar quais aspectos do desenho das tarefas geraram maior impacto nas suas percepções. Estudantes principiantes entre os 18 e 36 anos com pouca ou sem experiência no uso de ferramentas tecnológicas para a prática da fala foram selecionados para participar neste estudo. As reflexões dos estudantes foram analisadas seguindo os enfoques de pesquisa que combinam aspectos quantitativos e qualitativos baseados na observação da aula e das enquetes. Os resultados demonstram que as tarefas baseadas em ferramentas de voz são benéficas para o desempenho oral dos estudantes posto que permitem elevar a autoconsciência

e a autocorreção dos padrões da fala e proveem oportunidades adicionais para praticar aspectos da fala como a pronúncia, a fluidez, a entonação e a precisão. Os aspectos do desenho das tarefas que mais impactaram a percepção dos estudantes sobre esses benefícios foram a possibilidade de trabalhar na autoconsciência do seu desempenho oral, de interatuar com fins de compreensão e de intercambiar informação. Os estudantes reconheceram que as tarefas baseadas em ferramentas de voz podem ser educativas, pessoalmente significativas, agradáveis e benéficas para o reforço das suas habilidades orais sempre e quando estejam cuidadosamente planejadas e integradas na dinâmica da classe. Pode-se concluir que a natureza assincrônica e libre de ansiedade das ferramentas de voz oferece múltiplos benefícios para praticar a habilidade de fala tanto cooperativa como individualmente.

Palavras chave: ferramentas de voz, comunicação mediada por computador, tarefas comunicativas, desenho de tarefas, competência e desempenho comunicativo

Introduction

Students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) often have limited opportunities to practice speaking in an authentic and meaningful way inside or outside of class (Nakazawa, Muir, & Dudley, 2007). Asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC) tools that can be accessed in delayed-time and from different places seem to be beneficial for such students. They provide that additional speaking practice in an environment that enables the students to speak, listen to themselves, and, after repetition and feedback, raise self-awareness of their own speech patterns (Gleason & Suvorov, 2011).

Voice tools are pieces of software that enable students to practice their speaking skills online, either cooperatively or individually from any place or time on a computer with an internet connection. There are several web-based tools that can be found online free of charge. Others are integrated within learning management systems (LMS) that facilitate a supportive atmosphere for collaborative learning at institutions (Garrison & Anderson, 2003).

This is the case of a private language center in Bogotá, Colombia, which emphasizes students' oral competence training through a communicative task-based approach. The center has been interested in the use of technology for English learning and teaching, and recently began implementing an LMS that offers interactive tools for students to practice their language skills with a multimedia emphasis. One of these is the Wimba suite of voice tools, which includes voice authoring,

e-mail, presentation, podcasting and a message board. This study focused on the use of the Voice Board tool, which is a threaded voice discussion board where students can record, playback, listen, edit, and post audio messages within a communicative task at their convenience of time and space (Nakazawa et al., 2007).

A communicative task is the main component of the Task-based Language Teaching approach (TBLT), which has become widely implemented in language education for its relation between the work done in class and its possible application outside. Nunan (2006), who has been one of the principal contributors to understanding and shaping TBLT, defines a task in this way.

> [It] is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. (p. 17)

Similarly, Ellis (2003) defines a task as "a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate content has been conveyed" (p. 16). While a variety of definitions of task have been suggested, this study takes Ellis' (2003) definition and considers communicative tasks as pieces of work that require students to convey meaning in order to carry out academic activities that resemble those in real-life. This language approach allows students to work toward a clear goal, share information, exchange opinions, negotiate meaning and get ready for real-world tasks.

Ellis (2003) recommends tasks should follow some methodological principles that facilitate a more meaningful and structured learning experience. Tasks should be designed according to the learner's skills in order to set an appropriate level of task difficulty. Egbert and Hanson-Smith's (2007) findings corroborate this principle by showing that the enjoyment and completion of a task using technological tools can be achieved if there is an optimal balance between the challenges offered by the task and the students' available skills. Tasks should also follow a process with clear goals, steps and outcomes where the teacher orientates students to take an active role during the performance of the task. Taking an active role implies taking more risks in using the language more spontaneously, focusing on meaning rather than on form. At the end of this process, as a main component of the TBLT approach, students are encouraged to reflect on and evaluate their own and classmates'

performance and progress. These principles of communicative tasks can be planned and enhanced by the use of ACMC tools. Therefore, this study sought to find out learners' perceptions of the benefits of tasks using ACMC voice tools to reinforce their oral skills.

Literature Review

The use of ACMC tools to provide additional practice and reinforce language learning has proven to be beneficial due to the asynchronous environment that enables students to rehearse and evaluate their oral performance. However, for teachers, the very nature of this environment can bring some technical, social and design factors that require careful attention when planning a communicative task.

It is widely accepted now that tasks using ACMC tools can contribute to the development of speaking skills (Blake 2009) by providing students with the facilities to practice and evaluate their oral performance within an online atmosphere that reduces the pressure of interacting in a face-to-face class. By being in this online environment, students lose their apprehension and are able to employ more time to elaborate and put ideas together in advance before actually interacting with others (Abrams, 2003; Altun, 2005; Stonebrink, 2008). Communicative tasks using ACMC tools can positively influence learners' attitudes and motivation towards discussions and forums, encouraging them to be more participative, receptive and interactive (Abrams, 2003). Thanks to its asynchronous nature, ACMC tools can tackle common problems when learning a foreign language by providing additional speaking practice outside class and the possibility to focus on one particular aspect of language (pronunciation, fluency, accuracy, intonation) that may require more time and attention (Johnson, 2006). This type of interaction can also help develop language complexity and collaborative learning (Blake, 2009; Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Language features such as syntactic complexity, lexical sophistication, and the amount of speech have been reported as aspects that can be enhanced through tasks using ACMC tools (Beauvois, as cited in Abrams, 2003). The facilities offered by ACMC tools, such as voice recording and feedback exchange, can contribute to raise students' awareness of their own speech patterns which could lead to self-correction (Gleason & Suvorov, 2011; Hunke, 2011; Yaneske & Oates, 2010). Self-awareness, self-correction, self-evaluation and assessment can be enhanced by ACMC tools.

However, the very technological and asynchronous nature of these tools may also bring some technical, emotional and procedural difficulties

for teachers and students. Learners may have problems accessing a platform, or meeting the technical requirements to run a program, as well as recording, editing, interacting with the tool, or personalizing the interface. These aspects may inhibit students' participation in discussions and tasks and bring emotional issues such as a drop in motivation, embarrassment or lack of interest (Yaneske & Oates, 2010). Other challenges when using ACMC tools for communicative tasks are the time constraints when providing individual feedback, especially in large groups. The a-synchronicity enables students to take their time to elaborate ideas and edit as many times as necessary before posting, but at the same time, this flexibility may delay conversations and feedback. This may cause students to lose the motivation to participate, and they may also be too expectant of individualized feedback, which seems to take a long time to arrive (Abrams, 2003; Wang & Woo, 2007; Yaneske & Oates, 2010).

In summary, studies suggest that, when carefully designed for meaningful tasks, ACMC voice tool-based speaking tasks can be beneficial for students to practice and reinforce their speaking skills. This research has reported the teacher's observations and analysis; however, it would be worthwhile to know the students' perceptions of the benefits of voice tools for speaking tasks, as they all have different reactions and insights that can contribute to the understanding of this area.

Methodology

Research Design

This research project follows a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches since investigating an educational environment requires understanding the significance of human behavior. This can be measured not only quantitatively, but also described and interpreted in the light of the research objective. The goal of this research project was to investigate the learners' perception of the benefits of voice-tool based speaking tasks and to determine what aspects of the task design affected these perceptions most.

In order to collect these perceptions, class observation and two surveys were used. Surveys were chosen because of their confidentiality and practicality. This data source has the advantage of being a safe space where students can express themselves freely without feeling judged or afraid; an example of this is that the surveys collected opinions from those shy students who may not have spoken their minds freely

if asked in class. Another advantage surveys have is the possibility of setting pre-established categories that facilitate the process of coding and preparing data. The categories were designed based on Dornyei's (2010) proposal of three kinds of data: a) factual information, to determine if demographic characteristics such as occupation and time learning English influence students' perception; b) behavioral data, to help identify the students' use and skills of voice tools for speaking tasks; and c) attitudinal information, to find out students' perceptions of the benefits of voice tool-based speaking tasks.

Participants and Context

The participants in this study were nine adult beginning-level EFL students in Bogotá, Colombia. The students come from varied geographical (six students from the capital city and three from other major cities), social (aged 18-35, different professions and lifestyles) and educational backgrounds. Although beginner students at the center acknowledge the fast progress in their language skills in the short time they have been studying (2-5 months), they usually report less confidence in their speaking skills and they often point out their concern about aspects as pronunciation or fluency, and sometimes for accuracy and intelligibility.

Since the center's goal is to develop students' communicative competence and has just started implementing an LMS that supports Wimba Voice Tools, it seemed appropriate to integrate those tools into the dynamics of the class in order to explore the impact that this practice might have on the students' speaking performance. That integration based the main component of the learning process, the communicative tasks, on the voice tools, specifically on the Voice Board. The basic courses at the center feature one task per unit, which includes a written and an oral presentation. The students' performance during these task presentations constitutes a determining factor in deciding if students pass or fail the course. For this study, three tasks were chosen to be done during one month.

Task Design

The three tasks were designed following the center's principles which correlate to the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001) standards for level A1-A2, and the features of the Wimba Voice Board.

	Task 1 My Anecdote at School	Task 2 The Walking Tour	Task 3 Let's Take My Walking Tour
Center's principles (TBLT): • Communication (C) • Language (La) • Learning (Le)	(C) Narrate an anecdote from school (La) Use logical sequence of events in the past and intonation to show emotions (Le) Correct things you say	(C) Design and present a Walking Tour (La) Give directions and instructions to get somewhere (Le) Confirm information you heard	(C)Recommend your Walking Tour (La) Suggest tips for the Walking Tour (Le)Politely reply to invitations related to the Walking Tou
CEFR standards for level A1- A2	*(Describing experience A2)*	*(Information exchange A2*)	*(Conversation A2) (Informal discussion A2)*
Wimba Voice Board features	Listen to yourself and edit intonation to show emotions and make an anecdote more interesting and intelligible	Flexibility of time to search, elaborate and correct information to be shared in a clear, accurate spoken way	Interact with partners to hold an asynchronous, informal conversation about suggesting places to visit in a walking tour and replying to invitations

Figure 1. Task design elements

The three tasks were also designed according to the following task design principles: a) presentation, in which students are given enough planning time for framing ideas and self-correction; b) structured practice, where exposure to the language is maximized; c) reflection about language components; d) individual and cooperative work; and e) exchange of meaningful information within a relevant context (Tschirner, 2001). When learning occurs in given contexts, it may be called situated learning. This type of learning can be done in a social, cultural, group and individual level.

Data Collection Instruments

Two surveys were used to collect students' perceptions about the benefits of voice tools for speaking tasks. The first survey was completed on paper in class. It consisted of 24 open-ended questions designed to

give the students the opportunity to express their feelings. The questions were also designed to guide participants to analyze and describe their perception of specific aspects of task design. Therefore, questions were focused on finding out the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the voice tool to enable them to practice pronunciation, intonation, fluency and accuracy, to provide the opportunity to playback, listen and edit as many times as necessary before posting, and to evaluate one's own and others' performance and progress.

The second survey was done online during class time through Google docs. It included five open-ended questions about the students' opinions, preferences and suggestions about the use of voice tools for speaking tasks. It also included 40 rating questions using (1 = strongly disagree – 5 = strongly agree) divided in the following categories: general information, attitude toward tech tools for speaking, evaluation of technical aspects of the voice tools, evaluations of task design, and evaluation of voice tool-based speaking tasks for features such as pronunciation, intonation, fluency and accuracy.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

These categories pre-organized the results, which were coded in a process of selecting, segmenting and labeling the data (Creswell, 2008). The labels describe the data in general groups, for example self-correction, pronunciation, technical issues. These can be subdivided into a few manageable, specific themes, such as voice tool as an aid for self-awareness, which help answer the research questions. Afterwards, a thematic approach (Creswell, 2008) was used to analyze repeated commonalities, key words and perceptions. Not only the students' quotes and rich details from observation, but also quantitative data from the rating questions helped answer the research questions.

Results

The main purpose of this study was to find out learners' perceptions of the benefits of voice tool-based speaking tasks for their spoken performance. Two principal themes were identified: 1) as an aid to raise self-awareness and self-correction, and 2) as an aid to enhance specific features of speaking such as pronunciation, intonation, fluency and accuracy.

Voice-based Tools as an Aid to Raise Self-awareness and Self-correction

All the students perceived self-awareness and self-correction of their speaking performance as a main benefit of using voice tools for speaking tasks. Students highlighted how the facility of listening and editing as many times as necessary helped them become more aware of their mistakes, as exemplified in the following statements: "It is very enriching to be able to practice and notice the mistakes, listen and correct," and "Listening to my classmates and to myself (…) helped me identify my mistakes." Once learners identified their errors, they were motivated to self-correct and strive to do a better job. This finding is consistent with that reported in Gleason and Suvorov (2011), which showed that students can benefit significantly not only from listening to themselves, but also to others.

Voice-based Tools as an Aid to Enhance Speaking Features

The second benefit students perceived with the use of voice tools for speaking tasks is the possibility and importance of self-awareness and self-correction for language features such as pronunciation, intonation, fluency and accuracy.

Pronunciation. Among all the speaking features, pronunciation (the production of specific sounds) was perceived by students as a principal aspect to enhance and master, not only during tasks but also in order to be considered proficient English speakers. Having a tool that enables students to become aware of their pronunciation patterns was perceived as beneficial and useful. This awareness was enhanced by the possibility of speaking without the fear or embarrassment of a face-to-face class. In an asynchronous environment, students can take more risks to speak more freely (Nakazawa et al., 2007), and to self-correct their pronunciation. It seems that being at home also provides an extra level of comfort that enables students to pay more attention to their pronunciation, something that simply cannot be done in class, as explained in the following figure:

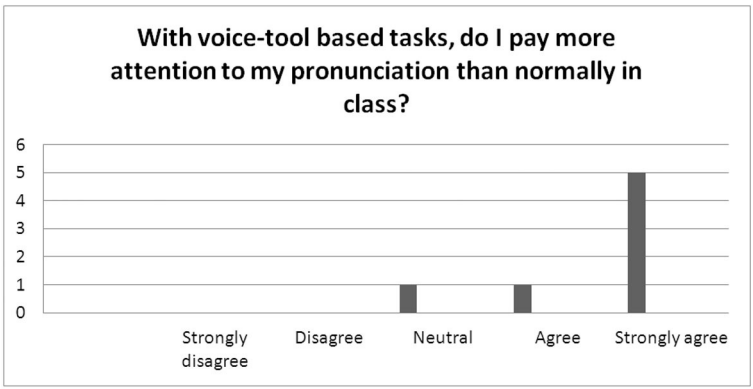

Figure 2. Attention to pronunciation when working with voice tools

When working with the voice-based tasks outside class, students have more time to check the phonetic transcription of difficult words, practice repeating a particular sound several times before posting, and especially, and listen to themselves. These aspects helped students evaluate their pronunciation, as illustrated in the following comments: "I sincerely feel that I have improved especially in pronunciation," "I honestly think that Voice Tools have helped me practice English because I can record, listen and detect my mistakes in terms of pronunciation, something very important for English learning."

Students perceived this experience as beneficial for their language learning process since they evolved from a lack of awareness to a recognition of their own speech patterns, thanks to the voice tools. As Hunke (2011) reports, the constant repetition and possibility of editing offered by the voice tools helped students become aware of their mistakes and self-correct according to the goals of the task. It also helped them spot specific weak areas in their speaking skills that needed to be improved (Abrams, 2003; Blake, 2009).

Intonation. Intonation (referring to the pitch contours necessary to express varied emotions as surprise, enthusiasm or interest) was an essential aspect to accomplish the tasks as it adds to the understanding of recorded voices where there are no visual cues: it adds emotion and emphasis to their voices to clarify meaning and it guides listeners towards comprehension. Although students acknowledge intonation is not a fast or easy aspect to develop in such a short time, they perceive progress in terms of self-awareness of their intonation patterns, as illustrated in the following comments: "It was a little difficult because if I analyze what I'm saying, I lose the intonation to show emotions,"

"It was difficult to show emotions, sometimes because I was nervous. It seemed like I was faking." Students also perceived that after tasks using voice tools, they became more aware of their intonation production. This might be due to the fact that students could contrast how they sound speaking through a voice tool to how they normally sound speaking to friends and could realize it is not as natural as it should be and that more practice is needed.

Fluency. Another aspect of language that students reported could be enhanced through voice tool-based speaking tasks is fluency. Students acknowledged the value of the voice tools to help them accomplish more fluency to speak. Listening to themselves in a way they do not normally do in class is an alternative to become aware and evaluate how quickly or slowly they are speaking, as expressed in the following statement: "The voice tools helped me because I talk and then listen, in that moment I can notice how fast or slow [it is]." The finding that listening and editing can help students access a good deal of passive knowledge of language that is not usually accessed easily in a face-to-face situation corroborates the findings of Blake (2009) who states that teachers can make use of ACMC voice tools to help students reinforce their oral skills.

Accuracy. Another aspect facilitated by the voice tools' asynchronous anxiety-free atmosphere is the time students can take to elaborate and put their ideas together, trying to incorporate the grammar and vocabulary seen in class. This confirms the findings of Johnson (2006), who suggests that this kind of environment enables the students to pay more attention to language features. One feature students usually consider difficult to apply is grammar; therefore, having a tool that helps them correct that specific aspect was appreciated, as expressed in the following comments: "I improved the naturalness with which I expressed myself, my intonation, but especially I think it enabled me to better structure my ideas putting into practice the topics seen in class," and "[Voice tool-based tasks] make me more demanding until I'm satisfied with the work presented and for, those who listen, they can understand it."

This finding is corroborated by those of Blake (2009) and Abrams (2003), who reported that increased attention to grammar structures, use of lexicon and students' construction of ideas can be achieved through CMC tools. Although only one student disagreed that voice tools could contribute to the elaboration of ideas, most students agreed or strongly agreed that through the voice tools they paid more attention to grammar and vocabulary than they normally would in class.

In general, students perceived that the voice tool-based speaking tasks had benefits for becoming more self-aware of speaking features as pronunciation, intonation, fluency and accuracy, as well as self-correction. In order to better understand those benefits, it is necessary to understand what specific aspects of task design impacted the students' perception of their spoken performance, which is the second purpose of this study.

Aspects of Task Design that Impact Students' Perceptions

Three main aspects of task design were identified as affecting students' perceptions in regards to the potential benefits for their speaking performance: 1) voice tool-based tasks as an aid for individual work; 2) as an aid for interaction for comprehension purposes; and 3) as an aid for sharing and exchanging information.

Voice tool-based tasks as an aid for individual work on speaking. The possibility of becoming self-aware of their own speech patterns in order to self-correct their speaking was perceived by the students as an important aspect of task design. Students reported that the facilities offered by the tool, the online environment, and the purpose of the tasks were beneficial to practice their speaking skills. They also highlighted the importance of using these voice tools to increase their self-correction (Yaneske & Oates, 2010). A sense of progress from the first to the third task was perceived and students acknowledged how much they felt they improved thanks to the integration of this voice tool to carry out the tasks: "I know I still have many things to improve, but I have made progress in my vocabulary and pronunciation,." and "I notice there has been progress throughout the process from the first to the last task." Students reported a sense of accomplishment, progress and improvement in their speaking performance thanks to the integration of the voice tool for speaking tasks, as illustrated in the following figure:

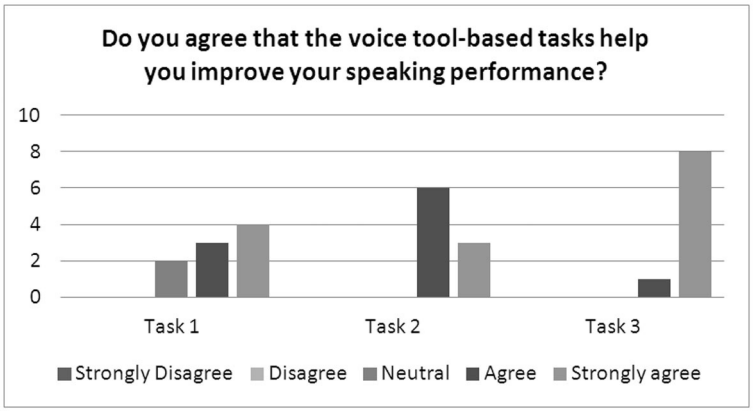

Figure 3. Comparison of the students' satisfaction with their performance in the three tasks

Voice Tool-based Speaking Tasks as an Aid for Interaction for Comprehension Purposes

The second aspect of task design that most affected students' perceptions was the possibility of using the voice tool to interact with partners and do the task asynchronously outside class. Students stated their preference for this kind of task over a class presentation, as they felt more at ease to share their opinions and ideas about a relevant and personally meaningful topic. They were also able to elaborate their ideas more before presenting them to their classmates (Abrams, 2003; Altun, 2005). Finally, and especially, students were able to go beyond just posting and started interacting with each other, replying in a personalized way to the invitations being made to complete the task, as explained in the following statement: "I thought it [interacting] was enriching because we went beyond recording our experience, and we interact with the classmates through questions, suggestions and advice (…). It was a necessary exercise to know if we make ourselves clear and if others can understand what we try to say."

This preference for interaction demonstrates that the students' perception about the benefits of voice tool-based tasks evolved from the basic facility of recording their voice to a more meaningful, enjoyable and enriching interaction. Students claimed that learning cooperatively through the voice tools was beneficial to develop their speaking skills because they could help each other in their performance, evaluate their progress, complete the task goals and share with their partners.

Voice Tool-based Tasks as an Aid for Sharing and Exchanging Information

Promoting meaningful interaction among classmates at their own convenience of time and space was perceived as the third aspect of task design that most affected students about their spoken performance. The tasks involving the exchange of information about real places and activities in a personally-designed walking tour of the city as well as remembering anecdotes from school were seen by students as a main benefit to enhance their speaking skills in a meaningful, enjoyable and contextualized way (Tschirner, 2001). The findings of the benefits and preference for using a CMC tool to promote collaborative learning corroborates the findings of Garrison and Anderson (2003), who state that teamwork skills and cooperative learning can be fostered by tasks using voice tools. However, it was also noticed that the delay in the responses had a negative effect on the motivation to keep the conversation going (Wang & Woo, 2007).

Sharing personal experiences made the tasks more enjoyable and meaningful for students, as reported here: "I liked the topics, listening to my classmates and sharing our experiences," "I liked the interaction with my classmates and teacher," "I liked remembering things from my childhood and finding out details of some places in the city." A task where students can exchange information for a meaningful purpose enables them to develop their communicative and social skills, which confirms Stonebrink (2008) and Altun's (2005) findings which suggested CMC tools promote collaborative work. The possibility of self-awareness, self-correction, and interaction also affected students since they could perceive the benefits of these practices to reinforce their oral skills. They expressed that they wanted not only to continue using these tools, but also to integrate them as a part of the dynamics of the classes, which demonstrates the impact those voice tool-based tasks had on their learning process.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the learners' perceptions of the benefits of voice tool-based speaking tasks and determine the aspects of task design that most influenced those perceptions. It can be concluded that students had a positive perception towards the voice tool-based speaking tasks as they benefit their spoken performance, both individually and collaboratively.

Students were able to work on their self-awareness and self-correction of language features such as pronunciation or fluency since the task design chosen motivated them to pay attention to their speech patterns. Self-correction was fostered by the voice tool-based speaking tasks since students had the chance to listen to themselves for the first time in a more critical and evaluative manner to make any necessary changes in their speech. As students were able to listen to themselves, they developed a higher level of reflection and evaluation skills of their oral production.

Students were also able to work collaboratively to interact and share their feelings and ideas with their classmates in a meaningful and enjoyable way at their own convenience of time and space. Students reported that interacting and exchanging information with classmates about places of interest or activities in the city was fun, educational, and meaningful for them as it related to their personalities, enabled them to talk with classmates in a meaningful way outside class and helped them practice listening, speaking and comprehension skills within a real-life context. Collaborative work was highlighted among the aspects of task design that positively affected the students' perceptions of their spoken performance. Being able to share and talk with their classmates about a meaningful topic was perceived by all students as an effective and significant way to practice and reinforce speaking skills.

Some technical factors affected students' perceptions of the advantages of these kinds of tasks, such as issues with computer updates, appropriate equipment, and the procedure of interacting with the voice tool. Emotional factors also influenced these perceptions, including individual preferences for technology and computers, self-confidence, risk-taking, and self-motivation. Nevertheless, the benefits outnumbered the drawbacks as voice tools proved to be an effective aid to increase students' self-awareness, self-correction and collaborative work to enhance their speaking skills.

Due to the small number of participants (9), the data in this study should be interpreted with caution. Larger samples during longer periods of time and within different educational contexts would be needed to test the findings. A much more systematic study would explore how emotional or social factors can influence the learners' perceptions and performance during tasks using voice tools. Thus, further research should be done to investigate the importance of these "human" factors when working with ACMC voice tools. This kind of research would contribute to the understanding of the use and benefits of asynchronous voice tools for speaking skills enhancement.

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Author

***Astrid Wilches** received her Bachelor of Arts in English and Spanish from the *Universidad Pedagógica Nacional* in 2005. She has nine years of experience teaching English to children, teenagers and adults. She has worked as a teacher and as a tutor at the *Centro Colombo Americano* for eight years only interrupted to travel to the United States in 2011 to work and study at Gardner-Webb University. Interested in the use of technology for English teaching and learning, she pursued her M.A. in Educational Technology and TESOL at The University of Manchester. Her main interests are the use of technology for English learning and teaching, design of virtual material, e-learning and m-learning.