



The Affordances of Telecollaboration to Teach Apologies

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the results of three telecollaboration projects carried out between Spanish-speaking students and their English-speaking counterparts. The aim is to explore the affordances of telecollaboration for the development of Spanish learners' use of apologies in English. To investigate its suitability, a control group and three experimental groups were set. Quantitative analysis of the responses to a pre- and post-test, as well as quantitative content analysis of the strategies used to apologise in role-playing tasks have been carried out. The results revealed that there is a tendency toward improvement in the three experimental groups, as opposed to the control group. In line with this, the control group used a smaller range of strategies to apologise. It is concluded that the first experimental group is the one that obtained better results than the rest.

KEYWORDS: Telecollaboration; Second Language Pragmatics; Speech Acts; Apologies; Role-plays.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's globalised world, the use of technology in foreign and second language teaching and learning is common practice. In fact, globalisation has reshaped the linguistic and cultural structure of the world itself (Taguchi, 2021). Consequently, teaching second language (L2) pragmatics has also been affected by technological advancement. Despite being limited, the existing body of research on L2 pragmatics and technology has notably expanded in the past 20 years (González-Lloret, 2022). An example of this is the use of telecollaboration to aid in developing language learners' pragmatic competence, which has proven to be an effective way to trigger pragmatic acquisition since learners are exposed to authentic interactions with L2 speakers (González-Lloret, 2021; Taguchi & Roever, 2017). In line with this, telecollaboration

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has been defined as “one of the most profound shifts in the ways pragmatic development can occur” (Sykes, 2017, p. 126). Nevertheless, little attention has been devoted to the acquisition of the speech act of apologies by Spanish-speaking learners of English in virtual environments.

For this reason, the aim of this paper is to analyse the results obtained in three different telecollaboration projects and compare them to those achieved in a traditional face-to-face setting. In particular, this study will explore the affordances of telecollaboration projects to teach Spanish-speaking students apologies in English through role-playing tasks. Based on this presumption, this study sought to answer the following research question:

RQ1: Will there be any differences in terms of apology performance between the four groups of participants? If so, which ones?

RQ2: Will there be any difference in the post-test questionnaire between the four groups of participants? If so, why?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Interlanguage Pragmatics

The field of Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) was first defined by Kasper and Dahl (1991) as “referring to nonnative speakers’ (NNs’) comprehension and production of speech acts, and how their L2-related knowledge is acquired” (p. 5). However, since then, the foreign language teaching paradigm has shifted from the unrealistic native-speaker-oriented model to the intercultural speaker model (Byram, 1997, 2021). The latter is a foreign/second language speaker who can maintain successful interactions with speakers of other cultures and languages. For this reason, Sykes (2017) claims that ILP is the approach to figuring out and defining how meaning is conveyed and understood in multilingual exchanges, as well as “the ability to communicate and interpret meaning in a learned language” (Sykes, 2018, p. 121). This is closely related to Byram’s intercultural speaker since to successfully interact with culturally different people, L2 speakers need to possess ILP skills to be able to interpret meaning in their L2. For this reason, L2 pragmatic competence is vital in intercultural communication.

In line with this, within ILP, the subfield of L2 pragmatics can be identified. The term was used by Bardovi-Harling (2013) to refer to the field of research entirely dedicated to the development of learners’ L2 pragmatic system from an acquisitional point of view. She also argued that all L2 pragmatics studies can be framed within ILP, but not vice versa. For the purposes of this study, the author of this paper shall refer to L2 pragmatics as defined by González-Lloret (2019): “the field of L2 pragmatics examines how learners of another language communicate and interact with others given the context of the interaction; the relation between participants; physical setting; their linguistic, social, cultural, and historical background; and their ideologies and identities” (p. 2). This seems to be the most adequate

definition since it takes into consideration learners' relationships, the context, as well as their sociocultural backgrounds, which are all factors that differ between digital-mediated interaction and face-to-face communication, as opposed to Bardovi-Harling's (2013) definition which only refers to the acquisition of this competence without considering the above-mentioned aspects.

2.2. Apologies

Apologies have been selected because, as Sawin (2022) claimed, they rarely appear in the foreign language classroom. Despite this, they are considered a characteristic of English-speaking societies (Leech, 2014). What is more, being pragmatically appropriate in British contexts can be problematic for speakers from Spain, as the latter belong to a positive politeness culture (Halenko, 2021). For these reasons, it is claimed that it would be beneficial for Spanish learners of English to be trained on this particular speech act, as its use differs from Spanish to English.

Apologies are a post-event speech act, meaning that their performance occurs after an offence has been committed or a social norm has been violated (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). They are frequently employed to re-establish harmony between the interlocutors as well as to follow social conventions (Leech, 1983), thus, they can be used as a remedy to transgression (Deutschmann, 2003). For this reason, apologies can be framed within the concept of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) as both the apologiser and the interlocutor's face (Goffman, 1967), which can be broadly defined as one's public self-image, play an essential role in the performance of this speech act (Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2014). Apologies can be defined in terms of politeness because they are a face-threatening-act (FTA) for the speaker (Ellis, 1994) and a face-saving-act (FSA) for the hearer (Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2014).

In the Cross-Cultural Speech Acts Realization Project (CCSARP), Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984, p. 207) identified five main steps that should be followed to apologise:

1. an explicit illocutionary force indicating device (IFID)
2. an explanation of what caused the offence
3. an expression of the speaker's responsibility
4. an offer of repair
5. a promise of forbearance

The IFID was then named head act by Leech (2014), who defined the other strategies as satellite speech events. In fact, apart from Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), other authors such as Leech (2014) and Martínez-Flor (2016) proposed their own taxonomies. The main differences among them lie in the labels used and in the addition of some subcategories such

as acknowledgement of responsibility in Martínez-Flor's (2016) taxonomy (Di Sarno-García, 2023).

According to Godwin-Jones (2019), “experiencing pragmatics directly offers learners the opportunity to add to their L2 repertoire the knowledge about expected norms in speech acts and acceptable discourse practices” (p. 11). For this reason, it is suggested that telecollaboration would be an appropriate environment for the practice of the speech act of apologies. Section 2.4 will better explore the advantages of telecollaboration for L2 pragmatic competence.

2.3. Role-plays

Grounded on social constructivism, Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development defines interaction and cooperation with peers as an effective and successful way to develop an individual's learning skills. For this reason, the data elicitation method in this study is based on role-playing tasks, which also involve negotiation of meaning (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). Despite some authors criticising its use, role-plays are a common data collection method in L2 teaching (Beltrán-Palanques, 2013; Félix-Brasdefer, 2018). Among many other reasons, role-plays are considered an adequate method as “the data obtained includes pragmalinguistic production, paralinguistic phenomena as well as repetitions, omissions, false starts, pauses, turn taking behaviour and so on” (Rodríguez Peñarroja, 2015, p. 192). In particular, the role-plays used in this study were open role-plays, which means that the outcome of the scenario cannot be controlled by the researcher but depends solely on the interlocutors themselves. In other words, the participants in the study reported here were required to apologise in a particular scenario, although the way they apologised and the length of the interaction were not controlled. In support of this stance, Halenko (2021) categorised role-plays as the closest data collection method to naturally occurring discourse.

Authors such as Sykes and González-Lloret (2020) criticised the use of role-plays because of their lack of authenticity, while others pointed out the absence of pragmatic consequences for the speaker (Golato, 2003). Despite these critiques being well founded, the context of interaction between language learners plays an essential role in the usefulness of this data collection method. In other words, previous studies demonstrated that it is unlikely that an apology occurs in a telecollaborative environment. For instance, Canto Gutierrez's (2020) analysis of spontaneous speech acts in telecollaboration demonstrated that participants used requests, greetings and leave-takings, polite formulas, and humour, but no apologies. In addition, the findings obtained by Oskoz and Gimeno-Sanz (2020) revealed learners' willingness to maintain a positive environment by avoiding criticism and hurting their counterparts' feelings. Therefore, those results justify the adequacy of role-plays as an apology eliciting method in telecollaboration.

Having said this, the task used to elicit apologies in this study will be explored in the methodology section.

2.4. Telecollaboration

Within the field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), telecollaboration is considered one of the main backbones (O'Dowd, 2011). Although there is no clear consensus on the 'umbrella' term to be used since different nomenclatures are frequently used, for the purpose of this study, the term telecollaboration will be used, taking Dooly's (2017) definition as a reference:

The process of communicating and working together with other people or groups from different locations through online or digital communication tools (e.g., computer, tablets, cellphones) to co-produce a desired work output. Telecollaboration can be carried out in a variety of settings (classroom, home, workplace, laboratory) and can be synchronous or asynchronous. In education, telecollaboration combines all of these components with a focus on learning, social interaction, dialogue, intercultural exchange and communication all of which are especially important aspects of telecollaboration in language education. (pp. 169-170)

The author of this paper prefers the term telecollaboration since it makes clear the importance of collaborating between the institutions and students involved.

Despite being under-researched, previous studies explored the affordances of telecollaboration to foster L2 pragmatic competence (e.g., Belz, 2007; Belz & Kinginger, 2002, 2003; Belz & Vyatkina, 2005; Cunningham, 2016, 2017; Gonzales, 2013; Morollón Martí & Fernández, 2016; Nuzzo & Donato, 2023; Rafieyan et al., 2014; Sykes, 2005; Vyatkina & Belz, 2006; Di Sarno-García, 2022). Some of the benefits that telecollaboration offers teaching L2 pragmatics are exposure to authentic and meaningful interactions with L2 speakers (Belz, 2007; Rafieyan et al., 2014), as well as opportunities for analysis and reflection (Sykes, 2017) as it occurs in intercultural contexts. However, "benefits continue to emerge" (Sykes, 2018, p. 124).

Because providing students with opportunities to practice the performance of speech acts in the target language (TL) is one of the main goals of foreign language teaching (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2010), it is suggested that telecollaborative projects are a suitable environment for this purpose. In fact, "gaining pragmatic competence in the L2 has increasingly been seen as one of the most important outcomes of telecollaboration" (Godwin-Jones, 2019, p. 10).

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper reports on three different six-week telecollaboration projects which involved students from various institutions, although the data analysed concerns only Spanish students. In addition, a control group that did not participate in any intercultural exchange was set. The three telecollaboration projects involved both synchronous and asynchronous interaction, although only the former will be analysed here.

3.1. Context and participants

Participants of this study were four classes of aerospace engineering students from the Universitat Politècnica de València (Spain), three of them participating in a telecollaboration project.

The first class, that is, the control group was composed of seventeen students aged between 19 years old and 21, with an average age of 20.17. They were enrolled in an optional 3rd year B2 level (CEFR) English subject of 4.5 credits. In terms of gender, 15 students were males and 2 of them were females. All of them were Spanish-speaking students except for one student who was from Latvia but had been living in Spain since childhood.

The first experimental group comprised seven students enrolled on the same subject as the control group, two of them being females and the other males. Their age ranged between 19 and 28, the average being 21.12 years of age. This group participated in a telecollaboration project with seven L1 or highly proficient speakers of English from the University of Bath (UK) who were studying different degrees and were taking an optional Spanish course that was not part of their degree.

The second experimental group included twenty-four 1st year learners enrolled in a B2 level (CEFR) Technical English subject. Regarding gender, four were females and twenty-two were males; while regarding age, they were between 18 and 28, the average age being 19.4. These students engaged in a telecollaboration project with ten learners from the University of Hawai'i (USA) who were either L1 or highly proficient speakers of English and who were enrolled in a B1 Spanish subject.

The third experimental group comprised ten students enrolled on the same subject as the control and first experimental groups. They were aged between 20 and 39, the average age of the Spanish students being 24.8, while in terms of gender, 2 were females and 8 were males. This group telecollaborated with ten students from Morgan State University (USA) who were L1 speakers of English. Their initial level of Spanish ranged between B1 and B2 (CEFR).

Three different experimental groups were set to collect a considerable sample. The researcher also planned to set a second experimental group, but due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, this was not possible.

3.2. Instruments and materials

Students from both the control group and the experimental groups completed a questionnaire on apologies in the form of pre- and post-tests, whose aim was to measure students' knowledge of performing apologies in English before and after the performance of the role-plays. It was administered via Google Forms, and it consisted of three questions aimed at gathering demographical information and ten multiple-choice questions that presented scenarios depicting different types of apologies. The following is an example:

You are at a dinner with your friends. You sneeze. How would you apologise?

- a. *I apologise.*
- b. *Sorry about that.*
- c. *I'm extremely sorry.*

The second survey that students in the experimental groups had to fill in was a pairing questionnaire, whose aim was to pair students with somebody with similar interests. It comprised eight questions written in Spanish and administered via Google Forms. A PowerPoint presentation, which included audiovisual materials, was employed to provide all learners with explicit instruction on pragmatics and apologies, as described in the following section.

As previously mentioned, the central tasks students had to carry out were a number of role-plays. Learners were expected to engage in synchronous Zoom sessions on a weekly basis, and to perform six different open role-plays (i.e., one per week). Since in open role-playing tasks the outcome is not predetermined, performance was believed to be more similar to naturally occurring speech data. Apart from the speech act of apologies, students had to perform a second speech act in every role-play. These included refusals, congratulations, and promises. This decision was taken following Taguchi's (2007) suggestion, according to whom performing a second speech act would deflect students' attention from the one under study. The following is an example of the task carried out:

Your final project degree tutor invites you to a conference at the university. However, you cannot attend it because it is the same day of your sister's wedding. You know it is an important conference, but of course, you cannot miss the wedding, so you refuse the invitation and apologise.

Four of the six role-plays presented an informal situation, while two were formal. Subsequently, students could practice different types of strategies to apologise at different levels of imposition. Furthermore, the role-plays intended to present authentic situations that learners could experience in real life, rather than artificial scenarios.

3.3. Procedure

According to Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2010), there are three main conditions needed to acquire speech acts. These are input, opportunities for output, and provision of feedback. This study attempted to provide language learners with all three, as described below.

The first step for all the participants was to complete the pre-test on apologies. After that, they all received explicit instruction on pragmatics and apologies, comprising the input. This was done because they were engineering students and lacked a linguistics background. Students were provided with a definition of pragmatics to make them aware of the importance of context and the way language should be adapted to different scenarios. Besides, the five main steps of a proper apology and different strategies to perform the head act were explained to them using a PowerPoint presentation. In addition, audiovisual materials were employed to show some examples of adequate and inadequate apologies. Some of these were used based on previous research carried out by Di Sarno-García (2018). The third step required students to read and summarise the magazine article *How to Make the Perfect Apology* (Jalili, 2018), which is based on a study by Lewicki et al. (2016). These activities were carried out in a face-to-face setting with all groups except for the second experimental group, as at that time online teaching was imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this, students in that group were asked to summarise the article individually or in pairs, while those in the other groups were expected to do it in pairs.

Afterwards, learners in the experimental groups completed the pairing questionnaire. Then, the telecollaboration project started and students engaged in weekly synchronous Zoom sessions where they were expected to perform one role-play per week. In addition, they were given free time to practice oral conversation with their English-speaking counterparts. These synchronous sessions comprised the output. Learners were in charge of recording the Zoom sessions and sharing either the video or the audio with the researcher for subsequent transcription. Providing audio-only files was allowed because some students from the collaborating institutions did not feel at ease sharing their videos. Students in group 1 worked in pairs with their counterparts from Bath, while students in group 2 worked in groups composed of 3 Spanish students and 1 North American, and students in group 3 worked either in pairs or groups composed of 1 Spanish student, one Erasmus student, and 1 North American. To avoid overloading the American partners in the second experimental group, each week a different Spanish student performed the role-play. Thus, learners in the second experimental group had less opportunities to practice the speech act of apologies and interact with their English-speaking counterparts. English-speaking students were required to provide the Spanish learners with feedback on their performance of apologies, that is, feedback in terms of strategy adequacy according to the context. On the other hand, students in the control group worked in pairs with their preferred classmates in a face-to-face context and used their mobile

phones to record the role-plays. At the end of the six weeks, students from all the groups completed the post-test on apologies.

3.4. Data gathering and analysis

Data was collected from the pre- and post-tests and the apologies were elicited through role-playing performance. Quantitative and quantitative content analyses were conducted, and descriptive statistics from each pre- and post-test were calculated. The responses obtained through each pre- and post-test were coded from the least pragmatically appropriate, which was coded with the numerical value 1, to the most appropriate, which was coded with 3. Thus, in the above-mentioned example option (a) would be 2, option (b) would be 3, and option (c) would be 1. In the case of two questions, the numerical value 2 was not assigned to any of the options as it was believed that there was only one appropriate answer. An independent researcher validated the categorisation of the responses to ensure inter-rater reliability, and an agreement was reached on 100% of the responses.

The responses from each pre-test were compared to the ones obtained in the post-test to seek any improvements after the performance of the role-plays. The statistical programme JASP (<https://jasp-stats.org/>) was used to carry out the statistical analysis. In the case of the control group, it was impossible to compare the responses given by each individual as the researcher used an anonymous survey for the pre-test. Therefore, in that case, the responses from the pre- and post-test were analysed as a group. Different statistical tests were carried out at this stage. First, a Shapiro-Wilk normality test was conducted to understand if the data was normally distributed. After that, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney T-test for independent samples was conducted to understand if there was an improvement from pre- to post-test. In this case, the data was treated as independent variables to seek any possible relation between pre- and post-test, since it was impossible to determine if the student from the pre-test was the same as the post-test because of the above-mentioned reason. The Shapiro-Wilk normality test was also conducted with the experimental groups since its outcome would indicate if the second step would be a parametric or non-parametric test. Since the data was not normally distributed, a non-parametric Wilcoxon test for paired samples was conducted with the experimental groups, as in those cases it was possible to compare the responses of each individual. Experimental groups were first analysed individually and then, as a whole. Finally, a Mann-Whitney U-test was calculated to analyse the results obtained in the post-test of the control group and the experimental group as a whole.

On the other hand, since the Zoom sessions were transcribed, the strategies used by students to apologise were coded following a taxonomy collated from the ones proposed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), Leech (2014), and Martínez-Flor (2016), as reported in a previous study (Di Sarno-García, 2023). The main difference with the three above-mentioned taxonomies is that it includes an extra category of L1 strategies as “it seems unlikely not to

have L1 transferred strategies” (Di Sarno-García, 2023, p. 112) in L2 teaching contexts. To code the strategies, instances of the ones employed were identified, counted, and classified following the categories proposed in the taxonomy. The qualitative data was quantified and, therefore, a quantitative content analysis was carried out. Table 1 below illustrates the taxonomy employed:

Table 1. Apology taxonomy used for the analysis.

Strategy	Type	Example
IFID/head act	Expression of speaker’s regret	<i>(Be) sorry</i> <i>I regret</i>
	Asking hearer’s pardon or forgiveness	<i>Excuse me</i> <i>Pardon me</i> <i>Forgive me</i>
	Using a performative utterance	<i>I apologise</i> <i>I beg your pardon</i>
Expression of responsibility	Explicit self-blame	<i>It was my fault</i>
	Denial of fault	<i>It wasn’t my fault</i>
Explanation of why the fault occurred		<i>I can’t attend your party because I have to study</i>
Offer of repair		<i>I’ll pay for the reparation</i>
Promise of forbearance		<i>It won’t happen again</i>
Apology intensification	Concern for the hearer	<i>I know it is important for you</i>
	Intensifier/modifier	Adverbials: <i>very, terribly, really, so, etc.</i>
		Repetitions: <i>I’m really, really sorry</i>
L1 transfer apologies		<i>I hope you understand</i>

The last step was to calculate the Pearson correlation coefficient to explore the relationship between the number of strategies used to apologise by each learner and the mean score obtained in the post-test, as well as to investigate the relationship between the number of role-plays performed by each student and the mean score obtained in the post-test.

4. RESULTS

This section focuses on the results obtained from the data analysis carried out. The descriptive statistics reveal a trend toward improvement in the mean from pre- to post-test in all the experimental groups, as can be observed in Table 2 below which illustrates the descriptive statistics of the individual analysis of each experimental group. In particular, in group 1 an improvement can be observed in 6 out of 10 items, while a regression was observed only in item 2, and items 4, 5, and 10 showed no variation from pre- to post-test. Group 2 improved in 5 out of 10 items and a regression was noted in 3 items, while 2 items did not show variation from pre- to post-test. Group 3, on the contrary, improved in 6 out of 10 items, while there was no variation from pre- to post-test in items 2, 5, and 8, and a regression was observed in item 9.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the three experimental groups.

		Group 1		Group 2			Group 3		
		M	SD		M	SD		M	SD
Item 1	Pre-test	2.857	0.378	Pre-test	2.769	0.514	Pre-test	2.556	0.726
	Post-test	3.000	0.000	Post-test	2.615	0.697	Post-test	2.889	0.333
Item 2	Pre-test	3.000	0.000	Pre-test	3.000	0.000	Pre-test	3.000	0.000
	Post-test	2.714	0.756	Post-test	2.769	0.652	Post-test	3.000	0.000
Item 3	Pre-test	2.143	1.069	Pre-test	2.115	0.993	Pre-test	1.667	1.000
	Post-test	2.429	0.976	Post-test	2.385	0.941	Post-test	2.111	1.054
Item 4	Pre-test	3.000	0.000	Pre-test	2.769	0.430	Pre-test	2.667	0.500
	Post-test	3.000	0.000	Post-test	2.923	0.272	Post-test	2.778	0.441
Item 5	Pre-test	3.000	0.000	Pre-test	3.000	0.000	Pre-test	3.000	0.000
	Post-test	3.000	0.000	Post-test	3.000	0.000	Post-test	3.000	0.000
Item 6	Pre-test	2.143	0.690	Pre-test	2.231	0.863	Pre-test	1.889	0.928
	Post-test	2.571	0.787	Post-test	2.577	0.578	Post-test	2.000	0.707
Item 7	Pre-test	2.857	0.378	Pre-test	2.769	0.652	Pre-test	2.778	0.667
	Post-test	3.000	0.000	Post-test	2.846	0.368	Post-test	2.889	0.333
Item 8	Pre-test	2.857	0.378	Pre-test	2.846	0.368	Pre-test	3.000	0.000
	Post-test	3.000	0.000	Post-test	2.885	0.431	Post-test	3.000	0.000
Item 9	Pre-test	2.857	0.378	Pre-test	2.885	0.326	Pre-test	3.000	0.000
	Post-test	3.000	0.000	Post-test	2.962	0.196	Post-test	2.889	0.333
Item 10	Pre-test	2.000	0.577	Pre-test	2.115	0.588	Pre-test	1.889	0.782
	Post-test	2.000	1.000	Post-test	2.038	0.662	Post-test	2.000	0.500

When the three groups were analysed as a whole, the descriptive statistics reported similar results, as can be seen in Table 3 below. An improvement was observed in 6 out of 10 items in this case as well, while items 1 and 5 showed no variation from pre- to post-test, and a regression was observed in item 2. In particular, the highest improvement was observed in the mean score of items 3 and 6.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the three groups as a whole.

		M	SD
Item 1	Pre-test	2.738	0.544
	Post-test	2.738	0.587
Item 2	Pre-test	3.000	0.000
	Post-test	2.810	0.594
Item 3	Pre-test	2.024	1.000
	Post-test	2.333	0.954
Item 4	Pre-test	2.786	0.415
	Post-test	2.905	0.297
Item 5	Pre-test	3.000	0.000
	Post-test	3.000	0.000
Item 6	Pre-test	2.143	0.843
	Post-test	2.452	0.670
Item 7	Pre-test	2.786	0.606
	Post-test	2.881	0.328
Item 8	Pre-test	2.881	0.328
	Post-test	2.929	0.342
Item 9	Pre-test	2.905	0.297
	Post-test	2.952	0.216
Item 10	Pre-test	2.048	0.623
	Post-test	2.024	0.680

The results of the Wilcoxon test for paired samples showed that there were no statistically significant differences from pre- to post-test as $p > 0.05$. Nevertheless, in line with the descriptive statistics results, findings from items 3 and 6 demonstrate that p is closer to 0.05 than in the other items (see Table 4 below). This corroborates the fact that there was a higher degree of improvement in the answers given to questions 3 and 6 of the apology questionnaire.

Table 4. Results from the Wilcoxon test of the experimental groups.

	W	p
Item 1	61.000	0.976
Item 2	-	
Item 3	37.000	0.080
Item 4	10.000	0.110
Item 6	79000	0.064
Item 7	14.000	0.326
Item 8	5.000	0.572
Item 9	7.000	0.484
Item 10	90.000	0.846

Regarding the control group, the descriptive statistics shown in Table 5 below reveal that students scored better in the post-test in 4 out of 10 items, while a regression was observed in 5 items and 1 did not show variation from pre- to post-test. Therefore, these results seem to suggest that students in the experimental groups outperformed those in the control group in terms of apology acquisition.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of the control group.

		M	SD
Item 1	Pre-test	2.762	0.539
	Post-test	2.647	0.786
Item 2	Pre-test	2.810	0.512
	Post-test	3.000	0.000
Item 3	Pre-test	2.048	1.024
	Post-test	2.294	0.985
Item 4	Pre-test	2.810	0.402
	Post-test	2.824	0.393
Item 5	Pre-test	2.905	0.436
	Post-test	2.882	0.485
Item 6	Pre-test	2.524	0.750
	Post-test	2.353	0.931
Item 7	Pre-test	2.952	0.218
	Post-test	2.824	0.529
Item 8	Pre-test	2.667	0.577
	Post-test	2.706	0.588
Item 9	Pre-test	3.000	0.000
	Post-test	2.941	0.243
Item 10	Pre-test	1.952	0.740
	Post-test	2.235	0.664

In line with this, the Mann-Whitney T-test for independent samples revealed that $p > 0.05$ in all cases. Therefore, it can be claimed that there are no statistically significant changes from pre- to post-test in the control group, as can be seen in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Mann-Whitney T-test for independent samples of the control group.

	W	p
Item 1	180.500	0.948
Item 2	-	
Item 3	156.500	0.461
Item 4	176.000	0.930
Item 5	180.500	0.909
Item 6	190.500	0.687
Item 7	191.500	0.433
Item 8	170.500	0.775
Item 9	-	
Item 10	141.000	0.237

The comparison of the mean scores obtained in the post-test by the control group and the experimental group corroborates that the latter slightly outperformed the former in terms of apology acquisition, as can be seen in Table 7. The experimental group scored higher in all items except for items 2 and 10, thus revealing a higher trend toward improvement in the students who participated in a telecollaboration project. Furthermore, the results from the Mann-Whitney U test demonstrated that $p < 0.05$ in item 8, which means that it is statistically significant.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics of the comparison between the control group and the experimental group.

		M	SD
Item 1	Post-test control group	2.647	0.786
	Post-test experimental group	2.738	0.587
Item 2	Post-test control group	3.000	0.000
	Post-test experimental group	2.810	0.594
Item 3	Post-test control group	2.294	0.985
	Post-test experimental group	2.333	0.954
Item 4	Post-test control group	2.824	0.393

	Post-test experimental group	2.905	0.297
Item 5	Post-test control group	2.882	0.485
	Post-test experimental group	3.000	0.000
Item 6	Post-test control group	2.353	0.931
	Post-test experimental group	2.452	0.670
Item 7	Post-test control group	2.824	0.529
	Post-test experimental group	2.881	0.328
Item 8	Post-test control group	2.706	0.588
	Post-test experimental group	2.929	0.342
Item 9	Post-test control group	2.941	0.243
	Post-test experimental group	2.952	0.216
Item 10	Post-test control group	2.235	0.664
	Post-test experimental group	2.024	0.680

Regarding the quantitative content analysis, Table 8 illustrates the results obtained. One similarity between the four groups was observed, i.e., that the most used strategy was that of expression of speaker's regret (e.g., I'm sorry; sorry about...; etc.). In addition to this, the control group was the one that employed a performative utterance the most, while being the one that used asking hearer's pardon or forgiveness the least. The control group was also the one who provided an explanation of why the fault occurred the most, as opposed to the first experimental group who used this strategy the least. Despite this, the first experimental group was the one that provided an offer of repair more frequently, and the one who used apology intensification the most, either by showing concern for the hearer or by employing intensifiers such as "I'm terribly sorry". Regarding the second experimental group, the main difference is that it was the one that provided a promise of forbearance the most, as opposed to the control group that was the one that used this strategy the least. The second experimental group was also the one that asked hearer's pardon or forgiveness as a head act the most, as opposed to the control group. Concerning the third experimental group, this was the one where students expressed responsibility the least. As can be observed in Table 8, a small percentage of strategies was transferred from learners' L1 (i.e., Spanish). This finding was analysed in (Di Sarno-García, 2023).

Table 8. Results from the quantitative content analysis.

Strategy	Type	Control group		First experimental group		Second experimental group		Third experimental group	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
IFID/head act	Expression of speaker's regret	4	38.54	49	26.77	59	31.06	43	35.25
	Asking hearer's pardon or forgiveness	1	0.52	3	1.64	4	2.10	2	1.64
	Using a performative utterance	11	5.73	5	2.73	4	2.10	5	4.10
Expression of responsibility	Explicit self-blame	7	3.65	4	2.19	7	3.68	2	1.64
	Denial of fault	1	0.52	1	0.55	0	0	0	0
Explanation of why the fault occurred		41	21.35	28	15.30	36	18.95	23	18.85
Offer of repair		15	7.81	17	9.29	15	7.89	9	7.38
Promise of forbearance		8	4.17	16	8.74	22	11.58	8	6.56
Apology intensification	Concern for the hearer	4	2.08	12	6.56	11	5.79	3	2.46
	Intensifier/modifier	26	13.54	38	20.77	29	15.26	24	19.67
L1 transfer		4	2.09	10	5.46	3	1.59	3	2.45
Total N of strategies		192		183		190		123	
Total N of role-plays		50		31		38		25	
N of participants		17		7		26		6	

The most outstanding difference between the four groups is that the control group produced 192 strategies in 50 role-plays, while the first experimental group produced almost the same amount of strategies (i.e., 183) in 31 role-plays. The second experimental group also used almost the same number of strategies as the control group, but in 38 role-plays, while the third experimental group employed 123 in half the amount of role-plays compared to the control group (i.e., 25). This remarkable difference can be evidence of the experimental groups' higher degree of improvement in terms of apology acquisition, as the findings reveal that they used a wide range of strategies to apologise compared to the control group.

This claim is supported by the results obtained from the Pearson correlation coefficient as the correlation between the number of strategies employed by each student and their mean score in the post-test was statistically significant where $R=0.440$ and $p=0.01$. Similarly, the Pearson correlation coefficient between the number of role-plays performed by each student and the mean score obtained in the post-test by each learner showed a statistically significant correlation where $R=0.430$ and $p=0.002$. These results indicate that the students who used a wider repertoire of strategies during role-play performance obtained better scores in the post-test. Therefore, this supports the fact that students in the experimental groups slightly outperformed those in the control group in the apology questionnaire, as well as the fact that they also used a wide array of strategies as compared to the control group.

5. DISCUSSION

Despite being one of the main components of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), the limited body of research that analyses how pragmatic competence could be implemented through technology is surprising (Belz, 2007; Khaerudin, 2012; Eslami et al., 2015; González-Lloret, 2019; Sydorenko et al., 2020). Because of this, this study intended to cover a gap in existing literature, that is, the effect of telecollaboration on the acquisition of apologies by Spanish learners of English.

Regarding RQ1 Will there be any differences in terms of apology performance between the four groups of participants? If so, which ones? The most used strategy was expression of speaker's regret (i.e., sorry, I'm sorry, etc.) in all four groups. This could be interpreted as a positive result, as according to the British National Corpus (Deutschmann, 2003) most of the strategies produced by L1 speakers of English contained the word sorry. These results confirm those previously obtained by Halenko (2021), who used a similar taxonomy to analyse her data. In addition, the control group in the present study was the one that used intensifiers less frequently, which also corroborates Halenko's (2021) findings. Nevertheless, the results of the present study differ from those obtained by Halenko (2021) in terms of explanation of why the fault occurred since her results demonstrated that the control group was the one that used this strategy the least, while the opposite was found in the present study.

As mentioned in the results section, the most relevant difference rests in the number of strategies produced by each group, since the experimental groups employed a more extensive range of apologies compared to the control group. According to Sabaté i Dalmau and Curell i Gotor (2007), using a wide range of apology strategies could be a feature of high-level proficiency learners, and therefore these findings could imply that the L2 pragmatic system of the learners in the experimental group improved to a greater extent as opposed to that of the control group. This is likely to have happened thanks to the experimental group's interaction with L1 or highly proficient speakers of English. This claim is supported by the results of the Pearson correlation coefficient which demonstrated that those learners who used a wide array

of strategies to apologise were the ones that scored the highest in the post-test, and therefore those who were able to grasp the most pragmatically appropriate ways to apologise. In other words, the fact that the experimental groups slightly outperformed the control group in the post-test results correlates with the fact that they were more prolific when performing the apologies.

This leads to RQ2: Will there be any difference in the post-test questionnaire between the four groups of participants? If so, why? A tendency toward improvement was observed in all the experimental groups, in particular, in the first and third experimental groups as they scored higher in the post-test in 6 out of 10 items. This could imply that for a telecollaboration project to be beneficial for students they should work in dyads rather than in groups. These findings corroborate the ones from a previous study by (Di Sarno-García, in press), which analysed the impact of work modality (i.e., in pairs or in groups). In Di Sarno-García (in press) the author found evidence that there is a correlation between the number of strategies used to apologise by each speaker and their work modality, thus suggesting that the ones who worked in pairs outperformed those who worked in groups. The fact that the results of the present study were not statistically significant could be due to the small sample as it is not likely to find statistically significant results with a sample size smaller than 30 participants. These results are in line with the above-mentioned findings, which suggest that the first and third experimental groups outperformed both the control group and the second experimental group. In addition, the results reported in Table 7 above illustrate how the three experimental groups as a whole outperformed the control group in 8 out of 10 items. The differences found between the four groups can be due to the amount of interaction with L1 speakers of English. As previously stated, learners in the second experimental group had less opportunities to practice role-playing tasks with their virtual partners due to the group configuration, as opposed to students in the first and third experimental groups. Furthermore, they did not have the same opportunity to practice oral conversation either, as when participating in a group conversation the time for interaction is more limited than in pairs. It is argued that for this reason these two experimental groups outperformed the second in terms of strategy production and questionnaire results. The same might apply to the control group that carried out the task with Spanish partners in a face-to-face setting.

These findings partially support Sykes' (2005) earlier findings regarding the impact that written chat, oral chat, and face-to-face interaction had on the development of North American students' pragmatic competence in Spanish and, in particular, on the acquisition of refusals. In that case, role-plays were used as pre- and post-test. The findings showed that while all groups improved overall, the written conversation group performed better than the other two groups "in terms of complexity and variety" (Sykes, 2005, p. 420). As previously stated, in the present study all the experimental groups also improved to some extent, however, they also outperformed the face-to-face group (i.e., the control group). Rafieyan et al. (2014)

also obtained similar results as they claimed that, in contrast to the control group which scored lower on the pragmatic comprehension test, telecollaboration had a significantly positive impact on the experimental group's development of pragmatic comprehension. Halenko's (2021) findings also align with those of the present study in that, compared to the control group, the two experimental groups in her research generated more adequate apologies. Nonetheless, comparisons with Halenko's (2021) should be made cautiously because her research was conducted in a study-abroad context.

6. CONCLUSION

Despite being one of the main components of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), the limited body of research that analyses how pragmatic competence could be implemented through technology is surprising (Belz, 2007; Khaerudin, 2012; Eslami et al., 2015; González-Lloret, 2019; Sydorenko et al., 2020). Because of this, this study intended to cover a gap in existing literature, that is, the effect of telecollaboration on the acquisition of apologies by Spanish learners of English.

The purpose of this paper was to explore the affordances of role-playing tasks in telecollaboration projects to help Spanish-speaking students in their acquisition of the speech act of apology. The results from pre- and post-test comparisons have shown that, although not statistically significant, the three experimental groups tended to improve after their engagement in telecollaboration. In particular, the first and third experimental groups were the ones that obtained the best results in the post-test. A possible explanation for this might be that learners in those groups collaborated with their English-speaking counterparts in dyads and, thus, they had more opportunities to practice the speech act under study with TL speakers and to practice oral conversation with them. The findings of the quantitative content analysis of the strategies employed align with this, in that the first experimental group was the one that used a wider repertoire of strategies to apologise, as opposed to the control group that was the one that used less strategies. In line with this, the descriptive statistics of the control group revealed that an improvement from pre- to post-test was observed in 4 questions out of 10. This supports the idea that the more practice in a telecollaboration project, the better. Notwithstanding, it does not mean that quantity is preferred over quality. What is argued here is that to learn how to perform apologies in English, students need to receive instruction and to put it into practice with highly proficient or L1 speakers of the TL. Moreover, role-plays have been heavily criticised for their lack of authenticity, however, it would have been very unlikely to be able to collect instances of students using the speech act of apologies in a telecollaborative environment without providing pushed input (i.e., the role-plays). Therefore, the results verify the adequacy of role-playing tasks to practice apologies and acquire pragmatic competence in telecollaboration.

One of the limitations of the present study is that, although English-speaking students were required to give feedback to their Spanish counterparts, only a few of them did so. Therefore, Spanish learners lacked one of the main conditions for the acquisition of speech acts. This may have possibly been due to students feeling that ‘correcting’ their partners was face-threatening or could potentially sound rude, thus they avoided providing feedback in terms of apology performance. Future studies should try to emphasise the importance of feedback and scaffolding when carrying out telecollaboration projects, as well as the role of students as pedagogical mentors. Researchers should consider designing pre-telecollaboration tasks to teach learners how to provide feedback to their partners, and thus analyse its effect on speech act acquisition since previous studies have demonstrated the crucial role of feedback for L2 pragmatic acquisition (González-Lloret, 2022). Furthermore, recent studies such as Tsubota et al. (2023) confirmed the effectiveness of pre-telecollaboration training courses on learners’ willingness to communicate. The second limitation is the small sample size, which could be the reason why, despite showing a tendency toward improvement, the results from the quantitative analysis of the experimental groups were not statistically significant. Besides, the fact that participants in the second experimental group had fewer chances to perform the role-plays could have negatively affected the results obtained. The third shortcoming is the level of difficulty of the questionnaire used a pre- and post-test. The fact that some items did not show any variation from pre- to post-test could imply that those items were ‘too easy’ for the students. Hence, future research should elaborate on these items to increase the degree of difficulty. Nevertheless, the other items posed a challenge to the language learners as none of the participants scored 10 out of 10 in the questionnaire.

Despite its limitations, the findings of the present study show that telecollaborative environments can be an appropriate setting for the practice of speech acts with TL speakers, and thus, it has shed some light on an under-researched area in CALL.

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