

## Distance learning and the development of speaking skills: Challenges and opportunities

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### ABSTRACT

**EN** Based on data from the GRAAL group's questionnaire on remote teaching, caused by the Covid-19 emergency as reported in Conti (2021), oral production practice was neglected by both high school and college students. The aim of this paper is to reflect on how to promote and sustain speaking from the beginning of the language learning process, during in-person, remote and/or hybrid teaching. The framework presented indicates task-based language teaching (TBLT) as an effective approach to help learners participate in successful communication. The paper provides: 1. an overview of current literature on the subject; 2. applicable examples integrated with Flipgrid; 3. data analysis of students' performance.

**Key words:** REMOTE TEACHING, HYBRID TEACHING, TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING, SPEAKING SKILLS, TECHNOLOGY-SUPPORTED LEARNING

**ES** De los datos del cuestionario del grupo GRAAL sobre la enseñanza virtual debida a la emergencia Covid-19, como se informa en Conti (2021), se extrae que la práctica de la producción oral fue descuidada por el alumnado tanto de secundaria como universitario. El objetivo de este trabajo es reflexionar sobre cómo promover y mantener la expresión oral desde el inicio del proceso de aprendizaje del idioma, durante la enseñanza presencial, virtual y/o híbrida. El marco propuesto indica que la enseñanza de idiomas basada en tareas (TBLT) es un enfoque eficaz para ayudar al alumnado a participar en una comunicación exitosa. El presente artículo ofrece: 1. una descripción general de la literatura actual sobre el tema; 2. ejemplos aplicables integrados a través del uso de la herramienta digital Flipgrid; 3. un análisis de datos del rendimiento del alumnado.

**Palabras clave:** ENSEÑANZA VIRTUAL, ENSEÑANZA HÍBRIDA, ENSEÑANZA DE IDIOMAS BASADA EN TAREAS, APRENDIZAJE CON TICS

**IT** Dai dati del questionario realizzato dal gruppo GRAAL sulla didattica a distanza dovuta dall'emergenza da Covid-19, riportati in Conti (2021), emerge che l'abilità di produzione orale è stata trascurata sia dagli studenti delle scuole superiori che nei corsi universitari. Il presente contributo si prefigge di riflettere su come promuovere e supportare la produzione orale fin dall'inizio del processo di apprendimento della lingua durante l'insegnamento in presenza, a distanza e/o ibrido. Il quadro proposto definisce il *task-based language teaching* (TBLT) quale approccio ideale per favorire strategie e pratiche efficaci al fine dello sviluppo del parlato. Il presente contributo fornisce: 1. una revisione della letteratura sull'argomento; 2. esempi applicativi integrati attraverso l'uso di un opportuno strumento digitale Flipgrid; 3. un'analisi dei dati sulle prestazioni degli studenti.

**Parole chiave:** DIDATTICA A DISTANZA, DIDATTICA DIGITALE INTEGRATA, APPRENDIMENTO LINGUISTICO ATTRAVERSO I TASK, ABILITÀ DI PRODUZIONE ORALE, TECNOLOGIE DELL'INFORMAZIONE E DELLA COMUNICAZIONE PER L'APPRENDIMENTO LINGUISTICO

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## 1. Introduction

Data we collected through a questionnaire on remote language teaching (Conti, forthcoming) during the recent health emergency has shown that speaking was one of the skills least practiced by both high school and college students. This issue was reported by both teachers and students. While it is not surprising that such a complex skill was scarcely practiced in the virtual learning environment, the development of speaking is one of the most important skills for second language learners, not only because we learn a language to be able to communicate, but also because speaking promotes and facilitates further language learning.

This paper proposes that task-based learning can be an effective approach for learners to engage in spoken communication and to develop oral skills in an online environment (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 2009). The paper begins with the theoretical background on speaking and task-based language teaching. It next discusses how to promote and sustain speaking in remote teaching. These ideas are then illustrated in a description, including transcribed examples of student interaction, of how Flipgrid, a free video sharing platform, was adopted in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) speaking course for students mastering in Sports Management at the University of Rome Foro Italico. Concluding remarks identify the new opportunities and challenges for supporting speaking in virtual learning environments revealed by the experience of using Flipgrid.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. *The importance of speaking in SLA*

Speaking, as an essential language skill, is an essential goal of language learning. Learners aspire to speak without too much hesitation, without making too many linguistic mistakes, and without offending their interlocutors. Students often measure their progress in a second language (L2) through their confidence and ability to speak in real world situations. Research studies have also shown that speaking is not only an essential communication skill but that it also plays a fundamental role in promoting and facilitating second language acquisition (Hatch, 1978; Long, 2015; Skehan, 2009; Swain, 1997; Thornbury, 2005).

Swain (1997), through her Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, stressed the importance of production in second language acquisition (SLA). She proposed that having to produce the L2 encourages language development in multiple ways. First, it can help learners to pay attention to language features necessary to express what they want to say, as well as to reflect on their own productions as sort of “auto-input” (Schmidt & Frota, 1986). Along the same line, production allows learners to test their hypothesis about the L2, to get feedback, and even to automatise and achieve a better control of existing L2 knowledge. Comprehensible input alone is not sufficient to ensure full L2 proficiency.

Hatch (1978) showed that learners first learn how to interact through conversation and consequently syntactic structures are developed from these interactions. Thornbury (2005) expanded on this idea, positing that a scaffolding process takes place through the interaction, so the language is co-constructed and consequently develops.

Long’s (2015) Interaction Hypothesis also emphasised the important role of conversational interaction in SLA, as interaction can promote acquisition through comprehensible input, negotiation for meaning, feedback, and modified output. Central to these topics is implicit learning, which is the primary way by which we acquire our first language (L1). The acquisition of L1 grammar is implicit and is extracted from experience of usage rather than from explicit rules (Ellis, Loewen, Elder, Erlam, Philp, & Reinders, 2009). Implicit knowledge is automatic, fast, effortless, sub-conscious, and therefore efficient when we speak; we don’t have time to think, which is an essential feature of spontaneous language production. Long goes on to describe adults’ weaker capacity for implicit learning and the effects that this problem has on SLA and instructed second language acquisition. In Long’s (2015) words, as “the capacity for implicit learning [...] is weaker in adults, and tuned for L1 processing, optimally efficient adult language learning requires help from explicit learning (not necessarily via explicit teaching)” (p. 49).

From this perspective, the central issue in adult SLA is how much, when, and what form explicit knowledge should take, and what relationship exists between implicit and explicit learning. In Long’s interpretation, a limited and controlled amount of explicit knowledge can facilitate implicit learning—that is, what we want to achieve—in three ways: encouraging selective attention and noticing of specific linguistic features, helping to “notice the gap” between standard and non-standard forms, and modifying automatic L1 processing routines. Long underlined, however, that this is not the same as saying explicit knowledge becomes implicit through proceduralisation and automatisation. Instead, during interactions in meaningful

communications, interlocutors overcome communication obstacles by switching attention from meaning to form long enough to solve the communication problem and notice the new information. These moments, what Long (2015) calls “negotiation for meaning,” provide opportunities for attention to linguistic code features, and for explicit learning that goes to improve implicit input processing. One example of negotiation for meaning is a recast. Recasts are a type of implicit corrective feedback that provides information about the language at a time when interlocutors are attentive, ready for correction, and for noticing new elements in the input: “Recasts are crucial points at which implicit and explicit learning converge in optimal ways” (Long, 2015, p. 55).

Long’s theory and his reflections on the role of implicit learning are particularly important when we consider speaking. It is precisely in spontaneous language production that we have most difficulties, and where implicit knowledge seems to play a central role. Long returns to the importance of implicit knowledge by stating that “for many academic, occupational, and social survival tasks, especially those requiring listening or spontaneous speaking, learners depend primarily on their implicit knowledge [...]. Implicit knowledge is the result of incidental learning” (Long, 2019, p. 10). Implicit knowledge is often acquired through interactions, is the product of incidental learning when our attention is on the message we are trying to convey, and at the same time is the kind of knowledge most needed in spontaneous speech (Long, 2015).

## ***2.2. Difficulties with teaching and learning speaking as an L2 skill***

Students identify speaking as the most difficult L2 skill. In a study conducted by Cambridge University (2018), based on a survey with 14.000 students in which participants were asked what they found most difficult in English (L2), speaking ranked very highly among the difficulties. Curry (2018) presented the results of this survey in a webinar and explained that often students feel lost when asked to speak on the spot and, moreover, they feel that what is happening in the classroom does not prepare them for what they have to do with the language in the real world.

Lightbown and Spada (2013) pointed out that many adults and adolescents find it stressful when they are unable to express themselves clearly and correctly. Goh and Burns (2012) also consider affective factors to be strongly linked to speaking difficulties, especially when learners have to process and produce language spontaneously without any planning or rehearsal. Goh and Burns found that anxiety may make learners’ cognitive performance less efficient, impairing their ability to process, retrieve, or produce information when required.

Besides specific affective issues and individual differences in terms of character and aptitude, Ellis (2003) posited that a main problem in spontaneous language use is the lack of time to represent, process, and put into words what we want to say. Following the information-processing model proposed by Levelt (1989), Ellis (2003) emphasised the complexity of language production:

A complex skill such as speaking requires the performance of a number of simultaneous mental operations, potentially causing speakers to experience considerable processing pressure. [...] L2 learners are likely to experience special problems in formulating phonetic plans that require rule computation. In many cases the necessary connection will not have been firmly established in their implicit knowledge system, making access slow and effortful. In other cases, they might entirely lack implicit knowledge, and be forced to fall back to explicit knowledge, which [...] is not amenable to rapid deployment. (pp. 108-109)

According to Goh and Burns (2012), second language speaking can be described as a “combinatorial skill” (p. 63): learners must deal with the cognitive load of speaking clearly and comprehensibly, whilst paying attention to meaning and form at the same time (Goh & Burns, 2012). More recently, Goh (2017) pointed out that language learners may find difficulties in constructing grammatically well-formed sentences in oral interactions due to a lack of time and vocabulary as well as listening comprehension problems.

Thus, teachers have to take into account the different aspects of speech production and understand the challenges that learners confront when they are required to simultaneously focus on meaning and form. Moreover, the nature of spoken language is impermanent, transitory, and therefore difficult to teach and assess (Goh & Burns, 2012). In spite of these difficulties, speaking in itself facilitates the learning of an L2 and at the same time is an important part of the learners’ curriculum. Therefore, what should the teacher do in the context of the classroom? How should they deal with the difficulties that speaking poses and, at the same time, what kind of activities can they propose? If we exclude those teaching practices, unfortunately still in use, that equate speaking in the classroom with “nothing more than exercises and drills, where learners repeat sentences with

specific language forms” (Goh & Burns, 2012, p. 218), teachers are faced with dealing with alternative solutions. Primarily, these decisions involve finding ways to foster incidental and implicit learning through activities that encourage learners to speak and/or interact, while at the same time, ensuring that learners have appropriate opportunities to attend the language skills they are seeking to build.

Yet teachers, who have a lot of material to cover, may feel that “doing speaking” is not an efficient use of time. What we traditionally call “grammar and vocabulary” and exam preparation may take precedence over speaking. Speaking may be pushed toward the end of the lesson or the end of the unit and might get dropped all together. In more traditional teaching methods such as Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP), in which language structures are first presented formally, then practiced, to be sped up or even automated, and finally reused, the speaking activities are “the end point of the process (and may frequently be left out, in some classroom, because of time pressure), rather than the purpose of the learning process” (Goh & Burns, 2012, p. 183).

### ***2.3. Possible didactic solutions to teaching speaking***

What, then, might teachers do to make speaking a fundamental and active part of class activities? Task-based language teaching (TBLT) may provide one solution. In Long’s (2015) words, TBLT is an “approach to course design, implementation, and evaluation intended to meet the communicative needs of diverse groups of learners” which “requires an investment of resources in a needs analysis and production of materials appropriate for a particular population of learners” (p. 5), as in the case of the ESP course for students mastering in sports management. TBLT, as described by Ellis, Skehan, Li, Shintani, and Lambert (2019), emphasizes the importance of engaging learners’ natural abilities to acquiring language incidentally as they engage with language as a meaning-making tool, and thus contrast with structural approaches that emphasize language as an object to be systematically taught and intentionally learned. (p. 1)

One advantage of TBLT is how it facilitates incidental learning. As Ellis (2008) showed, SLA researchers claim that incidental learning does happen through practicing tasks and they offer ways to identify the conditions that facilitate this.

Ellis and Shintani (2014) define a task as a language teaching activity that must satisfy four criteria: firstly, there must be a primary focus on meaning and message making, rather than just trying to learn some specific bits of the L2. Secondly, there must be some kind of gap, either an information gap or an opinion gap. Thirdly, learners should rely largely on their own resources to complete the task. In TBLT teachers do not teach learners the language they need to complete the task, but rather leave it up to the students to express themselves the best way they can either through linguistic or non-linguistic resources. Finally, there must be a clearly defined communicative outcome other than the use of language for its own sake.

In this sense, TBLT caters to incidental learning, creating opportunity for learners to acquire new language or a better control over language partially acquired, while they are working to achieve the outcome of the task. According to Long’s (2015) perspective, TBLT has the advantage of drawing students’ attention to specific language features (words, collocations, grammatical structures, pragmatic patterns, etc.) in context as a way for teachers to facilitate students’ noticing. In this way, it is then possible to stimulate students’ awareness of particular forms and their uses (focus on form).

The role of the teacher then is to facilitate this process by enhancing language features in the input, giving learners time to plan the task beforehand, and interacting with them when they experience problems in understanding or expressing themselves. Task variables that have an impact on acquisition, such as task design and task implementation, have been extensively researched even though research did not come to any definitive conclusions on their impact on language acquisition. Nevertheless, certain features such as one-way tasks versus two-way tasks, task repetition, and type of feedback have an impact on interaction. Ellis (2008) considered both aspects for their impact on acquisition and their effect on language production in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity. The study did not come to any definitive conclusions. However, it did produce some important findings that individual instructors can consider using in their own classroom when planning a task.

Goh (2017), drawing on the ideas of VanPatten (1990) and Skehan (1996), identified three task variables in terms of implementation that can help the learning of speaking in class and improve learners’ performance: pre-task planning, task repetition, and communication strategies. These tasks work by providing

systematic direction and support, which learners need in order to learn to interact and communicate well orally. The teacher's role therefore is to provide these scaffolding activities, which support learners in their effort to do a speaking task that otherwise they would not be able to complete. According to Goh, teachers should include pre-task planning, task repetition, and communication strategies activities when planning lessons on speaking.

Pre-task planning allows learners time to plan and helps "to free up attentional space" so that they can pay attention to "articulation of ideas, speech monitoring and self-repairs" (Goh, 2017, p. 252). In other words, if students are less worried about speaking correctly, they can attend to meaning and grammar. When allowing for planning we can therefore see an improvement in fluency and complexity in the learners' performance.

Another type of scaffold, task repetition, can consist of repetition of the exact same task, of the same task procedure using different content, or of the same content but with a different implementation. Either way, this can again minimize learners' cognitive load and improve fluency. It is important to underline that repeating a task once may improve metalinguistic knowledge about some language features, but it may be insufficient to gain implicit knowledge. Nevertheless, Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) claim that we can expect better performances from task repetition because the previous experience of a specific task helps students to shift their attention from message content processing to working on how to formulate the message. Goh (2017) states that by asking students to repeat a task, teachers provide implicit scaffolding which not only increases students' awareness about language and skills, but also provides them with the opportunity to rehearse their performance so that they can easily achieve better results even after the second or the third time.

The third type of scaffold is communication strategies (CS). According to Goh (2017), the importance of the use of CS goes beyond their compensatory effects and should be considered with regard to language development through spoken interaction inside and outside the classroom. She underlines the importance of CS use leading to modified comprehensible output and negotiation of meaning. As stated by Goh (2017), teachers need to consider:

the theoretical implications of CSs for language learning so that they can plan lessons where speaking and language development can be scaffolded through the use of CSs by students and with their teachers. (p. 256)

Ellis (2017) reminds us that one of the advantages of TBLT is that it simultaneously facilitates both language learning and interactional competence. Similarly, Goh and Burns (2012) highlight that TBLT is a:

framework by which teachers can provide a holistic learning environment where learners not only practice speaking engaging classroom activities, but also learn about the nature of speaking in a second language and ways they can manage their own speaking developments. (p. 133)

The pedagogical model developed by Goh and Burns offers a teaching cycle that guides through a sequence of activities the progress of learners' speaking competence. They underline the difference between "doing speaking" and "teaching speaking," claiming that building contexts for learners to speak in class is not the same as teaching them how to do L2 speaking (Goh & Burns, 2012). TBLT, a learner-centered approach to teaching, has proven to be a very useful approach to teaching L2 speaking.

#### ***2.4. TBLT, computer assisted language learning (CALL), and technology-mediated L2 speaking***

The theoretical perspectives outlined in the previous paragraphs show how TBLT can promote speaking during the learning process; it not only provides opportunities for learners to achieve communication in L2, but it also provides a principled language teaching approach for facilitating and integrating implicit and explicit learning in the process (Ellis, 2017; Ellis et al., 2019). TBLT can be successfully and easily applied through technological tools. As highlighted by Blake (2017), best practices in teaching speaking, whether in the classroom or in a technologically supported environment, can be effectively implemented through task-based instruction (TBI). Blake (2017) advocated for TBLT to be used as a framework to inform technological design for language learning (Chapelle, 2017) via online tasks in computer assisted language learning (CALL), writing that:

a common misconception about CALL is that it only refers to specific programs or mobile apps when, in fact, CALL activities not only consist of asking students to engage with the L2 by

responding to prompts given by the computer, but also deal with students engaging in conversations with another person mediated through the use of the computer. (Blake, 2017, p. 112)

In fact, González-Lloret (2017) suggested that:

if task and technology integrations are properly motivated by TBLT theory, we would argue that language learning tasks which are mediated by new technology can raise students' motivation to be creative while using language to make meaning; and they can enable students to meet other speakers of the language in remote locations open up exposure to authentic language environments along with tremendous additional sources of input. (p. 5)

Smith (2005, 2009) has thoroughly investigated an SLA/CALL integration to “uncover which aspects of SLA theory can be most successfully applied to CALL research” (2009, p. 197), while adopting a specific approach to analyse negotiated interaction, learner acquisition and task-based computer-mediated communication. Smith's findings help to better investigate many of key constructs of the interactionist approach in a CALL setting such as heightened attention to form (increased saliency), self-initiated self-repair, and uptake as well as provide a fuller picture of what learners do while engaged in task-based online activities.

Summing up, TBLT, through collaborative tasks, stimulates “processes of learning such as discussion/debate, problem-solving, innovation and knowledge building” (Harasim, 2019, p. 139). Harasim argues that technology is not as important as pedagogy but should conform to pedagogy. Technology is therefore an additional aid that can facilitate the learning process by means of student discussions, peer collaboration, and student-teacher interaction. Thus, technology should be used to promote and sustain the transition from granularity to complexity (Roncaglia, 2018).

### **3. Methods**

The following section outlines how TBLT was adopted for online delivery of an ESP course in English for Sports management at the University of Rome Foro Italico. We then explore how the integration of an ad hoc technological tool promoted and sustained speaking in the learning process. We begin by describing the research design, the context of the course, and the particular technological tool that was adopted to enhance speaking skills, namely Flipgrid. In Section 3.3, we provide the research design; data collection and some applicable examples are illustrated in 3.4; and data analysis is discussed in 3.5 and 3.6.

#### **3.1. Purpose and research questions**

In the context of online teaching during the technological tsunami caused by the Covid-19 emergency, we asked the following research questions:

- 1) To what extent can a task-based speaking activity recorded on Flipgrid enhance or elicit negotiation for meaning by students?
- 2) To what extent does Flipgrid enhance students' accuracy in the use of verb tense, collocations, vocabulary, and question structure through a task-based speaking activity?

#### **3.2. Setting and participants: educational context and needs analysis**

In 2020 and 2021, we experienced the challenge of converting teaching from in-person to entirely remote teaching, and then to hybrid teaching involving blended and/or hybrid forms of teaching or face-to-face groups. TBLT, group work, and flipping the class were techniques used to engage students in speaking activities during both in-person and on-line classes.

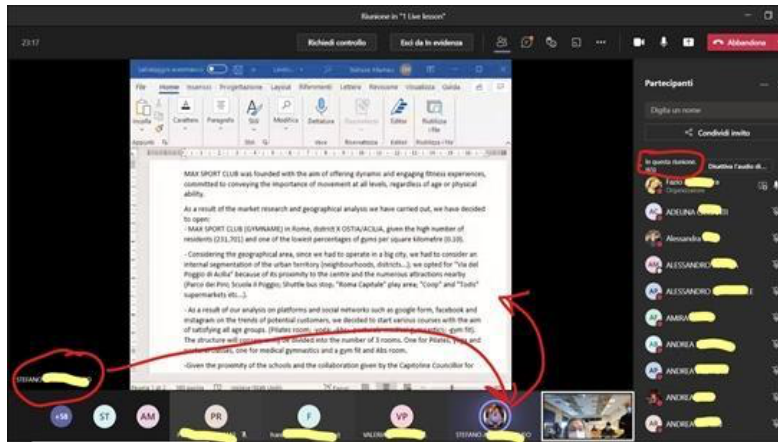


Figure 1. Hybrid class: student presenting remotely during a live hybrid class

Data in this article come from a hybrid English course meant to stimulate oral production for students mastering in Sports Management at the University of Foro Italico in 2020-2021. The ESP course, “English for sports Management (E4SM2021),” was designed following “an analytic approach with a focus on form” (Long, 2015, p. 17). Thus, the course focused on both meaning and form, as in Long’s words “a pure focus on meaning, is inadequate, especially if advanced proficiency is the goal” (2015, p. 27). The course was targeted at young Italian adults at the B1+-B2 proficiency level, with the aim to achieve proficiency in the use of language for specific professional purposes. The 40-hour course ran during the 2020-2021 year and met twice a week for 10 weeks. It used a hybrid modality (instructor in class and students taking classes either in person or remotely) and enrolled 103 students.

The master’s degree guidelines and the students’ career aspirations were taken into account in planning this course. Students in the master’s program typically sought career opportunities in the field of sports management in: national sports federations, sports marketing, and sports promotion bodies, as a sports agent, or as athletic directors/coordinators/managers of sports facilities, sporting events, sports clubs and associations, or recreational physical and health related activities. A specific needs analysis questionnaire was also administered to students. See Figure 1 for a screen shot from the English for Sports Management hybrid class in action.

### 3.3. Research design

The main focus of this explorative research was to analyse the use of the interrogative form during interactive classroom tasks and to observe practices of negotiation for meaning (Long, 1983, 2015). The research involved: 1) designing and implementing an information gap task to stimulate students to transfer their speaking skills into English spoken outside their class by means of simulating a real world professional situation; 2) video-recording participants’ exchanges during task implementation (task and task repetition); 3) transcribing the recordings; 4) conducting an exploratory analysis of instances of negotiation moves such as comprehension checks, clarification requests and confirmation checks (Foster & Ohta, 2005; Long, 1983).

The main aim was to explore to what extent technology, specifically Flipgrid, has a significant impact on the development of speaking skills in an ESP class. Research required two sets of data: video-recordings of students’ interrogative form productions, and two examples of video-recorded dialogues. These two sets of data refer respectively to task and task repetition, used to measure language improvement over a 3-week period during the master’s course.

Data were analysed using qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative analysis of the data investigated what was going on in the dialogue by dyads through negotiation moves. Quantitative analysis investigated the frequency of errors (incorrect forms) by means of descriptive statistical analysis of the following four broad categories of lexico-grammar features: 1) use of verb tenses, 2) collocations, 3) vocabulary, and 4) interrogative form/question structure. Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test was used to measure significant variations.

Taking into consideration Smith’s (2005, 2009) opinion on the benefits of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC), such as increased participation among students and increased quantity and

quality of learner output, a further aim of the research was to show how this emergency provided new positive opportunities facilitating processes of L2 learning.

With regard to data collection and processing (video-recordings and transcripts), Flipgrid was identified as a simple, free online tool to foster video-based discussion on classroom topics. It allows students to engage in video discussions. Flipgrid can be used on a PC or other devices, as an integrated application or as a standalone application on Smartphones. In our research, Flipgrid was selected as it is easily integrated into Microsoft Teams, the video conferencing system that was used for remote and/or hybrid teaching. Flipgrid was considered a promising emerging tool, useful to engage students to participate in an online learning community by means of recording video clips or simply practicing communication skills. As we show below, it has proven to be an extremely useful tool for students to practice speaking and gain confidence in English oral production. Table 1 shows the main characteristics and functions of Flipgrid.

Table 1  
*Flipgrid characteristics and functions*

Main characteristic	Function
Video recording	Instructor/trainee can set the timer of the video recording. Time limit ranges from 15 seconds to a maximum of 10 minutes.
Video and cover image effects	The system offers filters, stickers and other effects as well as video editing, deleting, rearranging video clips. Sticky notes while recording are allowed.
Captions and subtitles	The system allows to set subtitles and captions and automatically generates the immersive reading interface as well as video transcripts.
Topic moderation	Only video recording or responses/comments approved by instructors/ trainees will be shared.
Feedback	The system allows a default basic feedback option or custom feedback. Additional personalised feedback can be sent by email.
Mixtapes	A mixtape consists of a set of videos hand-selected by the educator. This allows educators to showcase student videos on any topic and share videos with others.

Students frequently recorded short clips that were parts of larger and more complex products in the direction of a consciously well-structured task. Flipgrid videos were mainly used as a rehearsal activity (homework) over the 10-week course to allow students to practice and gain confidence in English speaking skills. Transcripts of these student video recordings formed the data set for this project.

### **3.4. Data collection and data examples**

One speaking activity using Flipgrid was the “Guest Speaker” activity adapted from Rost (2013). As Rost noted:

in order to counterbalance the tendency that students are not transferring their listening and speaking skills to English spoken outside their class, it is effective and motivating for students to have a guest speaker (either native or non-native speaker of English) in class. (p. 179)

Therefore, an expert guest speaker in the field of sports management (a sports marketing manager) was invited to deliver a series of three short lectures, once a week, on fundamental topics of sports marketing, advertising, and geomarketing analysis. Short readings, key concepts, and vocabulary related to the presentations were discussed in class prior to these visits. Based on the preparation materials, the students’ task was arranged with the guest speaker, and it was divided into a 5-step workplan:

- 1) Task preparation: Speaker provides an introduction to geomarketing and provides readings; students complete a group assignment on geomarketing analysis presented as a business game;
- 2) Task: preparing questions to the speaker using Flipgrid (hereafter, Task 1);



- 3) Guest speaker visit: Students ask questions to the speaker in a live session (using Task 1 videos);
- 4) Debriefing: Students express opinions about the speaker and a brief summary of key concepts learnt;
- 5) Task repetition: follow-up questions for the speaker (hereafter, Task 2).

The focal task in this article was that students were asked to prepare questions for the speaker. Thus, the main focus was the interrogative form. The task required a preparation phase (Step 1), done with the speaker, which consisted of two short lectures, reading materials given by the speaker, and a group work assignment in sports marketing (geomarketing). Regarding the group work assignment, students had to do a geo-referred analysis of demographic and economic data of a neighbourhood (specific data/materials were provided in class) and plan marketing strategies to run a business in the sports industry in the chosen area. Both the group work preparation and the task were done as an educational game that we called “business game”. This helped not only with motivation but above all with preparation and implementation time. Students were asked to do a Google search and match the socio-demographic data to decide the best marketing plan for their sports business: price and offer as well as an explanation of why. It should be emphasised that from the very first step, students were expected to rely on their own language resources, or implicit knowledge, to carry out the task (interrogative form, specific vocabulary, collocations, etc.), therefore producing the language spontaneously without any help.

In Step 2, the students were assigned Task 1, video recording their questions. Class time was used to provide students with an experience of what it is like to use English, and Task 1 implementation was discussed in small groups either in person or in breakout rooms by brainstorming the work done with the speaker and discussing possible questions in groups. Then each student was assigned to individually video record one question for the speaker as homework using a maximum of 30 seconds. Giving them a time limit proved to be challenging but effective to elicit rapid spontaneous responses. Figure 2 shows Task 1 implementation in Flipgrid. The left side of Figure 2 shows task submissions by the students (87 questions were recorded by the students). A contest was held and five questions among all the students' questions were chosen according to the following two parameters: early submission and the most accurate and the most relevant questions (related to the preparation done). The top five questions were shared with the class in Microsoft Teams by means of Flipgrid mixtape function, as shown on the right side of Figure 2.

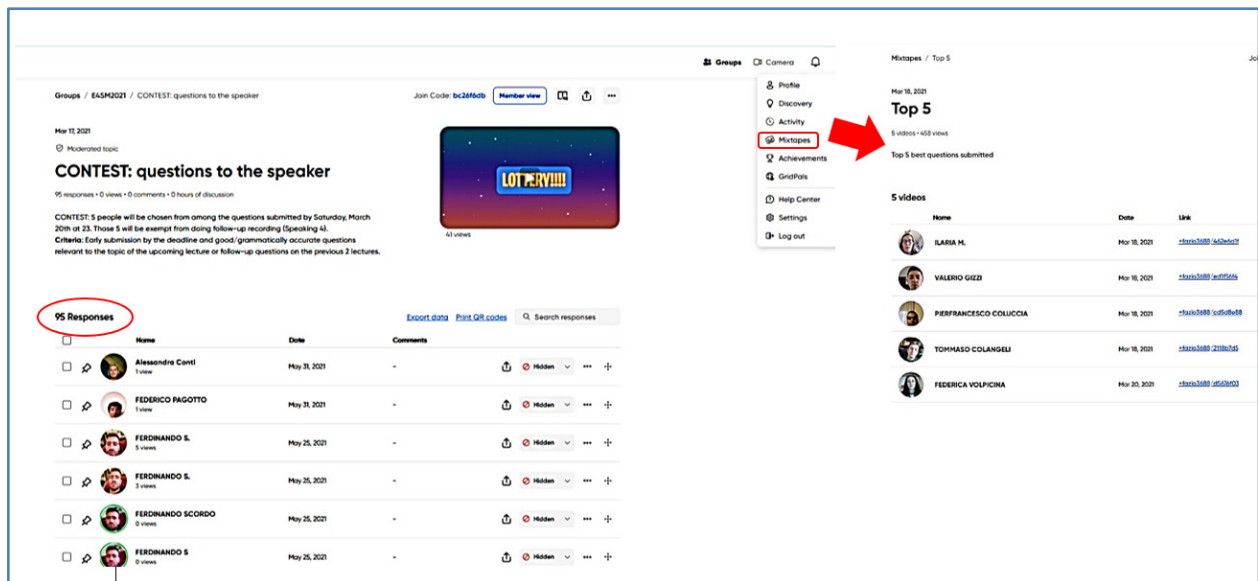


Figure 2. Flipgrid responses to a discussion and mixtape

In Step 3, these questions were posed live to the guest speaker. When time allowed, the discussion was opened up for further questions. After the visit, for Step 4, students were asked to video record their opinions about the speaker and to briefly sum up one key concept that they felt they had understood well among the different topics discussed with the speaker. Finally, in Step 5, students did Task 2, that is a follow-up activity,

or task repetition, to wrap up all the work done with the speaker: recording one question in a maximum of 30 seconds. The whole process of task preparation, task, and task repetition was entirely student-centered. This paper focuses on Task 1 (task) and Task 2 (task repetition).

Transcripts and examples of students' spoken productions from Step 2 and Step 3 are provided in Table 2 below. Column 3 and Column 4 respectively show the written and live questions asked by the students for Task 1. Bolded font in Column 4 indicates differences between the prepared question and what the student asked.

Table 2

*Task 1: Examples of questions for the guest speaker*

Student	Question Prepared for Guest Speaker using Flipgrid (Step 2)	Question Posed Live to Guest Speaker (Step 3)
1 Student 1	Good morning. If you were commissioned by a sports club to develop a marketing strategy to resume activities after the pandemic due to the Covid, what would be your strategy or what would be your starting point for developing it? Thank you.	If you were commissioned by a sports club to develop a marketing strategy to <b>restart sport</b> activities after the pandemic due to the Covid, what would be your strategy for developing it?
2 Student 2	My question is how has the role of advertising changed through years due to social media and in your opinion, which do you think were the most relevant changes?	<b>Hello. Umm my question was the one about social media and how they had changed advertising and why- why was it and how have changed?</b>
3 Student 3	Hello. Um, I'm very interested in competitive balance in the sport industry and so my question for you is, does the introduction of a salary cap improve the competitive balance of a sports league? Thank you.	Good morning. I'm very interested in competitive balance in sport industry so my question is: Does the introduction of a salary cap improve the competitive balance of a sport league? <b>For example, our Serie A football league?</b>
4 Student 4	During the lessons we have said that there should be multifunctional stadium. So why is it so hard to find someone that actually wants to build them in Italy?	<b>In</b> the lessons we have said that there should be multifunctional stadium. So why is it so hard to find someone that actually wants to build them in Italy?
5 Student 5	I would like to ask you how can a new start up or a little organization attract big sponsors and how does it work? For example, can they explain their activity or product? So, during a meeting or something like that? Or are the sponsors that are interested in what they do and so are going to contact them? Thank you.	<b>My question is about sponsorship and I would like to know ehm does that work for sponsors and for new start-up in particular. So how can they like reach big sponsors? Are they going to do presentations to them or in some cases are the sponsors that are like interested in the organisations and so they call them- contact them for sponsorship?</b>
6 Student 6	I hope you may be able to answer this question. We found a speech on the border between legality and illegality in various countries very interesting from a commercial perspective. On the base of your international experience, could Italy ever abandon its legacy in this matter? And could be able to conform to the common	We found the speech on the border between legality and illegality in regarding in various country very interesting from a commercial perspective. On the base of your international experience, could Italy ever be able to abandon its legacy in this matter and could be able to conform to the common idea of paying rights in order to see its

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idea of paying rights in order to see its proposal relieved or said in different phrased how could ethics and sustainability be reached in the business world. Thank you so much.	proposal realised? But in subtle different phrase, how could ethics and sustainability be reached?
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As indicated by the small amount of bolded text, other than for student 6, there are not many significant differences between the recorded questions and the live questions asked by the students.

### 3.5. RQ 1: Qualitative analysis

To answer Research Question 1—whether Flipgrid can enhance a task-based speaking activity to stimulate interaction and elicit meaning negotiation—qualitative analysis was used. The following two examples of the interaction (dialogue) exchanged between the guest speaker and the student are reported and analysed below. These examples highlight the exchange/interaction between the guest and the students and show how the guest was able to scaffold and help the students find the answer, thus eliciting students' linguistic output through negotiation for meaning, thereby facilitating the learning process. The examples in this section show how Student 1 was able to reformulate a good spontaneous question but had difficulty with the interaction, while Student 2 had difficulty reformulating the question but managed to have a more effective interaction with the guest.

#### Example 1. Interaction between Student 1 and Guest Speaker

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- |     |               |  |
|-----|---------------|--|
| 1.  | Guest Speaker | Ok I- tomorrow gyms, clubs will be open, alright? I'm your customer. What would be my feeling, my opinion? What do you think? There is no right or wrong answer. Please, start thinking about me, your customer [...]  |
| 2.  | Student 1     | Ehm, eh... resume activities in general because ...  |
| 3.  | Guest Speaker | No, no no no I- not in general. Think about me. I'm your customer. You are the club. How do I feel? I've heard from television that the club will be open tomorrow...  |
| 4.  | Student 1     | Ehm, eh...is amazing to resume activity after this pandemic  |
| 5.  | Guest Speaker | So I will...?  |
| 6.  | Student 1     | Go and start   |
| 7.  | Guest Speaker | Try to use another word, stronger than "go"  |
| 8.  | Student 1     | you will...ehm rush  |
| 9.  | Guest Speaker | Exactly, rush. I will rush as soon as I can to the club. But this is me, my perspective, you know. What would be the perspective of another person less enthusiastic?  |
| 10. | Student 1     | Ok. Eh...(long pause) I think ehm the person would be afraid for the situation or probably ...uhm.. uhm... scared. Maybe for the parents.  |
| 11. | Guest Speaker | Yeah, but the two possible reactions could be: I'll rush to the gym or it would be nice but...fear. Why are some people scared?  |
| 12. | Student 1     | Ehm... New perspective for activity is maybe new marketing strategy...   |
| 13. | Guest Speaker | What will be the concept? What will you say in your advertisement to make your clients coming back to your club?   |
| 14. | Student 1     | The pandemic is over and we resume activities at the sports club..and... maybe create a new advertisement.   |
| 15. | Guest Speaker | Make it simpler: YES WE ARE OPEN. Simple, You don't need anything else. [...] Because those enthusiastic clients would do the job for you. They will spread the word and say "I went to the gym, I'm safe, no Covid..." and after a month also the scared one will start coming. |
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In Example 1, Guest Speaker and Student 1 often interrupt one another, implying negotiation for meaning. Yet, conversation breakdowns from lines 1 to 8 above evidence communication problems for Student

1 in the interaction with the guest speaker, namely, failing to produce utterances related to general topic (how to find a marketing strategy to resume a sports-related activity during or after the pandemic). Implicit clarification requests or hesitations (moves 2 and 4) are mainly of a lexical nature. The utterance reported in line 10, rather than confirming or clarifying, may convey the function to allow Student 1 time to mentally build her answer (as also shown in all the pauses reported in this transcript). While the interaction goes on from lines 9 to 15, Student 1 gets stuck in search of the correct answer/word/phrase to express the specific meaning and to focus on correct forms. In this part of the dialogue, the communicative function of moves 9 to 15 is to shift from the general topic to the specific content of creating an advertisement, and there is evidence of a lack or difficulty of meaning negotiation.

In Example 2, an interaction between a guest speaker and Student 2, the communication is more fluent, but lines 18 to 20 show the explicit negotiation move through a clarification request.

#### Example 2. Interaction between Student 2 and Guest Speaker

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- |     |               |  |
|-----|---------------|--|
| 16. | Guest Speaker | Well...your <i>question</i> , the one I've just heard from the recording <i>was a little more accurate than the one you are asking now</i> .   |
| 17. | Student 2     | Yes yes, you are right I've just summed up.  |
| 18. | Guest Speaker | Is the role of advertising going to change due to the presence of social media, you know..because of course the examples I showed you were above all TV commercials rather than online commercials. So you have to remember that the Internet is a media, is a tool, right?! So the Internet offers further opportunities to attract your <i>consumers</i> . |
| 19. | Student 2     | <i>I'm sorry I didn't catch this last word</i> .   |
| 20. | Guest Speaker | With your <i>consumer</i> , your <i>customer</i> . Think about yourself when you go to university. You wake up in the morning and...what is the first thing you do?  |

This conversation continues with successful negotiation in communication, seen in lines 21-22.

- |     |               |   |
|-----|---------------|---|
| 21. | Student 2     | <i>Yes, I look at the screen of my phone</i>  |
| 22. | Guest Speaker | <i>Good, this is the first touchpoint. Then you go out and get on the subway. If you look around it is full of billboards. What can you see on each board? Big pictures, written message and ...of course an internet address or a QR code. So you take your phone again and you surf the web. The internet multiplies the chances of keeping in contact with your customers.</i> |
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The interaction continues in Example 3, from turns 23 to 29, and shows the function of request for clarification by means of practical examples, from the general topic to a more nuanced understanding of it (same topic as the previous example).

#### Example 3. Interaction between Student 2 and Guest Speaker continued

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- |     |               |   |
|-----|---------------|---|
| 23. | Student 2     | I don't know if we have time, <i>but could you give us an example of your strategy of advertising with social media and the internet?</i>   |
| 24. | Guest Speaker | First you have to create a database of prospective clients to know who they are. Then you have to segment your target audience. [...]. This is the first phase to establish a relationship with your customers.[...] you start to engage a "conversation" with potential customers. |
| 25. | Student 2     | So basically you are talking about a subscription to a newsletter, for example?   |
| 26. | Guest Speaker | No not exactly, [...]   |
| 27. | Student 2     | <i>What about LinkedIn?</i>   |
| 28. | Student 2     | <i>Ah good, LinkedIn is very powerful [...].</i>  |
| 29. | Guest Speaker | <i>Thank you for answering my question.</i>   |
- 

The final exchanges and responses demonstrate negotiation moves (Foster & Ohta, 2005; Long, 1983), which end the conversation with Student 2's acknowledgement to Guest Speaker (line 29).

### 3.6. RQ 2: Quantitative statistical analysis

To answer research question 2—whether Flipgrid can enhance students’ accuracy in the use of verb tense, collocations, vocabulary, and question structure in a task-based speaking activity—quantitative analysis was performed. This analysis compared students’ performance on Task 1 and Task 2.

As the main purpose of Task 1 was to elicit questions from the students for the guest and to engage them in a discussion with the guest (as reported in the interactional examples above), this task was repeated at the end of the whole activity to elicit further discussion questions on the topics explained in class. Therefore, following Bygate (2018), Task 2 was an example of task repetition and not just a specific mechanical response or repetition of the language previously used. In fact, when the task was repeated, students used their own language to express their meaning with some variations compared to their previous attempt because, as stated by Bygate (2018), language can vary. According to Bygate, in task repetition “what is repeated is a configuration of purposes and a set of content information” (2018, p. 2). As a way to wrap up the activity done at the very end of Stage 5 of the “Guest Speaker” sequence, Task 2 was designed as a task repetition linked to the second activity, Task 1, of the whole sequence. The first task (Task 1) was recorded after initial preparation, while the second video recording (Task 2) was recorded after a series of activities and following feedback, personalised comments either sent via email or provided during class hours. General feedback focused on language features that have to do with meaning. Some additional explanations of primary lexico-grammar features were also provided. The whole process took three weeks, with class meetings in a hybrid modality held twice a week, with the guest participating once a week. For Task 2, students were required to videorecord a follow-up question to the guest as in Task 1.

As Bygate suggests, the interest in task repetition is to observe and study “changes that occur when learners engage in task repetition, and how they may relate to language development” (2018, p. 3). Thus, an exploratory statistical analysis of students’ performances is provided based on the data of students’ performance of Task 1 (task) and Task 2 (task repetition) in order to measure language improvement over a three-week period. Data collected were analysed to describe and compare students’ performances of Task 1 (task or pre-treatment) and Task 2 (task repetition or post-treatment) and to verify whether there was an improvement in the development of speaking skills. Data refer to a sample of 87 students taking the course who were exposed to all the activities planned for the guest speaker were recorded. A total of 82 participants’ interactions for Task 1 and 69 participants’ interactions for Task 2 interactions were collected and processed. The errors from student interactions in Tasks 1 and 2 were selected and analysed. After analysing the frequency of lexico-grammar features, the following four broad categories were determined: use of verb tenses, collocations, vocabulary, and interrogative form/question structure. Students’ errors were divided into those categories. Data on the frequency of errors as well as on students’ mistakes and recorded incorrect language usage for the four variables are shown in Table 3 and Figure 3.

Table 3  
*Frequency of Errors by Error Type*

	Verb Tenses		Collocation		Vocabulary		Question Structure	
	Pre <i>n</i> = 82	Post <i>n</i> = 69	Pre <i>n</i> = 82	Post <i>n</i> = 69	Pre <i>n</i> = 82	Post <i>n</i> = 69	Pre <i>n</i> = 82	Post <i>n</i> = 69
Quantity of errors	24 20%	19 23%	20 17%	12 14%	23 19%	18 21%	47 39%	15 18%
Quantity of students who recorded errors	14 17%	19 28%	17 21%	12 17%	18 22%	18 26%	43 52%	15 22%

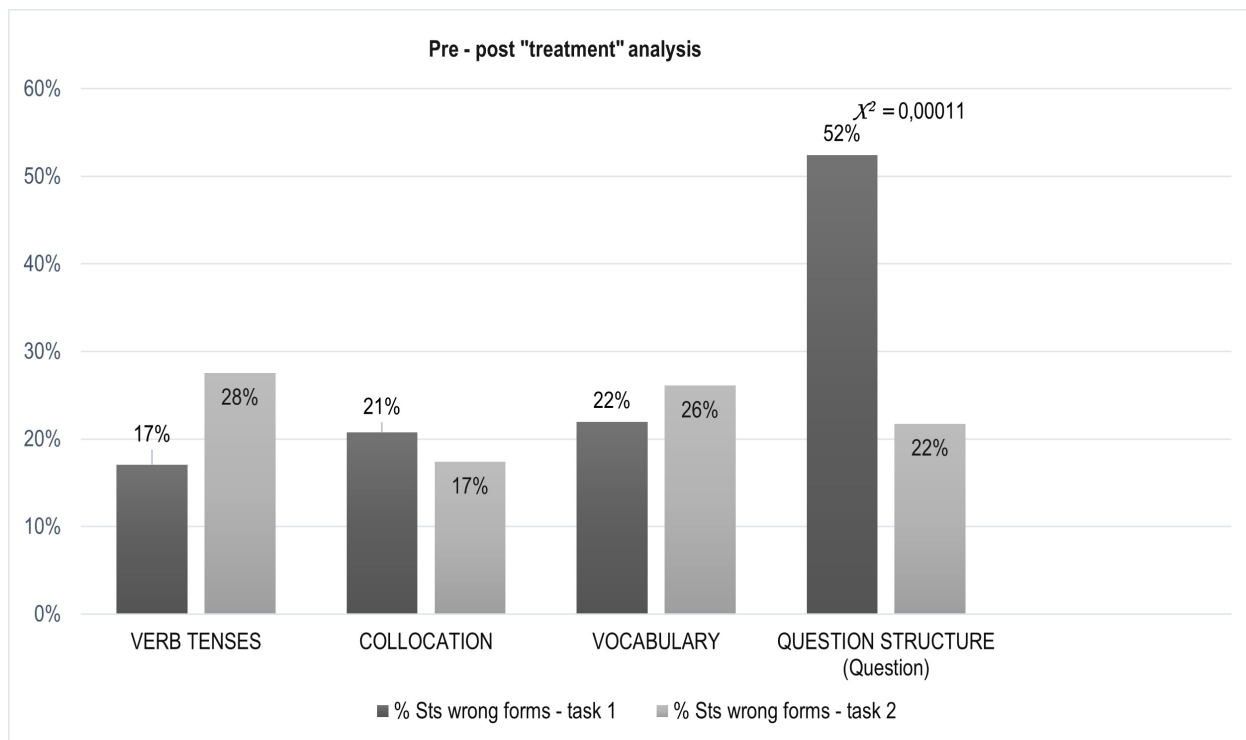


Figure 3. Percentage of errors recorded during Task 1 (task) and Task 2 (task repetition)

Data show an improvement in the students' performance of the interrogative form without significant variation in other aspects (verb tenses, collocations, and vocabulary). As shown in Table 3 and Figure 3, little variation is found between the use of collocations and vocabulary in Task 1 and Task 2. There is a slightly higher discrepancy in the use of the verb tenses. A Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test was used to make a comparison between the expected and the actual results to determine their significance. The variations related to verb tenses, collocations, and vocabulary were not statistically significant. However, the  $\chi$  value related to question structure ( $\chi = 0.0011$ ) was statistically significant ( $p$  value verb tenses = .0121;  $p$  collocation = .60;  $p$  vocabulary = .55;  $p$  question structure = .0011). This finding is not surprising because the focus on form during the feedback on Task 1 and Task 2 was mainly on the interrogative form. This also confirms Long's (2019) hypothesis that task repetition might sometimes be more difficult in some respects than the task itself.

#### 4. Conclusions: opportunities and challenges

The recent necessity of remote teaching due to Covid-19 presented the challenge of experimenting with new technological teaching tools, while offering an opportunity to reflect on the language learning process and on related methodological choices. This new scenario has demonstrated the critical need for a paradigm shift in teaching methodology involving more student-centred and customised classes aligned with technological tools that can deliver these innovations. To this end, TBLT, allied with Flipgrid, has proven to be an effective approach.

The analysis of students' performance provided some preliminary indications of the effectiveness of this teaching approach. The results of the study provide evidence that although no significant differences were detected between the students' recorded and live questions/interactions, on average students were able to reformulate questions and participate in correct and spontaneous live interactions with the guest. The analysis of the data provided evidence that the use of Flipgrid stimulated students' attention to produce fluent and accurate utterances because of the preparation in the video recordings, which emphasised oral practice and self-correction. The students were less focused on the use of verb forms, collocation and vocabulary, but more focused on the use and understanding of the question structure in the short term.

As this is an exploratory analysis, this topic merits further investigation in a more in-depth study. A control group would also be needed to pilot an experimental or quasi-experimental design. However, this study already shows how the use of technology in the context of TBLT can provide multimodal opportunities to

present complex work plans and to perform them synchronously and/or asynchronously (Ellis, 2017). Furthermore, tasks that reflect real-world language use proved to be effective in promoting the co-construction of knowledge, supporting students' motivation and helping them to apply speaking skills outside of the classroom (Rost, 2013).

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