

**Editorial**

# Online Synchronous Platforms, Foreign Language Learning and the Use of Sociolinguistic Competence

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**Abstract:** The current saturation of possible synchronous software platforms that foreign language teachers can utilize is challenging the traditional classroom. At the same time, these virtual platforms are having a profound effect on current pedagogical practices that are not yet firmly entrenched in foreign language teacher development programs. A number of issues arise whenever an instructor chooses to implement such a tool (or circumstances require its implementation). These issues include logistics, preference for platform choice, student concerns, computer/device specifications and customization options. On top of these practical concerns, these cultural factors, teacher abilities (through training and otherwise), multi-modality adjustments, and virtual adaptations influence the success or failure for the implementation journey. One area in particular poses a significant challenge for both learners and teachers alike in a foreign language-learning environment. The development of sociolinguistic competence is a necessary skill for successfully navigating through synchronous environments. After completing a historical review of the term sociolinguistic competence, I investigate the manner in which sociolinguistic skills influence the language acquisition process. This editorial includes investigations into how teacher training and technological skills influence and enable the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence within the tools and the target language in virtual classroom spaces through these guiding questions for synchronous virtual classrooms, language learning and foreign language teacher development. First, in what manner do sociolinguistic skills influence the language acquisition process, especially as it relates to the influence of multimodality? Second, what teacher training elements influence both teacher and student acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in language learning in virtual synchronous environments? Lastly, what technological skills enable both implicit and explicit acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in the target language?

**Keywords:** Sociolinguistic Competence, Synchronous Communication, Virtual Platforms, Language Teaching

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## 1. Introduction

Language learning in the classroom has undergone many changes from a historical perspective in both methodologies and structures and teacher approaches [1] (Guichon & Wigham, 2016). The recent addition of interactive online platforms with a suite of tools for learning (among other uses) is continuing to change the teaching/learning domain and these tools have the inherent potential to meet the diverse needs of learners, educators and administrators alike. There are a plethora of choices for these platforms available that include Blackboard Collaborate (formerly Elluminate Live! and Wimba Classroom), Adobe Connect, Zoom, Google Hangouts, among others. These platforms combine many of

the features of a face-to-face (F2F) classroom into a synchronous format that also allows for the use of a number of key technologies. The current saturation of possible synchronous software platforms that foreign language teachers can utilize is challenging the traditional classroom. At the same time, these virtual platforms are having a profound effect on current pedagogical practices that are not yet firmly entrenched in foreign language teacher development programs. A number of issues arise whenever an instructor chooses to implement such a tool (or circumstances require its implementation). These issues include logistics, preference for platform choice, student concerns, computer/device specifications and customization options. On top of these practical concerns, cultural factors, teacher

abilities (through training and otherwise), multi-modality adjustments, and virtual adaptations influence the success or failure for the implementation of such synchronous tools. One area in particular poses a significant challenge for both learners and teachers alike in a foreign language learning environment. The development of sociolinguistic competence is a necessary skill for successfully navigating through synchronous environments. After completing a historical review of the term sociolinguistic competence, the author investigated the manner in which sociolinguistic skills influence the language acquisition process. This article includes investigations into how teacher training and technological skills influence and enable the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence within the tools and the target language in virtual classroom spaces.

Lastly, this article is focused on two aspects of sociolinguistic competence as it applies to distance learning courses and language learning. First, the focus is on a variety of specific virtual tools, Blackboard Collaborate, Zoom and Adobe Connect using the Hymes SPEAKING mnemonic device [2] (Schmidt-Rinehart & Le Loup, 2017) as a way of defining the challenges learners and educators face within this virtual space. The second focus is on how a second language learner and teacher would be able to negotiate meaning in this virtual landscape while creating a guide to a traditional and local system of speaking. In short, having sociolinguistic competence implies knowing when to talk and when to be quiet and being able to read situations and know the right thing to say or do. Even though this article will focus on virtual spaces, it is important to note that some traditional face-to-face classrooms have difficulty developing learners' sociolinguistic competence. Within an online synchronous environment, teachers must not only develop this competence, but they must do so while acting as moderators, participants and teachers in these virtual spaces.

## 2. Background

Language learning has been involved in distance education from the beginning in the form of correspondence courses and followed the trends in distance education over the years (from radio broadcasts to satellite training). With the advent of the personal computer, independent language study programs were developed. These tools range from prepackaged software programs to video courses. Along with current trends, language learning is currently enjoying new found potential due to advances in technology. Language learning is taking advantage of the internet, handheld devices in two forms: language exchange websites and portals containing language information. There also exists the possibility of a third area with the development of virtual worlds like Second Life.

The current use of distance learning can be divided into two broad categories: language exchange websites and portals containing language information. The language exchange websites focus on linking two complementary learners together. There is also a new subset of this category in the addition of exchange islands within the Second Life website.

Language portals differ in the number of assorted mediums available to a potential learner. Learners are able to choose from supplementary activities, such as vocabulary tests or games and grammar exercises to areas specifically tailored to content areas like TOEFL. A particular thread of language learning that falls within the language portal category is termed Independent language study or the use of a program developed for use without an instructor or other students. These tools range from prepackaged software programs to video courses (including courses through correspondence). A very important tool in language learning can be found in computer-assisted language learning materials (or CALL). The materials within CALL are student-centered and are to be used to facilitate the language learning process.

Distance learning can offer unlimited opportunities for practice for learners and in observing appropriate language use in some situations. Many of these opportunities are especially relevant to intermediate or advanced speakers whereas the internet can offer a type of immersion into a target language. For any level learner, distance learning offers a path to high levels of reading and writing literacy, though not necessarily in oracy. Distance learning also appeals to learning styles of its participants by offering numerous methods of communication (i. e. email, internet, two-way video/audio, etc.). By far, the greatest contribution distance learning offers is its reach of audience. Learners have the potential to communicate with the world's languages and it can be especially useful for learning a less commonly taught language.

One of the biggest disadvantages in using distance learning to acquire a language is that a learner may be unable to achieve a high level of speaking ability without immersion in a community or without the use of synchronous platforms. Though the technology is improving, a learner still needs to "live" a language to become a competent speaker. In some studies, there is some evidence that posits classroom, hybrid and distance L2 learners can reach comparable levels of oral proficiency during their first year of study [3] (Blake, Wilson, Cetto & Pardo-Ballester, 2008). [4] Gaskell (2006) notes that with the current global learning environment that intercultural and interpersonal understanding is more important than ever. She cites studies done using students in the UK's Open University and in the Turkish Anadolou University where competing pedagogies and cultural norms can come into conflict at the international level. These studies point to an underlying issue in this article: the ability to learn enough to satisfy the intercultural and interpersonal skills needed for language learning.

Beginning learners might suffer in using distance learning that does not take advantage of structured instruction and corrective feedback. These learners would have modest gains using internet portals and websites. In these early stages of language study, a learner faces a number of challenges that also occur in F2F environments, but are heightened in an online format. There can be a greater perceived inadequacy of feedback in certain distance learning approaches. There can also be a greater lack of interaction between course

participants. Finally, motivation, self-regulation, and autonomy can lead to unsatisfactory results for learners.

As stated, language learning in the classroom has undergone many changes in both methodologies and structures, especially as virtual tools have moved into more and more courses. These changes have all been implemented in order to meet the varying needs of its participants from the learners to teachers to administrators, among others. In order to reach the full potential of any learning methodology, there must be an incorporation of all the participants in its pedagogical, structural, and instructional design. Currently, no single methodology can be described as having no disadvantages in regards to its participants and each methodology needs to be approached in a manner that maximizes its advantages while minimizing its disadvantages. These types of classrooms are unique in that they become spaces for language learning. These special environments must originate from within a strong focus on foreign language teacher development and a strong familiarity with the potential in virtual tools.

As tools like these synchronous platforms move further into language learning classrooms, there will be a need to indoctrinate teachers and students into this virtual environment [5] (Xiangyang & Shu-chiu, 2007). In kind, more and more students will choose to learn a target language through platforms like those mentioned and teachers will be required to use these technologies, especially in fully online language courses [6]; [7]; [8] (Sun 2011, 2014; Dixon 2012), in order to both meet their students' needs and that of their professional institutions. Given the complexities of the language learning process in any form, the added dimension of a virtual environment will need to be a part of the teachers and students' repertoire as a new addition to their communicative competence ability, especially where sociolinguistic competence is concerned [9]; [10] (Guichon, 2009; Hegelheimer, Reppert, Broberg, Daisy, Grgurovic, Middlebrooks & Liu, 2004). The need to identify the components in the synchronous virtual environment will become greater as more learners turn to this technology to acquire languages [11] (Godwin-Jones, 2006). All of this discussion leads to defining the notion of sociolinguistic competence.

Any discussion sociolinguistic competence must begin with a focus on the original notion of learner competence. This notion of competence has its origins in the work of Chomsky in the early 60's and his ideal speaker within a homogeneous speech community. This ideal speaker was seen as an extreme case and one that bears little relation to the meaning of competence, or the minimal qualification needed to complete a task [12] (Swaffar, 2006). But, this Chomskyan perspective prevailed and formed the basis for this notion of linguistic or grammatical competence. In later years, Hymes [13] (as cited in O'Grady, Archibald, Aronoff & Rees-Miller, 2010) added to notion of competence by positing that grammatical

competence does not account for the sociocultural abilities of speakers. This Hymesian perspective was an acknowledgement of the complexity of the abilities present in all kinds of speakers, but it was just a beginning. Following Hymes addition to the umbrella term communicative competence, a number of new avenues were added to the definition of communicative competence. These avenues were refined to a working set of four competencies that make-up the communicative abilities of a speaker. Canale and Swain [13] (as cited O'Grady et al., 2010) divided communicative competence into linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies.

In Canale and Swain's taxonomy in table 1, the four areas referred to specific abilities present in speakers. In the case of linguistic competence, the speaker would be able to use syntax and vocabulary in grammatically sound ways. Using language in various settings and with varying registers falls to sociolinguistic competence. The underlying key to this competency is the ability to perceive and use the appropriate attitude. Building on the notion of linguistic ability, the manner of constructing parts into wholes is covered by the discourse competence. This competence speaks to how it is possible to turn words, phrases and sentences into coherent wholes (e. g. conversations, reports, etc.). Finally, the ability to maneuver through language is a part of strategic competence. When a speaker can describe an object without using the word itself or when a speaker knows he/she has been misunderstood are examples of employing strategic competence. The implication for this taxonomy is that it is based on a functional understanding of language instead of on what is said [14] (Kramsch, 2006). This understanding makes up the combined list of competencies from Canale and Swain and served to further specify the underlying skills a successful speaker needed, but their model still lacked completion.

The ability of a speaker to participate in discourse was found to include the four competencies above along with the addition of illocutionary competence. Some models were also reorganized to better mirror the complexity of communicative competence. In [13] O'Grady, Archibald, Aronoff and Rees-Miller (p. 454), they stated that communicative competence is the sum of two overarching competencies: language and strategic competence (2010). The language competence is further broken down into two areas: organizational and pragmatic competence. Within these areas, four more areas are also defined: grammatical, textual, illocutionary, and sociolinguistic competence. Most of these notions are also represented within the Canale and Swain approach with the exception of illocutionary competence. Because this competence seems to incorporate pieces from the sociolinguistic and discourse competencies, the model of O'Grady et al. places the meaning of an utterance under the term illocutionary competence. Table 1 illustrates the historical process in the building of the communicative competence model.

**Table 1.** Historical overview of communicative competence development.

Chomsky (1960's)	Hymes (1970's)	Canale & Swain (1980's)	O'Grady, et al. (2000's)	
Linguistic Competence <i>ideal, homogeneous</i>	Linguistic Competence <i>performance, underlying rules</i>	Linguistic Competence <i>grammar, syntax, vocabulary</i> Discourse Competence <i>interpretation, context, whole</i>	Organizational Competence	Grammatical Competence <i>vocabulary, morphology, phonology, syntax</i> Textual Competence <i>cohesion, rhetorical organization</i> Illocutionary Competence <i>functional abilities</i>
	Sociolinguistic Competence <i>possible, appropriate, done</i>	Sociolinguistic Competence <i>appropriate use, attitude</i> Strategic Competence <i>repair, meta-language</i>	Pragmatic Competence	Sociolinguistic Competence <i>dialect, register, cultural reference</i> Strategic Competence

As sociolinguistic competence grew currency as a term starting with Hymes, the term also continued to grow specificity. The original meaning behind the term referred to all the combinations possible for a language utterance in regards to the variability of the same. This variability refers to the linguistic acceptance of the various forms an utterance can take from a descriptivist perspective. As linguistic understanding of language continued to grow throughout the sixties, seventies, and eighties, sociolinguistic competence evolved to include the abilities use and understand varying dialects and to incorporate cultural references at the speech community level. Both of these additions do not have a specific relationship to virtual environments, but are underlying abilities present in all speakers. The evolution of sociolinguistic competence to the level of the use and understanding of registers is a key component of its application to virtual environments. These registers, or the language specific to a content area or a task, are the sum of the type of language used in a particular domain with a specific audience. The type of language refers to formality vs. informality to academic vs. colloquial and rate of speech vs. tone. The domain refers to the physicality of an area or, simply, location. All of these characteristics are part of the Hymesian perspective and have observational techniques that will be discussed shortly.

Having established the importance of sociolinguistic competence in the literature, there is the issue of how to approach observing it in action. An important concept within the notion of sociolinguistic competence is the understanding of speech acts and their uses. These speech acts (asking permission, forgiving, complimenting, etc.) are negotiated between speakers and rely heavily on a number of factors that can be summarized using a mnemonic device: SPEAKING. [15] Hymes (1986) places sixteen components into eight categories that form the mnemonic device. These are settings, participants, ends, act sequences, keys, instrumentalities, norms, and genres. These concepts are employed by speakers to act as a guide to communicating in a local system of speaking.

The need to identify the components in the virtual environment will become greater as more learners turn to this technology to acquire languages [11] (Godwin-Jones, 2006). These virtual components are based on face-to-face contexts and, therefore, approaches used to observe behavior should be applicable to this online environment with some adaptation. In

[16] Gumperz and Hymes (1986), the use of sociolinguistic description and taxonomy are the keys to the successful understanding of the interaction of language and social life. In many respects, the components in virtual environments are based on face-to-face contexts and, therefore, approaches used to observe behavior should be applicable to this online environment with some adaptation. In [16] Gumperz and Hymes (1986), the use of sociolinguistic description and taxonomy are the keys to the successful understanding of the interaction of language and social life. The parts of the SPEAKING mnemonic are interrelated and interconnected. [15] Hymes (1986) defined sixteen components that make up the ways of communicating which form a descriptive theory of communication. These components can be further grouped into a set of eight overarching terms that are formed into the mnemonic device: SPEAKING. The parts of SPEAKING are settings, participants, ends, act sequences, keys, instrumentalities, norms, and genres. Table 2 links the sixteen components to the eight mnemonic pieces.

**Table 2.** Mnemonic Device: SPEAKING (Hymes, 1971).

Letter	Description	Components
S	Settings	1. Setting 2. Scene 3. Speaker, or sender
P	Participants	4. Addressor 5. Hearer, or receiver, or audience 6. Addressee
E	Ends	7. Purposes-outcomes 8. Purposes-goals
A	Act Sequences	9. Message forms 10. Message content
K	Keys	11. Key
I	Instrumentalities	12. Channels 13. Forms of speech
N	Norms	14. Norms of interaction 15. Norms of interpretation
G	Genre	16. Genre

The parts of the SPEAKING mnemonic are interrelated and interconnected. In defining settings, Hymes lists both physical (setting) and psychological (scenes) characteristics together. The next group, participants, is a generalized term meant to be inclusive of the many forms this group can take (e. g. speaker, hearer, audience, etc.). Because Hymes defines communication as a purposeful interaction, the ends (i. e. outcomes or goals) are needed to understand the speech acts. Message form and content comprise the act sequences (or A)

portion of the taxonomy. Message form is concerned with describing how the message is delivered, while the content can be described as the topic being discussed. The key in this taxonomy refers to the tone or manner in which an act is delivered and is important because it can override other acts. The instrumentalities cover the channel or the medium used in the speech transmission and the form the speech takes in regards to things like register, dialect or domain. The rules of speaking, or the specific behaviors, coupled with the interpretation function form the norms for the speech transmission. Finally, the genre, or the traditionally recognized forms of the speech acts, completes the mnemonic device.

There are numerous criticisms of Hymes' view of communicative competence [17] (Riley, 1996) that focus on speech acts and their limitations. Riley states that there are four deficiencies in Hymes' approach. First, speech acts are positioned as parallel acts that are based on an individual instead of a "collaborative construction of intersubjective meaning (p. 120)." Second, participants are said to be performing and recognizing acts, but there is clearly more to interpreting acts. Third, the notion of speech acts limits participants' role to this small set of possible performances, which ignores a number of other communication modalities. Fourth, this approach places communicative competence into situational determinism and appears to turn all of the interactions into mechanical relationship. [17] (Riley, 1996) These criticisms of the speech acts are within Hymes' communication theory and any further research in this area needs to account for these limitations. The rest of Hymes' SPEAKING mnemonic device is sound and can be used to

evaluate a virtual space.

For now, further research needs to focus on the message form and content and how participants shaped meaning along the line of collaborative construction using intersubjective meaning [17] (Riley, 1996). Using Hymes taxonomy can be a necessary tool in understanding the interactions within the virtual environment. The taxonomy enables the researcher to become aware of the environment. In [18] Levy (2007), many scholars conclude that "[people] may be largely unaware of [their] culture orientation" (p. 105) and people can project that cultural orientation onto others. The taxonomy, as a tool, requires the researcher to evaluate the interaction through this rubric. [18] Levy also refers to the emergence of differing levels of culture during the language process. These differing levels will also occur in the virtual environment and Levy marks them as culture 1 versus culture 2 (C1, etc.), a unit wholly different from L1, etc. The virtual environment is another dimension of culture and possibly another culture in and of itself. Further research could look into the shared culture of participants in virtual spaces and use ethnographic tools to compare a virtual space to a face-to-face space.

Further studies using the Hymes taxonomy will benefit from the work of [2] Schmidt-Rinehart and LeLoup (2017) and their work done in SLA through the lens of sociolinguistic frameworks as they apply to socio-cultural contexts of language learning. These authors focus on two mainstream methodologies in sociolinguistics: variationist studies in the Labovian tradition and conversational analysis. In variationist studies, interlanguage or learner speech is studied to determine its systematic nature and its range of linguistic and social constraints.

**Table 3.** Levels of Modality, terms and features.

LEVELS OF MODALITY, TERMS, & FEATURES*	
Suggested Term for Modality Level	Features & Channels
In Person	All Channels/All Senses
Multi-channel (Complex)	Includes video (many) + audio (many) + whiteboard/workspace (s) + chat + other windows/rooms/tools
Multi-channel (Simple)	Includes video (one) + audio (one) + whiteboard/workspace (s) + chat + Other windows/rooms/tools
2-3 Channel Maximum	Includes video + audio + chat + screen share (either video or screen share, but not both)
2 Audio/Visual Channel Maximum	Includes audio + screen share
2 Audio/Text Channel Maximum	Includes audio + chat

Conversational analysis (CA) focuses on the moment-by-moment interaction and adds a much finer grained analysis of the interaction. Though somewhat controversial, proponents of the CA approach note a number of advantages: ability to gain a fuller picture of interactions, refine insights into interactional structures, define grammatical organization in interactions, and study speakers as well as active listeners. The use of CA to complete further research into virtual environment would provide the ability to study speakers as well as active listeners, which is important in these studies due to the possible varied locations of the participants. In [19] Hewitt-Taylor (2003), the author calls for explicit interactions between student and teacher, but with a specific role in mind: that of facilitator in control of the appropriate environment for learning. This same author also lists a number of non-language related issues that might cause

a learner difficulty. These virtual spaces, or computer mediated communication (CMC) have the potential to aid learning in the acquisition of a second language because there is greater control over learning tasks and even goals [20]; [21] (Johnson, 2002; Chappelle, 2001). An example of such a platform can be seen in the Blackboard Collaborate software program. This program combines many of the features of a face-to-face (F2F) classroom into a synchronous form that also allows for the use of a number of key technologies. First, the multimedia availability allows the use of chat rooms, voice connections, and white boards. Second, the customization features within the program allow teacher control combined with the ability to link students to the World Wide Web or to simply allow peer connections. This level of modality is explained further in table 3, though This table assumes the participants can see, hear and talk. Persons with different

abilities may need modifications to participate in each of the levels of modality. Depending on the way the course instructors plan his or her synchronous meeting, a platform like Blackboard Collaborate would fall under the modality level of multi-channel (complex) or multi-channel (simple).

As these levels show, there is a wide variety of choices facing instructors and learners in terms of modalities and/or channels. With the addition of each channel, the complexity in interactions increases. That increase requires the learners to need more strategies and skills in sociolinguistic competence. Along the same lines, that same increase means an instructor using a multi-channel approach must include specific procedures, rules or guidelines for issues related turn-taking, resource sharing, communication breakdowns, etc. For example, [7] Sun (2011) noted that synchronous platforms may fall short of expectations for synchronous meetings because "When students answered questions by the teacher, it was awkward as social etiquette, rules of turn-taking, etc. had not yet been established among the group." (p. 436). With this consideration in mind, the instructor can also choose to use a 2 channel system to initially establish conventions for running a synchronous meeting. The complexity is a challenge for all users, but the advantages they offer makes them a compelling option. For instance, [22] Jenks (2009) stated that "the challenges and pressure new technologies pose for online learners have been less studied and little known, e. g., equipment (of the learners) failing, multiple overlapping of voices, turn-taking, pausing, negotiation to "regain the floor", lacking non-verbal clues, just to name a few." (p.441). As these tools move further into language learning classrooms, there will be a need to indoctrinate students into this virtual environment. In kind, more and more students will choose to learn a target language through this platform. Given the complexities of the language learning process in any form, the added dimension of a virtual environment will need to be a part of the students' repertoire as a new addition their communicative competence ability of which sociolinguistic competence may be utilized the most.

### 3. Sociolinguistic Competence in Virtual Spaces

Since participants do not meet face-to-face, there must be either an additional skill added to the definition of communicative competence that covers technological abilities or the current definition must include specific references to this type or environment, especially in regards to the lack of verbal clues and the addition of a mediated tool. As online based language learning continues to grow, learners will be exposed to environments that are virtually based and, therefore, new environments. This virtual environment is especially important in the use of synchronous based learning tools like Blackboard Collaborate Platforms like Blackboard Collaborate offer a number of features that make the platform advantageous to its user. These platforms are used for many-to-many communication in a live format that would

benefit from the transfer of files or the inclusion of multimedia content. Some of these features include the following: classroom/conference tools, content development areas, access to rich media support, use of management tools, and technological considerations for accessibility and security. Once live the virtual classroom can include the following elements: teleconferencing, interactive whiteboard, instant messaging, and breakout rooms.

In this type of environment, learners are faced with a multi-modality approach that mimics a classroom environment, but requires a new set of communicative tools to utilize the medium fully. In the case of Blackboard Collaborate, the learner must navigate through the information presented on as many as four channels much like the multi-channel complex level in table 3. There could be information from the chat area, the whiteboard, the speakers, and the list of participants [11] (Godwin-Jones, 2006). An example of a five channel web-based environment can be found in [35] Chen, Belkade, and Okamoto (2004), where the course content used various frames to display videos, lessons, instructions, feedback, and tutorial functions. Using these five channels provided the students with interactivity and support within the same page, but this combination of frames added to the complexity of the site. Much like all human interaction, the complexity in synchronous virtual environments requires the ability of the learner to acquire and use all of the communicative competencies. Development in communicative competence is essential to a language learner and his/her success.

For instance, [35] Chen, Belkade and Okamoto (2004) researched the form function impact of interaction Japanese learners of English in an online course. These learners were completing a web based course in academic English and the study focused on motivation and learning through computer mediated communication. [35] Chen et al. also looked at the abilities of students to self-initiate, to ask for clarification and their ability to self-negotiate comprehensible output. All of these self-initiated concepts rely very heavily on the student's ability to function competently using strategies and techniques of sociolinguistic competence. These authors concluded that the technological innovations are creating changes in language acquisition, especially in terms of the ability to acquire oral skills through technology.

This article provided some evidence that learners are able to expand their skills in sociolinguistic competence through the technology currently available. It also demonstrated that there is a link between acquisition level and a speakers' motivational level, especially given the autonomy of working through a web-based course. Finally, this article is one example of a specific type of sociolinguistic competence needed by learners in an online environment. The students were required to post audio responses that represented monologues for the teacher to assess. This type of interaction requires a new set of sociolinguistic competence skills and is a skill that needs to be trained/developed much in the same way as any students' abilities with literacy.

While the complexity of these competencies for language

learners is challenging to acquire and use within face-to-face contexts, the addition of electronic mediums have added another dimension, or domain, to this experience. This addition of an electronic medium is not new, but until recently it has been limited to simple one modality technological tools (telephone, email, etc.). With the addition of the internet and multimedia applications, its present-day form can be accessed in the form of an advanced communication platform requiring the use of all the language skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking). It is important to note that these advanced communication platforms have the ability to require the use of all the language skills at the same time. Though possible, it is more likely that one or two of the language skills will be needed as a learner navigates through a course. Because of this combination of technologies, the development of communicative competence, especially sociolinguistic competence and register must be accelerated as well as modified. Since participants do not meet face-to-face, there must be either an additional skill added to the definition of communicative competence that covers technological abilities or the current definition must include specific references to this type or environment, especially in regards to the lack of verbal clues and the addition of a mediated tool.

The availability of numerous types of virtual spaces is unique to distance learning. For language learning, many of these spaces can be set up to encourage and promote interpersonal communication. Such communication is important given the negative attitudes many learners have toward online learning. In [23] Jensen (2000), he provided examples of students who were discouraged by the impersonal nature of online course delivery. These students indicated the need for more social interaction along with the rigors of the coursework. A traditional university framework is built on this idea of social interaction and community building. For many students, the attraction of attending college is in its atmosphere: living in a dorm, communal eating, and frequent group activities. While much of this university atmosphere is difficult to recreate virtually, there are some technical solutions that can meet the needs of students wanting more interpersonal communication. For example, these virtual spaces can contain multiple ways for interaction that include tools as simple as text based chatting. This chatting could

begin automatically when a student logs into the class and would be blended into the course layout. This outlet would provide a link to other students and/or instructors who are also currently logged in. This ability to know that someone else is out there would aid communication in the same way seeing a professor's door open invites visitors. Having this connection would provide a solution for me on one of the most frustrating parts of online learning, which is the unavoidable delay in communication.

One reason to move toward synchronous platforms is the inherent limitations in asynchronous tools like discussion boards. Students in the study of preferences in communication from [24] Henry and Li (2005) reported a preference in communication through other tools rather than discussion boards. The students listed these reasons for such a preference: tools like texting and/or email are easier to access. Direct communication like texting/email also allow for a high level of privacy. In many courses, tools like discussion boards are often not actively monitored and are of low value. Many students also prefer the private/individual nature of email versus the often public nature of posting or creating a thread in a discussion board. Aside from this private/public dichotomy, the passive nature of many discussion boards leaves students and faculty with the responsibility of reviewing the postings that are often found in different courses and/or different spaces in a particular learning management system. Some of systems allow for email or alert messages that indicate a new post has appeared. While these messages and alerts can be helpful, many students report turning off these features because they become overwhelmed with them during the course of a productive semester. Lastly, many discussion boards do not allow the users to modify or delete their entry unless this level of permission was enabled by the course instructor. Many students indicated that this lack of control was unnerving, especially when such threads or entries were posted in a public forum. This lack of control was important to students because they were unable to correct errors and/or modify their posts in response to additional information. As these limitations are problematic, synchronous tools may help alleviate some of them. In table 4, there is a list of possible synchronous tools and their availability on different operating systems as well as devices.

**Table 4.** Table of synchronous tools based on operating systems, and device.

Operating Systems*		Tools					
		Blackboard Collaborate	Anymeeting.com	Adobe Connect	Google Hangout	Skype	Facetime
Desktop / Laptop	Windows	X	X	X	X	X	
	iOS/ Mac OS	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Other (includes Linux, Ubuntu, etc.	X	X	X	X	X	
	Android	X <sup>1</sup>	X	X	X	X	
Handhelds <sup>2</sup>	iOS		X	X	X	X	X
	Windows Phone		X		X	X	
	Other (includes Blackberry, Firefox OS, Tizen, Ubuntu, etc.	X	X	X	X	X	

Table 4 provides a quick overview of these platforms based on two important features. With the current fragmentation of operating systems and devices, instructors and learners must

be aware of the choices they make. If numerous learners for example do not have access to a device with iOS (i. e. Apple products), it may be advisable to avoid using FaceTime as that

particular tool will not operate in multiple environments. Along with the fragmentation in operating systems, there is now more diversity in types of devices from traditional desktops or laptops to more recent additions of handheld devices and tablets.

As Table 4 shows many of these platforms offer full access on the traditional computing systems, while the handhelds often require an app that may or may not be the full program. In some cases, there are no available options for these platforms on many on the handhelds currently on the market. Table 4 also shows the operating systems are in order of market share [25] (Netmarketshare, 2017)

Teaching in an online format can be daunting for a new instructor given the difficulties in moving into a new arena. There are many issues facing a novice user like the need to define a role as a moderator, choose components for inclusion in the course, and deal with the feelings of loneliness that may occur in working at-a-distance. The following tips should provide a starting point for a new instructor.

First, a new instructor will need to understand his/her role as a moderator for the course, the discussion boards, and the flow of information. In [26] Berge and Collins (2006), the authors categorize the various roles a moderator may encounter, which are roles an instructor will also assume. These include filtering the content, preventing so-called “fires,” facilitating group work, administering the course, editing information, generating discussion through posts or other means, and serving as an expert in the field. While these roles are varied and many, clearly defining the instructor’s roles will be necessary to reduce noise, keep focus on topic, eliminate flames, ensure timeliness, and digest messages or postings [26] (Berge & Collins, 2006). Such detailed information provides instructors with the option to engage more deeply in their courses because of the thoroughness and breadth. If an instructor understands what roles may be required, there is a greater chance that he/she will be prepared for the role as it occurs.

Second, a new instructor might benefit from a list of components that are usual and/or required for a successful online course. These components can be found in greater detail in [27] Hiemstra (1994) and will be briefly mentioned here. Given the electronic format, training should be available for learners on the use of the software in the course. There should be a variety of methods of electronic communication and, in fact, the course will be built around these discussion tools. As in a F2F format, there should be an extensive syllabus or course study guide. There should be various learning options that talk to student participation and interaction. In certain formats, the use of a learning contract is appropriate because it would be an individualized plan. Finally, the use of varied evaluation opportunities is important for the participants. This tip succinctly covers an important consideration that awaits every new instructor.

Third, many times new instructors feel as if they are alone in their concerns. In [28] Berge (2006), the author surveyed instructors in higher education regarding their perceptions on certain problems in education (e. g. quality, productivity, etc.).

The responses from this survey should help a new instructor understand that many of his/her concerns are what many others are also encountering. In some cases, instructors are able to work together to enhance their time by focusing on the many different instructional strategies available for use in an online environment.

Some other considerations for a new instructor includes the use of discussion boards and hypertext. Both of these tools can be integral within an online environment. In [29] Brown (1997) and [30] Pitt and Clark (2006) the effectiveness of discussion (or collaborative learning through lists or email) is discussed. One important element in an online course is peer interaction which is facilitated by online discussions. There are many advantages to this format: learners respond at their discretion, learners reflect and seek further information before responding, and learners have a written transcript of their interactions. This strategy is particularly effective because of the several modes available (e. g. listservs, discussion boards, chat rooms, etc.).

Much like discussion boards, the use of hypertext can be important, especially in synchronous meetings [29] (Brown, 1997). Obviously, the effectiveness of this strategy comes from the ability to reach so many resources on the World Wide Web. A secondary effectiveness occurs in the self-directed nature of hypertexting. Learners become the center of the format as they control their paths. Third, an effective method that can employ the above two methods is the use of a case study. This effectiveness can be found in allowing learners to reach their own conclusions and compare those resolutions with actual decisions to resolve the problems. Also, the case study allows for a sense of the real life limitations of both inadequate information and time pressure. Another tool that can be utilized by the new instructor is the resource website from [26] Berge and Collins (2006). Their website houses links to articles on successfully transitioning to an online environment.

As more studies using the synchronous and other tools are completed on virtual spaces and language learning, the effectiveness of this medium might help to answer many of the criticisms against distance education. For instance, one of the criticisms of distance learning and the use of online environments is that they are not as effective as face-to-face environments. [3] Blake, Wilson, Cetto, & Pardo-Ballester (2008) compare the outcomes (not the student gains) in hybrid and DL courses against students participating in the same levels in traditional classrooms that meet five days a week. This study investigated the effects on students’ oral proficiency. [3] Blake, et al. felt a focus on oracy was appropriate to quell doubts held by foreign language teachers toward technology and linguistic proficiency. The study was not asking if either DL or hybrid formats produce better outcomes than traditional formats, but if students in technologically supported learning environments show the same oral progress as students in face-to-face classrooms. The study’s results showed students enrolled in the hybrid and DL courses performed as well as their counterparts in the traditional classrooms. Though the results showed similar



performance outcomes, Blake et al. caution that too many variables influence the outcome, especially in terms of types of learners enrolled in DL courses. This study could benefit from the addition of the Hymes taxonomy as a reference point for zeroing in on the many variables. Another study that focused on the issue of oracy [31] (Heins, Duensing, Stickler, & Batstone, 2007) also showed quality language learning can occur in distance learning formats, but attributed this positivity to the advent of computer-mediated communication. For any level learner, distance learning offers a path to high levels of reading and writing literacy, though not necessarily in oracy. Distance learning also appeals to the learning styles of its participants by offering numerous methods of communication (i. e. email, internet, two-way video/audio, etc.). Instructional designers or course instructors need to take advantage of structured instruction and corrective feedback as a way of meeting students' needs. One method of helping students reach higher levels of oracy and in helping with intercultural and interpersonal skills would be a greater amount of interaction between course participants

[31] Heins, Duensing, Stickler and Batstone discussed the scarcity of research on synchronous online audio environments with a focus on interaction, which contrasts with the well-researched area of written computer mediated communication. Interpersonal interaction is studied in both online and face-to-face language tutorials and the authors provide a coding system for mapping interactions and discuss the use of the target language versus the degree of tutor control and focus. This article looks at interaction as being both the goal in means of communicative language learning and that there is a bias toward traditional face-to-face courses having a higher perceived quality versus an online format. The authors' research attempted to inform approaches to pedagogy for language learning whether they are in the virtual or traditional classroom. Their findings suggest interaction in an online format provided for more L2 input and output, more structure in that same input and output and limited the student exchanges to only assign tasks within the course.

The focus on interaction is essential for understanding sociolinguistic competence because learners must use linguistic resources to reach more target-like behavior and successfully navigate their language use.

[32] Ng, Yeung, & Hon (2006) researched another criticism of distance learning: that of student-teacher interactions in online environments and whether or not interaction diminished due to online environment factors and students' perceptions. This study is in respond to some critics who believe online environments discourage teacher-student interactions, an important language learning element. According to the findings, the students that felt better about their competence in English had more favorable perceptions of their level of interaction in an online English course. An important contribution from this study is in some suggestions for course designers to include explicit interactions between students and teachers, others, and self. These interactions should be based on learners' confidence and must build up meaning rather than accuracy.

In [19] Hewitt-Taylor (2003), the author calls for the same explicit interactions between student and teacher, but with a specific role in mind: that of facilitator in control of the appropriate environment for learning. This same author also lists a number of non-language related issues that might cause a learner difficulty. These issues are motivation, goal setting, time management, status and isolation. I would argue that these issues become more troublesome in the hands of non-native speaker given their cultural and linguistic background while in a virtual space. These virtual spaces, or computer mediated communication (CMC) have the potential to aid learning in the acquisition of a second language because there is greater control over learning tasks and even goals [20] (Johnson, 2002). Another study [34] (Skinner & Austin, 1999) has shown another potential benefit for language learners using CMC. Language learners in this study report on having a positive attitude toward using CMC. This positive attitude stems from the focus on "real" communication, the existence of a unique community, and the growth in personal confidence.

In regards to teleconferencing, participants in the session will need to negotiate the following issues that fall under two categories: technological and social. With virtual platforms, technological issues are paramount to consider since they involve choices and meanings that must be negotiated before (or possibly at the same time) the social issues become relevant. First, any electronic communication bypasses the self-awareness built into the human ear. Once a participant chooses to speak the feedback from the human ear concerning how the participant sounds is cut off because the utterance is not fed back through the system (if a signal is sent back through to the participant then either it will appear as an echo or as feedback). The limitation of this platform means the participant is unable to adjust his/her tone, volume, or pitch and will be unaware of how his/her proximity to the microphone affects speech. Another consideration not present in non-electronic communication comes from the ability to turn on or off the microphone connection. This on/off option is not available in all electronic communication mediums, but it is a consideration in synchronous platforms. Participants need to know if the microphone is set to multiple users or is limited to only one user at a time. Additionally, participants need to remember and being conscience of their microphones status. Is the microphone on, which means the participant is live? There are similar issues in non-electronic communications in the case of not realizing there are others near while speaking or whispering and still having the message reach others outside their intended audience. The importance of this issue in this platform stems from its subtle nature. The primary visual way to know a participant is live is by the depression of a button with a microphone icon on it. There is another way of determining if a participant is live and that is through the use of silence. In a turn-based option, the microphone might be on if there should be communication flow and there is silence in the platform. In a turn-based system, a microphone left in the on position blocks all others from communicating.

There are two social issues present in this type of virtual

space that a new participant to the medium must overcome. The first, or initiating conversations, is complex due to both the medium and the possible number of participants in the virtual space. The medium causes some of the complexity because of the multiple modalities present. A participant in this space needs to choose the channel to initiate a conversation, which could take the form of a chat, a greeting using the microphone, or through the whiteboard. There are some secondary issues that can impair or serve to further connect the participants. One of the issues that could impair connection is the greater possibility of getting lost in all the channels available. Another issue that could serve to connect participants more is the tool that allows participants to input a profile connected with their login name. This profile could provide some humanistic details that would help participants see each other as unique individuals. A picture is also an option that can be added to the profile, which is just another humanistic element.

The second social issue that is not unique to these communication platforms, but is exaggerated by them is the ability to turn-take [34] (Simpson, 2005). The notion of turn-taking can be seen in competent individuals who almost have a feeling of when it is time for their turn in a conversation. In a F2F environment the participants are able to react to so many clues and hints that the virtual environment can become a challenge as most of these F2F clues and hints no longer function. These clues and hints are body language, facial expressions, tone, pitch, tag questions, and silence. The participants in the F2F environment are able to constantly evaluate these items and react appropriately. Given the nature of multi-channel synchronous platform and the focus on audio/textual components, the clues and hints from body language and facial expression all but disappear. (There are often video features available, but this option is usually reserved for educators, especially in sessions with a large number of participants. Additionally, most platforms allow for a maximum of 6 web camera displays. In many cases, multiple video displays are not preferred as they often slow down the overall platform if multiple users do not have sufficient bandwidth or they have poor connections). The use of tone and pitch are still available, but only when participants use a channel that utilizes audio. Finally, because of the multi-modality of the virtual environment, tag questions and silence do not work as efficiently. Participants in this environment have the ability to switch between channels (from to chat to audio, etc.) and to physically walk away (while still appearing online) that only exists in specific and limited domains in the F2F environment.

[34] Simpson (2005) provides a case study on informal virtual community where learners are able to meet in various places on the Internet. These English language learners are meeting synchronously through a text chat forum and Simpson discusses the discourse management and technological skills that are required when using such a text based tool. Furthermore, he focuses on collaboration and scaffolding in learning with particular attention paid to the conversational floor as an analytical unit of study. Finally, the

article also discusses what is needed for successful sociolinguistic navigation in the virtual community. The article draws three very important conclusions that come from this qualitative perspective. First, in order to discuss individual learning, one must look at this learning within its social contexts or the treatment is incomplete. Second, when discussing a virtual environment (particularly a synchronous one) there are a number of functional skills that are needed beyond the ability to read and write and function within a virtual environment. These functional skills fall squarely within the idea of sociolinguistic competence. Third, using the conversational floor as a unit of analysis provided a basis for looking at synchronous discourse. One focus could be a type of analysis method using the discourse or conversational level, which focuses on studying how sentences form larger meaningful units like paragraphs or conversations. Both of these approaches focus very heavily on turn taking and repair, which are skills needed for a virtual synchronous environment.

## 4. Future Research and Directions

As more learners, educators and institutions turn toward online course delivery, the issue of developing and researching sociolinguistic competence will become greater. In fact, as more interactions occur virtually in other domains (commerce, business, etc.) the ability to negotiate meaning, understand interaction, repair breakdowns and communicate clearly will become an important component in any language learning experience. In terms of research, more studies need to focus on the manner in which skills in sociolinguistic competence influence the overall language acquisition process, especially as it relates to the influences of multimodality. In regards to teacher development and/or training, more work needs to be undertaken in exploring the teacher training elements that influence both teacher and student acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in language learning in virtual synchronous environments. Lastly, the technology behind these developments needs to be studied to determine what technological skills enable both implicit and explicit acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in the target language.

## 5. Conclusion

As language learners continue to search out alternative ways for learning, synchronous tools may offer the best solution for meeting their needs. While many other kinds of distance education approaches (specifically asynchronous ones) offer some benefits, the addition of a same-time virtual session combined with other elements may be the key to ensuring language learning happens for all of the skills (including speaking – the one skill often left out of traditional or asynchronous approaches). With the focus on these synchronous platforms, educators and learners alike must develop ways of navigating within these spaces. This negotiation is a critical component of the language learning

process and this sociolinguistic competence must be explicitly developed, taught and monitored. While it seems simple on the surface, the careful look presented in this article shows how complex the skills in sociolinguistic competence are because of the diversity of tools, devices and platforms. Future educators will need to be fluent in their language of instruction, in the tools of their courses and in imparting explicit skills with sociolinguistic competence while learners will need to not only learn the target language, but they will also need the skills necessary to navigate these online environments.

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