

IMPROVEMENT OF PRESENT SUBJUNCTIVE ORAL PRODUCTION IN GRADED VOICETHREAD TASKS

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Abstract The purpose of this action research was to assess the pedagogical value of the software program VoiceThread (VT) as compared to classroom discussions in developing and enhancing student production of the Present Subjunctive at the Intermediate level of Spanish language courses. The control group was exposed to tasks in classroom discussions while the experimental group recorded those tasks on VoiceThread. Another variable in this study consisted in a comparison of graded and non-graded assignments. The control group discussed topics in class in an informal manner, whereas, in the experimental group, each VoiceThread recording was graded and instructor feedback was provided. These VoiceThread recordings were a permanent record that students could use as reference when preparing for the Final Oral Exam. The study lasted one semester. The results indicate the beneficial aspects of Graded VoiceThread assignments over Informal Class Discussion. VT allowed students to produce, record and practice target structures, which lead to self-awareness by means of continuous feedback as proposed by Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. When both groups were compared, the Informal Class Discussions' group performed on average fifteen percentage points lower than the Graded VoiceThread group on the final oral exam at the end of the semester. However, because of the two variables present in the study, it was difficult to determine whether the success was due to the use of VoiceThread or to the nature of graded assignments.

Keywords: VoiceThread, Subjunctive, Experiential learning

Introduction

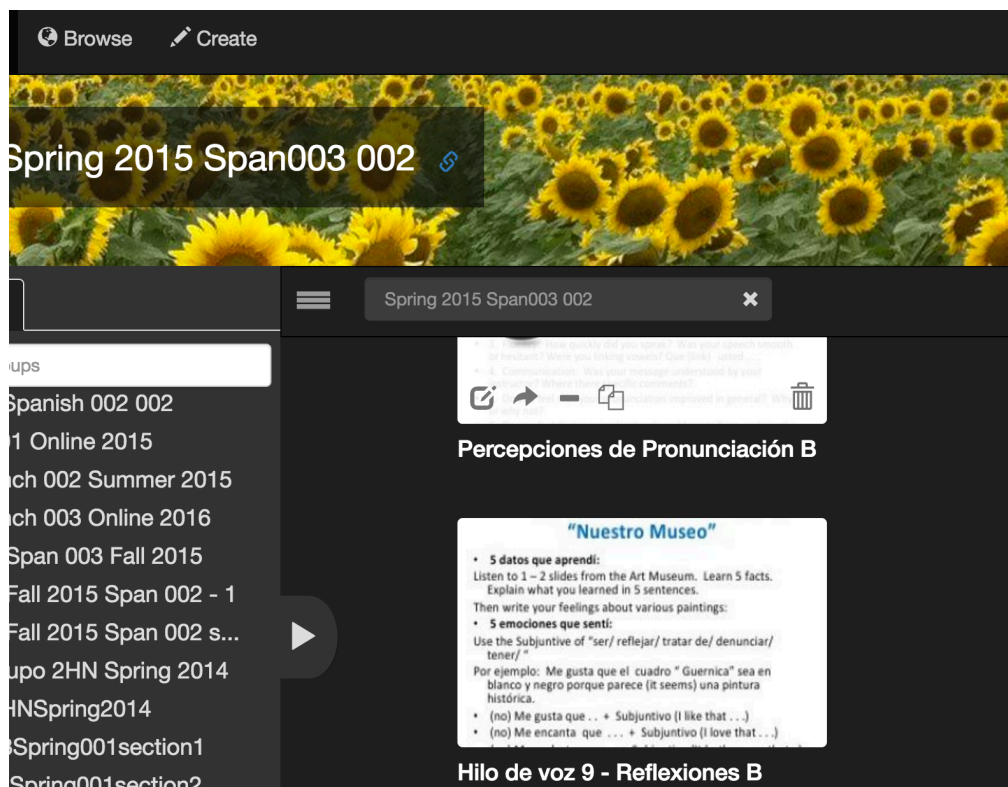
According to Kolb's experiential learning theory (1976), students learn by being exposed to concrete experiences, which lead to abstract conceptualizations, which are reassessed when the student is exposed to more experiences. Kolb's cycle of learning emphasizes the importance of repeated exposure to the target language structures. This emphasis on exposure to new experiences can be achieved in classroom discussions and through the use

of technology programs such as VoiceThread. In this study, the instructor was interested in evaluating the use of technology and graded assignments in opposition to ungraded classroom discussions in the final production of the present subjunctive in the final oral exam.

One of the most difficult subjects to acquire when learning the Spanish language is the use of the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive mood is used 5% in oral communication (Moreno de Alba, 1978) and it is an important concept that is routinely taught at the Spanish intermediate level. The subjunctive mood is defined as a point of view of the speaker who wishes to express subjectivity and hypotheses. Because it is a point of view of the speaker, students have to be given clear rules to understand at a basic level when it is used in the Spanish language. Therefore, this concept is introduced by explaining there are certain verbs which show a) uncertainty such as “dudar”/ to doubt b) wish “pedir”/ to ask for, c) volition such as “insistir”/ to insist d) and suggestion “recomendar” /to recommend, to name a few of the types of verbs which require a subjunctive mood. The second difficulty for the students in the subjunctive mood is found in subordinate sentences. So unless students have practiced using “que”/ that as a link between two sentences and to recognize two verbs, a main one, and a subordinate one, it is very difficult for students to understand the relation between a main clause verb which is expressed as a fact in the indicative mood and a subordinate clause verb which requires switching points of view, the subjunctive mood. These subordinate sentences can be noun, adjective or adverbial clauses, which further confuses the issue for students who don’t recognize types of subordination, in general. The third complex aspect of the present subjunctive is the phonetic aspect of the form. To generate the present subjunctive, there is a change in vowel in the verb ending. This is very confusing for students who have learned the present indicative with “a” “e” endings and who now have to switch these vowels to construct the present subjunctive. Finally, the fourth obstacle is the lack of use of the subjunctive mood in conversational English. In English, the subjunctive mood is used in archaic expressions like “God save the Queen” and in phrases with the verb “to be” like “I wish I were . . .” “If I were a rich person . . .” although many students are unfamiliar with these expressions and use incorrectly “I wish I was . . .”

In order to encourage student understanding of this difficult verb mood, students engage in tasks during class. A traditional format is the use of in-class discussions, but in this study, the author also used the software program VoiceThread (VT) to promote these tasks. VoiceThread is an asynchronous medium that allows recorded, visual, and text material to be uploaded by users. It is open to all students in a group, so everyone can read, see, listen to each other and to the instructor’s comments, as well as give both written and oral comments (Crane 2009) as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: An example of a VoiceThread Slide Thread Task Titled “Nuestro Museo”/ Our Museum



There were several purposes of this study. The first one was to assess student production of the target structure by replacing in-class discussions with a technology component, VoiceThread. The second goal was to compare student production of the present subjunctive in the final oral exam between the traditional classroom discussions in contrast to the recorded tasks on VoiceThread.

The instructor hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 1: The VoiceThread assignments' grades should reflect the final oral exam grade.

Hypothesis 2: The students exposed to VoiceThread tasks should perform better on the final oral exam than students exposed to informal classroom discussions.

Hypothesis 3: The students' perceptions of their progress in VoiceThread tasks should increase with time.

Literature Review

A wide range of methods has been analyzed in the literature to aid teachers in their pedagogical efforts. In this study, two methods were used to implement tasks. In order to teach the subjunctive mood, one of the most productive and tested ways is by means of processing Instruction as explained in Collentine (1998), and Farley (2001) who conducted experiments to test the differences between students who were taught the subjunctive via processing instruction and meaning based output. Although both methods yielded positive

results, processing instruction increased not only student output, but also better comprehension of the production of the subjunctive. This study used processing instruction as defined by Lee and VanPatten (2003) as focused practice that emphasizes the importance of form and meaning to understand the target structure of the subjunctive. The instructor refined the focused practice by using “Corralling” as defined by Meskill and Anthony (2010). Corralling is a way “to orchestrate practice with the target language that is narrowly focused on their instructional objectives at the moment” (p. 56). The corralling tasks used included narrating experiences in visiting a doctor’s office, making room reservations, observing paintings to describe emotions, and portraying their ideal partner. Thus, by preparing students in class using Processing Instruction and by asking students to perform certain tasks using “Corralling” of the present subjunctive was explored.

Finally, the act of repeating tasks, which were focused and which invited students to produce them within thematic boundaries, reinforced the process of self-monitoring and self-correction to produce a more accurate linguistic representation of rules regarding the present subjunctive. This focused, guided, and repetitive model followed Kolb’s experiential learning theory (1976) where 1) a concrete experience such as a task to produce the present subjunctive leads to 2) reflective observation either because of the production of the written slide, oral feedback from the Instructor, or written and oral comments from other classmates which results in a rearrangement of the rules of formation of the subjunctive and to 3) abstract conceptualization, leading students to try the new rules in another pertinent task or 4) testing in new situations.

Tasks were presented to students either in a classroom discussion or through assignments on the computer. The software program VoiceThread was chosen because it had been evaluated by students in a language class as a useful device, easy to use, and supported by the technical department at the university (Glick, 2012). Previous studies also showed that VoiceThread motivated and minimized anxiety (McKeeman, 2012) and Houston et al. (2008) highlighted that the only drawback was the absence of a live chat with students. However, that is not really a disadvantage since it allows for time to reflect before submitting information. It had been shown that computer mediated communication increased quantity/ quality and equalized the conversation by giving each student a time to speak. It improved linguistic competence as long as there was negotiation of meaning done prior to the production of the assignment (Chun, 2008). Furthermore, Van Deusen-Scholl (2008) on a longitudinal study of computer-mediated foreign language learning concluded, among other ideas, that students produced more language when using CMC approaches. However, not all studies showed increased production in target language when using technology. For example, Ducate and Lomicka’s study (2009) on using podcasts to enhance students’ pronunciation showed that students’ pronunciation did not significantly improve regarding comprehensibility after recording five podcasts. It was not clear whether or not these podcasts were part of the students’ grades and whether they counted toward a final oral exam.

Other advantages of using Voice Thread included that a student found a voice and a “social presence.” A student felt part of a “community,” and understood what the community was saying by reading about it, listening to everyone’s voices or looking for visual clues on the published slide (Orlando, 2010). Finally, other studies that indicate at least a positive perception of using VoiceThread in college level courses include Chan and Pallapu (2012) who showed that 64% of participants wanted to use VoiceThread in a business policy course at California State University and Glick (2012), who determined that 62% of students enrolled in a Spanish university course would recommend using VoiceThread. Another reason to use VoiceThread is cited in Tu (2011) who reported the increased use of VoiceThread according to US News and World Report Education Global rankings, claiming that “Over two million people in over 150 countries and over 25% of the top 100 US universities and colleges” (p.1) were using VoiceThread for connection and collaboration.

Plan of Action to Implement Research

The instructor observed that the oral production of students in two Intermediate classes of Spanish, as evidenced by final oral exam scores, was low 79 % and 71 %. For the instructor, these final oral exam scores represented extremely disappointing averages especially since throughout the course, there had been informal class discussions, as well as two (2) ungraded VoiceThread (VT) sessions where students recorded two exercises as preparation for the final oral exam. The instructor was concerned that these informal class discussions were not taken seriously and were not a permanent record that students could use to review for the final oral exam. The instructor decided to implement VoiceThread tasks as a permanent record of effort, which could be used by students as a reference would be graded, in contrast to previous Informal in-class Discussions and VoiceThread which were ungraded (Glick, 2012).

Two groups were compared, one exposed only to informal in-class discussions and the other exposed to VoiceThread tasks. As pertaining to the group exposed to VoiceThread tasks, students’ self-perceived understanding of their progress was evaluated through a self-assessment questionnaire (see Appendix A). Students’ grades were analyzed to determine progress (see Appendix B). Third, production of the Present Subjunctive in the final oral exam was calculated in a quantitative manner by two raters, and inter-rater reliability determined as well. With regards to a comparison between the control group who discussed the tasks in class and the experimental group who recorded on VoiceThread, the grades of the final oral exam were compared.

Methodology

In this quasi-experimental study lasting one semester, there were two groups of students: in the control course, students produced seven in-class, ungraded practice sessions of the Present Subjunctive whereas in the experimental group, students produced the same seven tasks, but they used seven VoiceThread and every recording was graded. Each VoiceThread graded session was worth 1% point of the final grade and the final oral exam was worth 10% of the final grade, in both groups. Thus, these combined oral exercises and final exam

represented a total of 17% of the final grade in the experimental group but only 10% in the control group because only the final exam was graded.

The subject selection lacked random assignment as student selection was based on the need to fulfill a language credit requirement. It was also a static group comparison design because there was just a posttest evaluation, which was the final oral exam grade. Also there was a gender imbalance as seen in Table 1 between the Informal Class Discussion group and the graded VT group, which will be addressed in the discussion section. This gender imbalance of 68% female and 32% male in the Informal Class Discussion group compared to 42% female and 58% male in the graded VoiceThread group may have affected the differences in means between final oral exams in both groups.

Students in both groups, control and experimental, were asked to discuss seven (7) assignments as follows: 1) Issue formal commands at the doctor's office 2) Offer recommendations by the doctor 3) Describe your ideal person 4) Compare preferred characteristics between an ideal man and an ideal woman 5) Describe an ideal hotel room 6) Museum (1) Describe your emotions, doubts, thoughts, and recommendations about a Latin-American painting of your choice 7) Museum (2) Describe your emotions, doubts, thoughts, and recommendations about paintings chosen by classmates.

Students in the graded VT group were explained how to use VT in class by the instructor and recorded one practice session together. Any related technical questions were solved by the Instruction Technology group of advisors at the college as well as by asking the instructor for further help. After listening to each student, feedback was given and students' grades were recorded.

Results and Discussion

This action research was designed to investigate the effect of substituting a technology component for Informal Class Discussion. One major difference between the control and the experimental group is attributed to the sample gender as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Student Gender per Course Section

Informal Class Discussion	Section 1 :	Section 2:	Total female: 68%
	8 female, 5 male	13 female, 5 male	Total male: 32%
N = 31			

Graded VT	Section 1 :	Section 2:	Total female: 42%
N = 26	5 female, 7 male	6 female, 8 male	Total male: 58%

To answer the first hypothesis, that VoiceThread assignments' grades should reflect the final oral exam grade, students' grades in the various VT tasks were determined. Table 2 shows measurements of the independent variable (graded practice of task on VoiceThread), which leads to production of the dependent variable (production of the present subjunctive). As the data shows, there was a consistent range of grades in tasks with a mode of 84, a mean of 83.21 and a median of 83.5. This interrupted time-series of measurements shows that during "treatment" of 7 graded VoiceThread assignments, students produced the required minimum number of subordinated sentences was five. This minimum number was determined by listening to the production of subordinated subjunctive sentences by a native speaker on the same topics and dividing that number by half, to accommodate for the Intermediate level of speech of the students.

Table 2. VoiceThread Tasks and Grades

VoiceThread Task #	Graded VT Section 1 (N = 12)	Graded VT Section 2 (N = 14)
1	80	83
2	84	84
3	84	82
4	81	84
5	82	85
6	72	96
7	87	81

Students were graded as described in the rubric for grading VoiceThreads and final oral exam analytically in Appendix A. The mean of the progression in tasks was 82, 84, 83, 83, 84, 84, 84, showing a mode of 84, which indicated that students accomplished the task at a high level in all cases. There was no increase in grade with time that reflected increase in comprehension or production of the target structure. Instead, in all assignments, students recorded and produced the required number and forms of the Present Subjunctive.

To discuss the second hypothesis, that students exposed to VoiceThread tasks should perform better on the final oral exam than students exposed to informal classroom discussions, it was clear that there was a difference between achievement of students in the informal class discussion and those who recorded on VoiceThread.

Table 3. Average Scores for Final Oral Exams

Final Oral Exam Scores of Ungraded Informal Class Discussions Group	Sections 1, 2: 79.23 % , 70.94 %
Final Oral Exam Scores of Graded VT Group	Sections 1 , 2 : 89 .25 % , 91.21 %

A one-tail test for T-test of independent samples was performed on the data in Table 3 to determine if the various sections of each course showed a significant difference in final oral exam grades. The P value was 0.071 (not < 0.05), which suggests that this might be of statistical significance if a larger sample were used. The mean of the control group who relied on classroom discussions was of 75%, representing a sample of 35 students. The mean of the experimental group who worked only on tasks in VT was of 90% representing a sample of 26 students. The improved performance on the Final Oral Exam by the group that worked with recorded assignments could be attributed to various causes including the gender of the sample since there were more female students in the control group than in the experimental one. Also, all VoiceThread assignments were graded which enhanced intrinsic motivation to complete the task. The instructor monitored class discussions, but there was no recorded evidence that all students in all groups performed equally and understood equally the topic of the discussion.

The third hypothesis was that students' perceptions of their progress in VoiceThread tasks should increase with time. In order to triangulate data and obtain the students' point of view, students were asked to complete a questionnaire on perceptions of progress, (Appendix A) to discuss their progress in production and understanding of the present Subjunctive between their first VoiceThread and their last one. In Table 4, 21 students agreed that they understood how to produce and form the present subjunctive after seven VoiceThread assignments. Out of 26 students, 23 mentioned they were more confident with their pronunciation, in general. One of the most significant answers was that two

students indicated they had recorded multiple times and that they had listened to feedback. This question should have been included in the questionnaire in order to better assess the value of the recordings in VoiceThread. It was confirmed that 21 / 26 students believed that the production of the present subjunctive was “easier, understood when and how to use it” with time. Because there is no comparison with the control group, it cannot be determined whether the control group also felt that they understood how to produce the present subjunctive after repeated class discussions.

Table 4. Students’ Perceptions of Progress

Variable	Students’ Perceptions (# of students)
Production of the Present Subjunctive	Got easier, formed correct endings, understood when, where, and how to use it, confident, comfortable, clear (21) Still needs work (2)
Pronunciation in General	Improved, saying more words, more clear, more confident (23) Difficulty pronouncing Spanish “j” (3) / double “r” / “q “ (2) ‘ “ll”
Production of Vocabulary	Harder words, longer words in the last assignments because first topic was “Parts of the body” and last topic was “Social Changes” (3)
Overall Communication	Message was understood when comparing VoiceThread 1 and VoiceThread 9
Additional Comments	I recorded 3- 4 times/ Listening to feedback helped (2)

To obtain a quantitative analysis of the production of the present subjunctive in the final oral exams, two independent raters counted the number of clauses produced with the Subjunctive. Inter -rater reliability, determined by the Cohen Kappa Correlation, was .506, which was moderate. To reconcile the difference between correlations, the instructor and the bilingual student reviewed the final oral exams jointly to discuss their differences and to reach a consensus. Only 18 out of 26 files were analyzed for subjunctive production as seen in Table 5. This is because only 18 students had to produce the subjunctive in the final oral exam. The number of files is 14 because four presentations involved two students while the rest of the ten presentations were given individually. Students produced a total of 99 subordinate sentences with the subjunctive, or 5.5 sentences per student, which was the expected goal for this task.

Table 5. Inter-rater Evaluations of Production of Subjunctive in the Final Oral Exams

File Number	Number of Subjunctive produced - Instructor's Evaluations	Number of Subjunctives produced - Bilingual Student's Evaluations
1	6	6
2	6	5
3	8	7
4	10	9
5	7	7
6	1	1
7	10	7
8	13	9
9	5	5
10	9	9
11	9	5
12	8	7
13	2	2
14	10	8

Limitations

In this action research case study, there was an attempt to minimize variables. Thus, the same instructor taught both Spanish courses, the control group with informal classroom discussions and the graded VoiceThread recordings. The same tasks were presented to students in both groups. However, because it is a quasi-experimental design, some internal validity threats observed were sample size, feedback, and time on task.

With regards to sample size and assignment, the distribution of students in the two groups, informal classroom discussions and graded VoiceThreads, was based on advising schedules and the need of the student to fulfill the required language credit. The gender imbalance may have skewed the results. Group size was 31 in the control group and 26 in the experimental one, which may not reflect a statistically significant proportion of the college population.

Concerning feedback, the instructor provided in-class comments to students in both groups but because of time limitations, it was difficult to allot the same amount of time per student in class discussions. Feedback to the graded VT group was more proportional, since the instructor had the leisure to listen to a recording, verify the information on the written slide and give a personal comment to aid students with no class constraints. Another potential variable was the time that students spent on task, which may not have been comparable. As noted in the self-assessment questionnaire, two students answered that they recorded between three and four times, whereas the in-class discussion group worked on the task in class, where some may have been more productive than others and where there were no immediate rewards to accomplish the task because these tasks were not graded. In class assignments seemed to have been taken more lightly than graded tasks. This added another variable to our study.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Was the success of the present subjunctive production in the final oral exam of the graded VT group due to intensive practice, to intensive feedback, or to other factors? It was unclear because in the questionnaire the instructor did not ask how often students listened to the feedback, or spent time recording. Some students may have recorded several times. Some students may have listened to comments several times as confirmed by comments on the students' perception of progress. What was clear was the effort made by the instructor to prepare tasks which focused on the form and which corralled the students to produce the target structures while engaging them in meaningful discourse. The repetition of the task aided students in reflective observations, which according to Kolb (1976) led to a possible rearrangement of abstract conceptualizations. Furthermore, students then made an effort to test the rules in new situations.

The preparation and evaluation of seven biweekly Voice Thread tasks per student for 26 students was one, which required dedication and time on the part of both instructor and students. However, as the data in this case study suggests, it was time well spent since students realized the importance of practice and paying attention to form in order to successfully communicate hypothetical ideas in Spanish. Further research could be done on determining how much time students spent listening to the feedback and how many times they recorded a VoiceThread before they submitted the final version. It would also be interesting to know how much time it took them to prepare the assignments. For the control group, grading in-class discussions would also be useful to reflect student understanding of the formation of the target task. Understanding students' self-awareness and their ability to form abstract conceptualizations would be important in developing new tasks and testing them on other software programs that enhance language pedagogical skills.

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Appendix A: Student Questionnaire on Perceptions of Progress

Compare the following between the first VoiceThread “In the Doctor’s Office” and the last VoiceThread “Reflections about Paintings”:

1. Production of the Present Subjunctive: Did you produce the Present Subjunctive? How difficult was it? Do you feel that your understanding of how to form and use the Present Subjunctive improved in general? Why or why not?
2. Production of Vocabulary: Did you feel comfortable speaking in Spanish? Which words were difficult to pronounce? Why?
3. Pronunciation in General: How quickly did you speak? Was your speech smooth or hesitant? Do you feel that your pronunciation improve in general, Why or why not?
4. Overall Communication: Was your message understood by your instructor? Where there specific comments?

Appendix B: Rubric for Grading VoiceThreads and Final Oral Exam Analytically

Category / Score/ Description	Weight as a percentage:
Communicative success 5 pts - Appropriate topic, exchange well-connected, proper amount of time 4 pts - Exchange connected but not enough time. 3 pts - Conversation not on topic and some misunderstandings 2 pts - Conversation often inappropriate and frequent misunderstandings 0 – 1 pt - Conversation inappropriate and no connected discourse.	25%
Grammar 5 pts - Very few errors 4 pts - occasional errors, communication rarely impeded 3 pts – frequent errors, frequent misunderstandings 2 pts - constant grammatical errors, very difficult to understand 0 – 1 pts - extreme lack of control of structures, no comprehensible speech	40%
Vocabulary 5 pts – Shows control of a wide range of vocabulary 4 pts - shows control of an adequate range of vocabulary 3 pts - shows some control of vocabulary but relies on basic vocabulary 2 pts - shows little control of vocabulary,	25%

communication extremely difficult

0 – 1 pt shows no command of the vocabulary

Fluency

10%

5 pts - speech smooth, no mispronunciations

4 pts - speech occasionally hesitant, some mispronunciations

3 pts - speech hesitant, with several misunderstandings arising from mispronunciation

2 pts - speech hesitant and choppy, conversation almost impossible to follow

0 – 1 pt - speech limited to isolated words, no comprehensible speech