



## Exploring the Development of Communication Abilities of Intermediate-High Spanish Learners during Online Chatting

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### ABSTRACT

This project explores how intermediate-high learners of Spanish communicate during a real-world style chatting conversation. Further, this study investigates these learners' ability to improve their communication over time as they are moving away from the effort of learning their L2 and toward the effort of applying that knowledge as they use the L2. To explore the use and development of communication abilities, online conversations (chats) were used due to their reduced-pressure contexts (Sun, 2007). Participants were 32 intermediate-high Spanish learners from an advanced grammar course. Learners completed five open topic online chatting sessions. These chats were analyzed for the use of twelve communication tactics: openings, closings, pre-closing devices, direct requests, indirect requests, mitigated speech, circumlocution, follow-up questions, message abandonment, code switching, self-correction, and other-correction. Results found a significant increase in closings and follow-up questions along with a significant decrease in code switching from Chat 1 to Chat 3. Following Chat 3, these significant changes were maintained in Chats 4 and 5 (despite a slight increase in code switching during Chat 5). Additionally, from Chat 1 to Chat 4, significant increases were seen in circumlocution and self-correction and from Chat 1 to Chat 5, a significant decrease was seen for topic abandonment. These results show positive development over time to higher quality conversations with a desire to better maintain and explore topics. Further, learners attempted to remain in Spanish using less code switching and greater circumlocution to convey their meaning. At the same time, learners worked toward greater accuracy through their increased self-corrections.

### Indexing terms/Keywords

second language acquisition; communication strategies; task repetition; intermediate learners; conversation.

### Academic Discipline And Sub-Disciplines

Second Language Acquisition, Foreign Language Acquisition.

### SUBJECT CLASSIFICATION

Applied Linguistics.

### TYPE (METHOD/APPROACH)

Mixed methods: quasi-experimental and descriptive analysis.

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## INTRODUCTION

Becoming competent communicators is a key goal for learners of a second language (L2) as many of them intend to interact with native speakers (NSs) of that L2. While it is important for learners to have a well-developed vocabulary and knowledge of grammar rules, those learners will not be able to reach a high level of competency nor will they be successful language users in the real world, if they are not capable of sustaining conversation. Moreover, conversational speaking ability is widely-recognized as a measuring tool to describe a L2 user's competency in the L2. For example, it is frequently used in formally assessing proficiency, such as in the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL's) Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) which requires the speaker to participate in a 20 to 30 minute interview. Without strong communication skills, a learner will not likely be judged as a highly-proficient speaker.

In addition, second language acquisition (SLA) theory supports the concept that conversations with other L2 speakers are vital to language learning. The importance of conversational communication is explored in Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996) and Gass' Input and Interaction Hypothesis (1997) as both explain that via conversations with other speakers in the L2, learners can gain linguistic knowledge and feedback from their interlocutors which helps to further the acquisition process. It stands to reason that a learner will gain more from such interaction the longer s/he can sustain that conversation. To be able to do this, learners must develop or adapt conversational tactics that enable them to get more information as well as provide sufficient information to their conversation partner. Providing information, or output, in the L2 is seen as another essential facet of L2 acquisition as stated in the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 2000). Swain states "to produce [language], learners need to do something. They need to create linguistic form and meaning, and in so doing, discover what they can and cannot do" (p. 99). In exploring what "they can and cannot do" learners are said to be testing their own hypotheses about the L2 and can gain positive or negative feedback from their interlocutor which then supports or refutes those hypotheses, respectively (Swain, 2000).

Taking these hypotheses into account, one can see the value of L2 conversational communication, and it behooves us as researchers to understand learners' abilities to participate in such useful conversations. This research project does this by exploring learners' conversational abilities through investigation of the communication tactics they use and how those communication tactics can develop over time as they receive more practice in the form of computer-mediated conversation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Communication Strategies

Communication Strategies (CSs) are traditionally identified as those strategies that L2 learners employ as a means of overcoming communication difficulties that arise due to learners' lower levels of L2 knowledge (Tarone, Cohen & Dumas, 1976; Tarone, 1980). This follows the concept introduced by interactionist theories that there will be communication breakdowns during interaction between a non-native speaker (NNS) and a NS and that the interlocutors must then negotiate to solve these breakdowns (Long, 1996; Gass, 1997). The means by which learners attempt to negotiate and solve these breakdowns are then said to be CSs. Further, CSs are considered as part of communicative competence as defined by Canale and Swain (1980) in that speakers use CSs to improve and maintain communication. Within this framework, CSs are not seen as purely reactionary maneuvers due to breakdowns but they may also be used to preemptively avoid such breakdowns. In a similar fashion, Faerch and Kasper (1983, 1984) take a psycholinguistic approach to CSs and view them as part of learners' mental process during conversation planning and execution, relying more on self-assistance rather than other-assistance. Within this perspective, CSs could be said to be skills that a learner can develop and improve as they work to produce output in the L2 and are not necessarily the result of communication breakdowns. Taking these concepts together, researchers Fernández Dobao and Palacios Martínez (2007) offer the following general definition of CSs as "all those techniques language learners use when, in their attempt to communicate in the foreign language with a reduced interlanguage system, they find that the target language items or structures desired to convey their messages are not available." (p. 88). This wider definition allows then that CSs may come about through interaction and communication breakdowns, or they may be part of a learner's initial approach to successful communication.

Empirical research into CSs first sought to identify the various strategies used by learners. In their studies, Faerch and Kasper (1983, 1984) identify two types of CSs: achievement strategies and reduction strategies. Achievement strategies are essentially substitute methods for conveying a message when the original method is unavailable or was unsuccessful. These can include paraphrases and circumlocution, conscious transfer in the form of borrowings or code switching, appeals for assistance, and act-out gestures/mime (Fernández Dobao & Palacios Martínez, 2007). On the other hand, reduction strategies are avoidance methods which are used to give up on a message when a problem is encountered. These can include topic avoidance, message abandonment, semantic avoidance, and message reduction (Fernández Dobao & Palacios Martínez, 2007). It is important to note that one category of CSs is not necessarily preferable over the other and that the same problem may trigger different strategies at different times. For example if a learner does not know a particular lexical item but it is crucial to his/her message it is likely that s/he will use an achievement strategy; whereas if that lexical item is not crucial to the message, a reduction strategy may be used. Research conducted by Fernández Dobao and Palacios Martínez (2007) also demonstrated that more than one CS can be used at the same time when attempting to convey a message and that the CSs may be shaped through interaction based on feedback and participation of the interlocutors.



## Impact of Communication Strategy Instruction

In order to assist learners with communication, CSs have become part of the pedagogical practice of strategy instruction. As described by Cohen “The goal of strategy instruction is to explicitly teach students how, when, and why strategies can be used to facilitate their efforts at learning and using an L2.” (2014, location 2674). Therefore, CS instruction should assist learners in identifying and understanding various CSs they might use in communication as well as provide practice for using CSs. It is hoped that by teaching learners these strategies, students will have greater success at classroom communication activities and in real-world conversations. Empirical research into the impact of CS-based instruction supports this hope and has found that learners that received strategy training demonstrated statistically significant improvement in their linguistic and conversational abilities (Cohen, 2014; Nakatani, 2005, 2010; Iwai, 2006; Naughton, 2006; Markle & D’Amico, 2013).

CS instruction appears to be successful in assisting learners to sustain communication as was shown by Nakatani (2005). In this research study, intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners significantly improved in their oral proficiency after training. This improvement was found to be based on significant changes in strategies that maintained conversation and that allowed for negotiation of meaning. For maintaining conversation it was found that learners significantly increased their use of achievement strategies that allowed them to add information to topics and to participate more overall. Similarly, results also found a significant decrease in the use of reduction strategies indicating less topic and message abandonment. In a subsequent study in 2010, Nakatani confirmed that an increase in strategies for communication maintenance and negotiation of meaning improves learners’ communication. However, the results of this newer study also showed that while meaning may be properly conveyed through these strategies, the learners show few instances of modifying their output to more accurate forms.

Learning CSs may also impact a learner’s L2 knowledge. In Iwai’s (2006) research, EFL learners that received CS training showed a shift in their knowledge type from having only declarative knowledge, possessing information about the language, to also having procedural knowledge, being able to use the language during oral communication. This procedural knowledge allowed learners to be better understood by their interlocutors which led to more successful conversations.

According to Naughton (2006), learners may already be using various CSs during interaction but their patterns of interaction can be improved through CS training to allow for greater advancement in the L2. Her investigation of intermediate-level EFL learners focused on assisting learners to use four strategies: follow-up questions, requesting/giving clarification, repair (self and peer), and requesting/giving help. As explained by Naughton, these strategies assist learners in creating interaction that best provides language acquisition opportunities (following SLA and sociolinguistic theories). Results found that after training, participants increased in their use of the four strategies, with requesting/giving help showing the greatest gains. Naughton’s results also show that participants who received CS instruction increased in their participation during conversation by increasing their total number of turns taken during the interaction.

Following the results of Nakatani (2005) and Naughton (2006), Markle and D’Amico (2013) sought to explore the impact of CS instruction on assisting beginning-level L2 Spanish learners to have greater participation during conversation and to better sustain conversation. Interestingly, results revealed that all participants significantly improved their communication abilities particularly by increasing the amount of turns, clauses, openings, follow-up questions, and active responses (adding information rather than back channel feedback responses) used. When exploring the differences between those participants that received instruction and those that did not, it was found that participants receiving instruction showed significantly more use of follow-up questions, greetings (openings and closings) and active response, but the overall differences between the two groups was not as drastic as anticipated. It was speculated that the act of practicing conversational communication may have been the reason for the overall improvement as learners in both the CS instructional group and control group participated in 10-weeks of communication activities. It appears that even without the special instruction, learners may be able to improve in CSs through practice alone.

## Impact of Task Repetition

The concept of practice has long been a part of second language learning and instruction. From a theoretical standpoint, it has been argued through Skill Acquisition Theory that practice allows declarative knowledge (knowledge of the L2) to become procedural knowledge (knowledge of how to do something in the L2) (Bialystok, 1978). Practice is thought to accomplish this by creating new pathways and strengthening existing pathways to knowledge stored in long-term memory, thus allowing the learner to recall that information with less processing effort (DeKeyser, 1997).

In the L2 classroom, practice often occurs through repeating similar activities over time. These activities or “tasks” share a pedagogical goal allowing learners to focus their attention on a particular skill or form. In more recent years, tasks have also been defined as being communicative in that they must also be focused on meaning and have a communication-based goal to accomplish (Ellis, 2009). Being successful at a communicative task requires learners to focus on meaning as well as focus on form, which can be very demanding on one’s mental processing abilities, particularly at lower proficiency levels. Therefore it is believed that by repeating a task, in other words practicing that task, learners can become more successful with it over time.

Research into the effectiveness of task repetition on oral communication has been largely positive in that task repetition appears to help L2 learners improve in temporal fluency factors and in lexical and grammatical accuracy (Bygate 1996, 2001; Gass, Mackey, Alvarez-Torres, and Fernández-García 1999; Lynch and Maclean, 2000; deJong and Perfetti, 2011; Ahmadian and Tavakoli, 2011). It appears that as learners become accustomed to using the L2 in a conversational manner and are familiar with the linguistic demands of these types of tasks, they become better at producing output.



In a recent study, Liao and Fu (2014) explored the impact of task repetition on communication tasks that were completed via computer-mediated communication in the form of online chats through Facebook. While it is written output, chatting is an informal conversational activity that mimics a face-to-face conversation but allows for greater planning time and a reduced-anxiety environment (Sun, 2007). Somewhat similar to the positive effects found during oral communication, Liao and Fu found that by repeating the tasks, learners improved in their variety of syntactic forms used and increased the complexity of vocabulary items.

Given the positive results of task repetition on L2 learners' communicative output and the explanation of the overall communication improvement seen in Markle and D'Amico (2013), it is logical to consider that task repetition will have positive results on learners' ability to use CSs. Following this concept, the current study will explore the impact of repeating the conversational task of online chatting without the use of strategy-based instruction for L2 learners.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Questions

In order to explore learners' communication tactics<sup>1</sup> in Spanish, the following research questions guided the present study:

1. Do intermediate-level Spanish learners show statistically significant development in communication tactics over time during online chatting conversations after completing five consecutive chatting sessions?
2. If development is seen in communication tactics, which tactics show significant improvement towards higher-level communication?

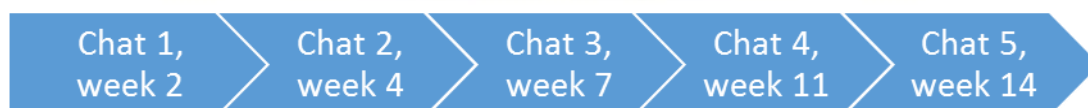
### Participants

The participants for this study are 32 learners (24 females, 8 males) of Spanish as a L2 who were all undergraduate students at a mid-size North American university at the time of the study. These learners were enrolled in a fifth semester Spanish grammar course and can be said to be at the intermediate level. All participants were native speakers of English and none were considered to be bilingual, nor were they heritage learners of Spanish. Of these 32 participants there were four learners who had study abroad experience in a Spanish-speaking country, three of these learners completed a six-week program and one completed a fourteen-week program. Analysis was completed to compare these four learners to those learners without study abroad experience at the time of the first chat and no apparent differences were found; subsequently, it was decided to include these four participants in the overall pool.

### Data Collection Methods

During a fifteen-week semester, participants completed ten online chats in Spanish with each other in groups of three or four learners. These groups were assigned at random by the investigator (who was also the instructor of the grammar course). Learners were allowed to choose whichever available chatting program they desired to use such as Google Chat, Facebook Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, etc. Chats were completed at the learners' convenience outside of class time. To encourage completion of the chats, learners received completion credit for chats as a course assignment. A copy of the chat transcript was collected each week by the investigator.

Chats were limited to one session per week and were instructed to be at least 20 minutes in length. The shortest chat time was 20 minutes and the longest was 45 minutes. Each week the learners were given instructions for the chatting with five sessions having specific topics or activities and five sessions being open-topic. For the purposes of this study, the data that were analyzed come from only the five open-topic sessions. The only instruction given to the learners for the open-topic sessions were that they should converse naturally with their group about topics that were of interest to them. Due to the openness of these sessions, topics varied greatly depending on the groups. For example one group tended to discuss university and local sports teams because they appeared to all share that as an interest while another group frequently discussed issues facing sororities at the university since all group members were also members of different sororities on campus. In order to allow for an analysis of the chats over time, the open-topic sessions were spread out over the course of the fifteen weeks. Figure 1 shows the timeline of the chatting sessions.



**Fig 1. Timeline of Open-topic Chatting Sessions**

One of the goals of the study was to determine what these learners would be able to accomplish on their own and therefore no specific feedback was given for the chats. However, it should be noted that as their instructor, the investigator did provide grammatical-based feedback on general problems seen in all homework assignments including the chats. For example, after observing learners' difficulty with the distinction between the two copula verbs in Spanish (*ser* and *estar*) when used with adjectives, the investigator revisited this topic in greater detail during class. Nonetheless, at no time was there any specific feedback provided for communication tactics. It should also be noted again that there was no instruction provided for communication tactics.



## Data Analysis

The chatting transcripts were analyzed for the frequency of 12 communication tactics. In developing the list of tactics, the researcher chose to look at communication strategies designed to sustain conversation and pragmatic strategies that can shape a conversation. Frequencies were compiled by the investigator and a research assistant with a 98% reliability rate between the two. In the instances where agreement was not seen, those phrases/words were not included in the dataset. Each tactic is explained below with a description of the tactic followed by an example in Spanish (with translation in English):

- Openings: words and phrases that are used to begin a conversation
  - *Hola, ¿cómo estás? (Hi, how are you?)*
- Closings: words and phrases that are used to end a conversation
  - *Hasta luego (See you later)*
- Pre-closing Devices: phrases that show the intention of concluding a conversation
  - *Bueno, es bastante tarde (Well, it's rather late)*
- Direct Requests: requests made in an explicit manner using either command forms or direct questions
  - *Dime la verdad (Tell me the truth)*
- Indirect Requests: requests made in a non-explicit manner
  - *Sería mejor decir la verdad (It would be better to tell the truth)*
- Mitigated Speech: speech designed to soften a face-threatening speech act through more indirect speech, usually used to ensure more polite address
  - *¿Puedes decirme la verdad, por favor? (Can you tell me the truth, please?)*
- Circumlocution: using other words to describe or define a word or phrase, often used when a particular word is unknown in the L2
  - *Me gustan estas películas que tienen cosas malas como fantasmas o brujas (I like those movies that have bad things like ghosts or witches) – used instead of the term “scary movies” or “horror movies”*
- Follow-up Questions: questions that seek to gain additional information about a topic of discussion rather than switching to another topic
  - *¿y tienes una película favorita de ese tipo? (And do you have a favorite movie of that type?) -- in response to the above statement about movies*
- Topic Abandonment: occurs when an interlocutor cannot answer/respond to the current topic of discussion and usually switches to another topic
  - *No sé. No sé este vocabulario. ¿Hablamos de deportes en cambio? (I don't know. I don't know this vocabulary. Can we talk about sports instead?)*
- Code Switching: for this study, code switching refers to switching from the L2 (Spanish) to the L1 (English)
  - *Es mi segundo año aquí estudiando accounting. (It's my second year here studying accounting.)*
- Self-correction: occurs when an interlocutor changes the form of his/her speech without prompting from other interlocutors
  - *Ayer yo voy fui a la biblioteca. (Yesterday I go went to the library.)*
- Other-correction: occurs when one interlocutor suggests a change of form for another interlocutor.
  - P1: *Ayer yo voy a la biblioteca.* P2: *Debe ser “yo fui”.* (P1: *Yesterday I go to the library.* P2: *It should be “I went”.*)

Once all frequencies were calculated for each tactic, the frequencies for all tactics, except for other-correction, were compared using Repeated Measures ANOVAs to determine any significant differences over time. There were only two instances of other-correction that were found in the dataset and therefore it was not worthwhile to run statistical analysis of this tactic.

## RESULTS

Results found statistically significant differences over time for six of the twelve tactics analyzed: closings, follow-up questions, code switching, circumlocution, self-correction and topic abandonment. Table 1 shows the results of the



pairwise comparison of these six tactics. In most cases, the change in these tactics was positive as it showed a shift toward more sophisticated speech and conversation structure.

**Table 1: Significant Differences found in Pairwise Comparison**

Tactic	Mean difference	Std. Error	Sig.
Closings Chat 1 to Chat 3	-.813	.165	.000
Follow-up questions Chat 1 to Chat 3	-.938	.246	.001
Code switching Chat 1 to Chat 2	1.094	.267	.000
Code switching Chat 2 to Chat 3	4.156	.238	.000
Code switching Chat 4 to Chat 5	-1.031	.267	.001
Circumlocution Chat 1 to Chat 4	-1.406	.215	.000
Topic abandonment Chat 1 to Chat 5	5.000	.254	.000
Self-correction Chat 1 to Chat 4	-1.250	.280	.000

Significance was set at .05

## Closings

From the time of Chat 1 to the time of Chat 3 a statistically significant increase in the use of closings was seen,  $p = .000$ . This indicated that as the participants completed additional chatting sessions they began to use more farewell greetings to end their chatting sessions. In Chat 1 and 2, usually one participant would announce that they had met the required time limitation and everyone would simply log-off without saying a formal good-bye. This was rather unexpected as the participants almost always used standardized opening greetings when beginning the chats. However, at the time of Chat 3 (week 7) the participants began using more standardized methods of saying good-bye before logging-off the chatting program. This change demonstrates a shift toward better communication in that it is expected that we would say good-bye to our interlocutors before leaving a conversation. No additional significant differences were seen in either direction at the times of Chat 4 and 5, which means that the participants maintained their use of closings in their subsequent chats.

## Follow-up Questions

In a similar pattern to Closings, follow-up questions also demonstrated a statistically significant increase from the time of Chat 1 to the time of Chat 3,  $p = .001$ . In earlier sessions, the conversations between the participants tended to follow a rather stilted formula wherein one person would pose a question and then the other two interlocutors would answer, then a different person would pose a question on a different/slightly related topic and the other two would answer. There were few follow-up questions from the participants which sought to maintain the topic or continue obtaining information about that topic. You can see this type of conversation in the following example from Chat 1 between participants B1, B2 and B3<sup>ii</sup>:

- B1: ¿Cuál es tu película favorita?  
*What is your favorite movie?*
- B2: Me gusta Anchorman.  
*I like Anchorman.*
- B3: Mi favorito es Toy Story.  
*My favorite is Toy Story.*
- B1: El mío es Harry Potter, Deathly Hallows.  
*Mine is Harry Potter, Deathly Hallows.*
- B2: ¿Qué tipo de comida le gustan?  
*What type of food do you like? (abrupt change of topic)*

During Chat 3, the participants showed a marked increase in the use of follow-up questions and the use of such questions allowed for greater development of topics. These questions often provided the participants with opportunities for using more sophisticated language as they explained their earlier statements in more detail. An example of this type of opportunity can be seen in example from Chat 3 between participants A1 and A2 as they discuss their past weekend and A1's follow-up question allows A2 to expand on her utterance about working on Friday:

- A1: ¿Qué hiciste?  
*What did you do?*
- A2: El viernes yo trabajé  
*On Friday I worked.*
- A1: ¿Qué hiciste a [sic] trabajo?  
*What did you do at work? (follow-up question)*



- A2: Yo es [sic] una camarera en Tumbleweed. ¡Típicamente, no hice [sic] dinero, pero yo hice noventa seis dólares en viernes!  
*I is [sic] a waitress in Tumbleweed. Typically, I did [sic] not make money, but I made ninety six dollars on Friday!*

This increase in follow-up questions can be said to be an improvement in communication since the use of these questions allowed the participants to have richer conversations and more in-depth discussion of a given topic. The use of follow-up questions also allowed for more natural flow during the conversations rather than the choppy, topic-jumping style that was used in earlier chats. As with closings, no additional significant differences were seen after Chat 3, but this indicates that the participants continued using follow-up questions during their subsequent chatting sessions. When considering the importance of this increase, this development is of greater value to the learners in that they are able to present themselves as more advanced speakers and demonstrate an ability to maintain a topic. This ability to maintain a topic is frequently used to measure speaking proficiency (see for example ACTFL Guidelines (2012) or COE Descriptors (Lenz and Schneider, 2004)). Nonetheless, it should be noted that at times the interlocutors could not answer another's question and this led to some confusion or message abandonment.

## Code Switching

There were two statistically significant decreases for code switching found in the dataset with the first from Chat 1 to 2,  $p = .000$ , and the second from Chat 2 to 3,  $p = .000$ . This result means that the participants switched between Spanish and English less frequently over time. In the first chat, participants used English rather a lot, primarily for culturally based words or phrases. It is possible that chatting entirely in Spanish was perceived as too difficult for the participants at first or simply that they were attempting to have a normal chatting session and maintain the flow of conversation. This can be seen in Chat 1 between participants D1, D2 and D3 as they discuss music:

- D1: Tienes suerte, D2 que fuiste a muchos conciertos  
*You're lucky, D2 that you went to many concerts*  
D2: Sí, yo tengo el "country mega ticket" y yo vi muchos conciertos este verano en Noblesville como... (list of artists)  
*Yes, I have the country mega ticket and I saw many concerts this summer in Noblesville like...*  
D3: No me gusta la música 'country' esta mucha, es muy 'cheesy' para mi.  
*I don't like country music this [sic] much, it is very cheesy to my [sic].*  
D2: ¿Qué música te gusta, D3?  
*What music do you like, D3?*  
D3: Me gusta 'classic rock' y 'modern day rock'.  
*I like classic rock and modern day rock.*

In this conversation most of the English vocabulary items, like "classic rock", could be explained through fairly simple means in Spanish or even a direct translation. It appears though that the learners had some difficulty at first when breaking up a set phrase in English or at least attempting to use Spanish to describe something they did not immediately know. However, as time went on, the participants appear to have made a greater effort of maintaining their use of Spanish throughout the conversation. Again, this shows a move towards better communication and a higher level of speaking ability. When code switching did occur it appears to have happened when a vocabulary word was unknown to the students as it was often framed by the learners with either an explanation (*Perdón, no sé la palabra en español – Sorry, I don't know the word in Spanish*) or with a request for the word from the other interlocutors (*¿Cómo se dice \_\_\_ en español? – How do you say \_\_\_ in Spanish?*). There were some instances where no explanation for code switching was given and thus it is not possible to speculate as to why participants chose to use English at those times. An interesting phenomenon occurred with code switching in that participants tended to put English words and phrases in quotations marks; this appeared in almost all chats throughout the semester. With the use of that punctuation, it appears then that the learners were aware of their English use during the chats and that it was a conscious decision to use English.

The decreased level of code switching was maintain through Chat 4, however, from Chat 4 to 5 there was a significant increase seen,  $p = .001$ . The reason for this increase seems to be due to the topic of conversation as most participants chose to discuss upcoming plans for the Thanksgiving Holiday during Chat 5. The participants used several English words when describing various food items they planned to eat or activities they planned to do. Since many of these vocabulary words are strongly based in U.S. culture, it was not common for learners to have learned these words in most Spanish textbooks or classrooms. For example, one group of participants were discussing attending an American football game and participating in the activity of "tailgating" where fans have a picnic-style party in the parking lot of the stadium prior to the game often using the tailgate of a truck as a table and/or seating area. This type of activity does not take place in Spanish-speaking cultures and there is no Spanish vocabulary equivalent. While it would have been preferable for the learners to maintain Spanish and use another tactic like circumlocution, it is likely that because the participants knew that their interlocutors all spoke English it was easier and faster to code switch. It should also be noted that although there was a significant increase, the total use of code switching between Chats 1 and 5 and Chats 2 and 5 was still significantly lower ( $p = .000$  and  $p = .001$ , respectively) indicating that overall, the learners improved in their maintenance of Spanish during their conversations.

## Circumlocution

Likely tied to the results for code switching, as the learners maintained their use of Spanish throughout the chats there was a statistically significant increase in their use of circumlocution from Chat 1 to Chat 4,  $p = .000$ . This increase was



maintained through Chat 5. Rather than relying on English, the participants began to use descriptions in Spanish when they were unsure of a word or phrase. Similar to code switching, the learners tended to offer reasons why they were describing something by stating that they did not know or could not remember the exact word in Spanish. This practice of explaining was also useful in that often another participant would supply the correct vocabulary item. This can be seen in the following example from Chat 4 between participants C1 and C2 as they talk about C1's volunteer work in Costa Rica and C1 does not know the word for "orphanage":

- C1: Allí ayudé mucho con los huérfanos en el edificio donde viven, no sé la palabra.  
*There I worked a lot with the orphans in the building where they live, I don't know the word.*
- C2: Creo que es orfanato, no importa yo entiendo.  
*I believe it is orphanage, it doesn't matter I understand.*

While the use of circumlocution may not be seen as entirely native-like, this tactic has been shown to represent higher speaking proficiency and represents more sophisticated speech. This ability requires learners to be able to recall known words that can be linked in meaning to an unknown word and allows the speaker to be able to convey a message entirely in the L2. While not as crucial in these chatting contexts, this ability is vital during conversations with interlocutors without knowledge of the learner's L1. Furthermore, by using circumlocution, the learners demonstrated another tactic for maintaining the topic rather than abandoning said topic due to insufficient vocabulary knowledge. Again this is a positive change because it allows a conversation topic to grow and provide new communication opportunities for the interlocutors.

### Topic Abandonment

Complementing the results for follow-up questions and circumlocution, there was a statistically significant decrease in topic abandonment from Chat 1 to Chat 5,  $p = .000$ . While this result occurred over a greater time period, it is a positive shift towards better communication in that the participants were better able to maintain a given topic. In earlier chats, particularly Chats 1 and 2, learners tended to give up on a topic much more easily and would often state that they did not know how to answer or that they lacked sufficient vocabulary to expand on a topic. This then resulted in somewhat disjointed or unfinished conversations due to the communication breakdown. This can be seen in an example from Chat 2 between participants C2 and C3 where C2 is trying to ask about volunteer work but C3 does not understand her question:

- C2: Y, C3, ¿te ofreciste como voluntario para alguna organización durante el colegio?  
*And, C3, did you work as a volunteer for any organization during high school?*
- C3: Lo siento no entiendo  
*I'm sorry I don't understand*
- C2: Bueno, ¿qué hiciste durante el fin de semana?  
*Ok, what did you do during the weekend?*

Rather than explain the question to C3 or attempt to rephrase it with other words, C2 elected to abandon the topic in favor of a more general and perhaps easier question. However in later chats, the participants showed a greater dedication towards maintaining a topic of conversation particularly through the tactics of follow-up questions and circumlocution. This decrease in topic abandonment allowed for conversations to flow better and avoided the disjointed or stilted style of the earlier chats. Another viewpoint to this change is that there appears to be an increase in participants' willingness to try harder to continue the topic. Instead of simply giving up on a topic because it was deemed "too difficult" the learners showed more persistence in answering their interlocutor's questions, rephrasing when necessary, and attempting to more fully explain an utterance.

### Self-correction

As time progressed, learners appeared to be more concerned about grammatical accuracy and used more self-corrections for grammatical form in Chats 4 and 5. This resulted in a statistically significant increase in self-correction between Chat 1 and 4,  $p = .000$ , and was maintained during Chat 5. Given that the learners were all enrolled in the same advanced Spanish grammar course and the chats were assigned as part of the homework for that course, it is not surprising that they would be concerned with their own use of grammar. When looking at the accuracy of these self-corrections, 87% of the time the corrections were towards target-like forms. This shows that the learners appear to be fairly accurate in their grammatical knowledge; however it should be noted that an analysis of overall grammar accuracy was not completed for this research project.<sup>iii</sup> Determining if the increase in self-correction is a positive or negative communication change is not a straightforward answer as with other tactics. On one hand, the use of more grammatically accurate language is a positive outcome and demonstrates a greater awareness of the language structure. The change to a correct form will also allow the interlocutors to better understand the speaker's message. On the other hand, self-corrections disrupt the flow of natural conversation and may be distracting to one's interlocutors.

It is important to note that self-correction was not common among all participants (three participants had no instance of self-correction during any of the chats) and was a much less common tactic than several others. Along these same lines, as was mentioned previously, there were only two instances of other-correction in the dataset. These two findings together suggest that making corrections to utterances is not seen by the participants as a very useful tactic for carrying out a conversation or is perhaps not necessary if the general meaning is conveyed.

### Non-Significant Tactics

Of the six other tactics that were analyzed, openings, pre-closing devices, direct requests, indirect requests, mitigated speech and other-correction, no significant differences were found over time. In the case of openings, indirect requests





and mitigated speech there was little change over time because it was found that participants were using these three tactics frequently throughout the chatting sessions and their use of these remained fairly constant over time. Since these three tactics can be said to be representative of polite speech (see for example, Brown & Levinson, 1978) it is not overly surprising that they were prevalent through the online conversations as it is expected that the participants would want to maintain good relationships with their classmates. Considering the tactics of direct requests and other-correction, there were few cases of these tactics found in the chats. If participants were concerned with maintaining politeness throughout the conversations it is possible that they viewed making direct requests or other-correction others as impolite and so elected not to use these tactics frequently. Finally, although an increase was seen in the use of pre-closing devices, following the change in the use of closings, the increase was not great enough to represent a significant difference over time. Nonetheless as the learners began to use closings with more regularity, they also began to prepare for the end of the conversation more.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

### Research Question 1

Do intermediate-level Spanish learners show statistically significant development in communication tactics over time during online chatting conversations after completing five consecutive chatting sessions? To readdress the first research question, the answer is yes, the learners demonstrated significant differences in their use of six of the twelve communication tactics analyzed. It appears that repeating the task of the online chats was beneficial to the participants' conversational abilities. Although the current study was designed to measure a different set of communication tactics, this finding also supports the concept that repeating communication tasks can have a positive influence on learners' abilities to produce conversational output as was seen in Bygate (1996, 2001), Gass et al. (1999), Lynch and Maclean (2000), deJong and Perfetti (2011), Ahmadian and Tavakoli (2011) and Liao and Fu (2014). These results also help support the possible explanation for changes seen in Markle and D'Amico (2013) as the current participants were also able to demonstrate changes over time with only task repetition and without communication-based instruction much like the control group from that previous study.

It is important to remember that at the time when they were completing the chats, the participants did not know that they would be analyzed for communication tactics nor had they received any special training about these tactics. Therefore we can deduce that these changes must be from the act of practicing conversations and becoming comfortable with producing output in Spanish. It could also be said that the changes were influenced by the learners' own experiences of carrying out conversations in Spanish that showed them which tactics led to successful communication and which did not. One limitation of this project was a lack of learner input as to why they chose to use certain tactics or how they determined which tactics were most useful. It was thought that interviewing the participants about communication tactics during the data collection period might influence their use of the tactics. Additionally, the researcher was not able to have access to the participants after completion of the chats. However, future research could benefit from hearing the learner's opinions and may allow for insight into why these developments are seen.

Although it was not the focus of the current study, the repetition of chats seems to have also influenced the learners' participation levels in the conversations. Like Naughton (2006) and Markle and D'Amico (2013) a statistically significant increase was seen in the amount of turns taken overall from Chat 1 to Chat 5 ( $p = .01$ ). From a descriptive viewpoint, the turns also appear to be longer (however, statistical analysis was not completed on turn length). This is a positive outcome because it demonstrates that learners are able at producing more L2 output as they have more practice with activities which require that output.

### Research Question 2

If development is seen in communication tactics, which tactics show significant improvement towards higher-level communication? Of the six tactics that showed significant change, closings, follow-up questions, code switching, circumlocution, topic abandonment, and self-correction, all are improvements towards higher-level communication. Of highest value were the tactics that allowed for participants to sustain and further their conversations. Similar to Nakatani's (2005, 2010) results, there was improvement in strategies that allowed for conversation maintenance in the form of the increases in follow-up questions and circumlocution, and the decrease in topic abandonment. This is a vital improvement for conversational skills given that the ability to sustain interaction is an indication of higher proficiency (ACTFL, 2012; Lenz and Schneider, 2004).

The increase in follow-up questions appears to be a common improvement as this change was also seen in Naughton (2006), Nakatani (2005) and Markle and D'Amico (2013). It is possible that this strategy may be one of the easier strategies that learners can use during conversation as it often will allow for a partial repetition of an earlier utterance and as follow-up questions tend to be fairly short utterances. Additionally, while follow-up questions do intent to delve deeper into a topic, the burden of production returns to the original speaker rather than the interlocutor that posed the question. This strategy can be helpful to L2 learners in that they can show interest in a topic and can create new opportunities to receive input, but it does not assist them overly in output production.



Circumlocution, could be said to show greater improvement towards higher-level communication as it requires greater output effort from the learner. Although circumlocution can be an indication of a less-sophisticated lexicon, it demonstrates an ability to use known information to convey a message in the L2 without returning to the L1 nor abandoning the message due to an unknown word. Given this description, it is not surprising that code switching and topic abandonment decreased as circumlocution increased in the data. The reduction of these two tactics also represent greater communication improvement with perhaps greater effort on behalf of the learners.

The increase in self-correction shows greater awareness of grammatical rules of the L2 and a dedication to grammatical accuracy. In most cases self-correction was a move towards better communication because the changes made were more accurate than the earlier utterance. When the changes were not more accurate, self-correction had the potential to cause confusion; however, in this study this does not appear to be the case as incorrect self-corrections appear to be largely ignored by the other interlocutors and did not cause communication breakdowns. This is most likely due to the context of the conversations in that they were between learners at the same level and were in the form of informal chats. In other contexts, inaccurate self-corrections may pose greater comprehension problems.

Perhaps the least important shift towards better communication was the increase in the use of closings. While this does show that the learners made progress toward more native-like communication, this is not necessarily a drastic change that would indicate a high proficiency level. Closings are taught very early on and most novice level speakers know several possible closings. A probable explanation for this improvement is a result of a change in thinking by the participants wherein the chats become more like natural conversations and less of a homework assignment. In the beginning of the data collection period, the chats appear to be more of an obligation, but in later chats, the participants appear to be getting more enjoyment out of the chats. Again, though without any input from the participants themselves, this is only speculation. It is also interesting to note that the two most popular closings used were “Adios” and “Hasta luego” which are very traditional and formulaic ways to end a conversation and thus do not necessarily represent higher communication abilities.

## Concluding Remarks

Overall, the results of the current study show positive development over time of the use of communication tactics that lead to higher quality conversations particularly with a desire to better maintain and explore topics. This is particularly interesting because the participants did not have any special instruction about communication strategies or conversation structure but were able to make these changes based on task repetition. It is important to remember, however, that this is only one study that has shown these results and the value of instruction should not be overlooked. Future research is planned to compare these results to those with learners who receive instruction on these communication tactics to see if there is what differences may exist. It is also necessary to consider that the changes that were seen here occurred during a less-pressure form of computer-mediated communication and while online forms of communication will certainly continue to be used in the future, it is also vital for researchers to understand how learners use these types of communication tactics in oral communication. Therefore additional studies into conversational abilities should consider various mediums of communication to allow researchers to have a better overall picture of how these communication tactics are employed by L2 learners.

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<sup>i</sup> The current study explores various communication abilities that go beyond the classic definition of a communication strategy and for that reason I have chosen to refer to them as “communication tactics”.

<sup>ii</sup> Please note all chat examples come directly from the chatting transcripts and have not been altered or corrected for grammar.

<sup>iii</sup> The author intends to investigate the learners' grammatical accuracy during these chats in another study.

