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Understanding vicarious participation in online language learning

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Understanding vicarious participation in online language learning

Online environments afford opportunities for participation, but equally offer a new perspective on engaging vicariously. Drawing on the concept of vicarious learning and taking account of the roles of input and interaction for language development this paper reports on an enquiry into students' retrospective use of recorded group tutorials. It is the first to investigate in what ways indirect participation in interactive online sessions may mediate second language learning. The study harnesses user-analytic and assessment data (n=964) and explores learner perception through semi-structured interviews (n=13) to increase our understanding of who uses tutorial recordings and to what perceived linguistic and motivational benefit. It argues that recorded group tutorials may support language learning by encouraging deep engagement with interactional input. This is relevant to educational practice in distance education institutions, MOOCs and SPOCs as well as to our understanding of language learning as a cognitive and social activity.

Keywords: vicarious; language learning; online learning; tutorial recordings; synchronous tuition; sociocognitive

1 Introduction

The past 20 years have seen a dramatic increase in educational opportunities for direct engagement in online tutorials. At the Open University in the UK the first pilot studies of synchronous online tuition took place from 1998 onwards (Shield, Hauck & Hewer, 2001); in the academic year 2018/19 a total of 24,154 online sessions were offered to students across all Faculties. This is relevant for language learners to whom online environments offer opportunities for interaction and collaboration which go beyond the affordances of the traditional language classroom (Levy & Stockwell, 2006; Felix, 2006; Hampel, 2006, 2014; Sun, 2018). Although a distinction is usually made between synchronous and asynchronous interaction, most online communication can be recorded and subsequently accessed by learners in their own time. Recordings of synchronous small group tutorials for languages will give access to all aural and visual content of the synchronous session and may make the retrospective viewer feel almost as if they were there. This article focuses on learners who make use of such recordings to support their learning.

<insert Figure 1>

The actual practice of providing recordings of group tutorials is a subject of intense discussion, and some lecturers believe that the practice is not only not beneficial but could be positively harmful in an online language learning context. The arguments center mostly around the idea that tutorials are private spaces for discussing and testing out ideas and need to serve live attenders first and foremost (Campbell, 2018). There are other concerns as well, including lecturers feeling their property rights might be jeopardized if their tutorials are made public or the recordings might be used for quality control purposes without their consent (The Open University, 2018a). Student consultations, on the other hand, tend to show substantial support for recording tutorials

(The Open University, 2018b, 2019; Brown, 2019) – a conflict of opinion which is interestingly reflected in sector-wide discussions around lecture capture (Owston, Lupsenyuk & Wideman, 2011; Leadbeater *et al.*, 2013; Edwards & Clinton, 2019; Nordmann *et al.*, 2019). The present article argues that, in many institutions, such discussions are currently under-theorized and that the pedagogic value of capturing either lecture-style events or small-group interactive tutorials, especially for language learning, needs to be examined more closely.

2 Recording small group tutorials

While lecture capture has become routine in many higher education institutions, the question of whether to provide recordings of small group tutorials certainly poses a conundrum: considering that tutorials are aimed at promoting language learning and cultural understanding through active participation and interactive use of the target language, it is not immediately obvious how learners can benefit from listening to the event in retrospect. In addition, considerations of privacy in online environments need to be given due consideration. There is, however, a lack of awareness that previous educational research into recorded tutorials in engineering and social science subjects as well as studies into classroom-based *language* learning point to significant benefits of learning through vicarious participation in tutor-student or student-student interaction (McKendree *et al.*, 1998; Craig *et al.*, 2000; Chi *et al.* 2001; Ohta 2001, Lee 2005; Mayes, 2015; Fernández-Dobao, 2016). There has so far been little research exploring vicarious language learning in audiographic online settings, which the present enquiry is addressing. This article is timely as spoken interaction online is rapidly becoming part of language education in many learning contexts - even more so since the move to online learning has been accelerating in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lau,

2020). The findings are relevant to higher education institutions, distance learning providers as well as open online courses such as Massive open online courses (MOOCs) or Small private online courses (SPOCs).

3 Literature review

3.1 Vicarious learning as a psychological construct

The concept of vicarious learning was developed by psychologist Albert Bandura and others who showed that human functioning is directly or indirectly socially mediated as people not only learn through stimulus and response (as had been suggested in previous behaviorist theories) but also through observing the interactions around them (Bandura 1965, 1971). In this view, the self is shaped in transactional experiences with the environment and learning is both a cognitive and social activity. Studies of vicarious learning led to the development of Bandura's social cognitive theory which is based on an agentic perspective seeing the human mind as generative, creative, proactive and reflective (Bandura 2001, 2006). In second language learning research too, learner agency has become a vital construct (van Lier, 2009; Vitanova *et al.*, 2015) and a learner's ability to self-regulate and take responsibility for their own learning is seen as instrumental to achieving their learning goals. Vicarious learning involves intentionality and an awareness of learning from the interactions of others and arises from the cognitive processing of a social event. The present study uses Lee's (2005, p. 1958) definition of vicarious learning as its starting point: "Vicarious learning arises in situations where a learning experience is witnessed as a learning experience by another learner".

3.2 Vicarious learning in online and blended contexts

The value of recorded tutor-student interaction was previously explored by educational researchers who were trying to revive the central role tutorial dialogue historically played for learning in higher education (discussed in Mayes, 2015). Dialogue can serve to articulate and externalize the learning process and watching recordings of peers who are also still learning has been shown to lead to deep learning gains (Craig *et. al.*, 2000; Lee, 2005; Mayes, 2015). Although sometimes direct participants learn more, occasionally, vicarious participants outperform those who interact directly, which is ascribed to limited cognitive processing capacities meaning listeners have more attentional resources at their disposal than direct participants who are engaged in selecting and formulating responses (Bandura, 1971). Such findings are highly relevant to language learning contexts, in which second language speakers may have to muster all their attentional resources to participate in target-language interactions. Vicarious learning also depends on how engaged the vicarious participant is. Conditions where tutorial recordings are observed jointly or where listeners are asked to self-explain have been shown to lead to more learning (Chi *et al.*, 2001). Lee (2005) emphasizes the empathic response vicarious learners often show towards live attenders, which is pertinent to the current enquiry into distance language learners who often lack sufficient contact with tutor or peers and, as a consequence, may experience low self-efficacy (Hurd 2006, 2008). Research into motivation in language learning points to the importance of role-models (Dörnyei and Kubanova, 2014), and researchers exploring learner agency in language learning see strong links between the cognitive and motivational benefits of vicarious participation (Mills, 2014, p.78).

Vicarious experiences, or the appraisal of abilities in relation to the accomplishments of peers, are an additional source of self-efficacy beliefs.

Visualizing the successes of comparable individuals in terms of age, level, and ability can raise a person's efficacy beliefs by fostering the belief that s/he could also master comparable tasks.

There is also a substantial body of research into the learning potential of asynchronous forum discussions, which are a part of online or blended courses in many subjects including languages (Chun, 1994; Warschauer, 1996; Salmon, 2000, 2011). In forums, vicarious participation through reading the discussions tends to be very much higher than active participation, and the phenomenon of 'lurking' has been discussed widely (Nonnecke & Preece, 2001; Levy and Stockwell, 2006; Bax and Pegrum, 2009; Salmon, 2011; Shafie, Yaacob & Singh, 2016). Although the word itself has negative connotations, there is a need for a more nuanced understanding. Bax & Pegrum (2009) refer to the potential benefits of lurking in forums in terms of enabling learning through reflection and observation, and they identify practical, social/cultural and linguistic/discursive reasons for non-participation. Levy & Stockwell (2006) believe that, in forums related to language learning, lack of confidence or competence in the language is often a reason for not contributing actively. Salmon (2000, 2011) sees browsing as a possible first stage before more active involvement while Smith & Smith (2014) call on institutions to recognize passive engagement as a valid way of learning.

Finally, current discussions around lecture capture are relevant to the present study in terms of the learning opportunities afforded through accessing live events in retrospect, and in terms of exploring how recordings could be incorporated into a meaningful and pedagogically informed concept for online or blended learning in higher education in future. Empirical and theoretical investigations of the potential usefulness of lecturecasts suggest that accessing different media may lead to deeper learning gains and recordings could help lessen anxiety and give students more control over their

learning (Owston, Lupsenyuk & Wideman, 2011). However, lectures in higher education largely follow an instructivist approach to learning, and most lecturecasts are monologues and offer few opportunities for vicarious participation. Much of the research into lecture capture focuses on the relationship between recording use and assessment and arrives at conflicting results. Owsten, Lupsenyuk and Wideman (2011) at York University in Toronto found that it is mostly low achieving students who benefit from lecture capture. At the University of Birmingham in the UK, Leadbeater et al. (2013) show that students make extensive use of recorded lectures, without, however, any demonstrable effect on their attainment and with the danger that a small proportion of students are becoming overly reliant on the availability of recordings. Edwards & Clinton (2019) warn of the pitfalls of lecturecasts, which, according to the authors, have led to a decline in attendance and attainment, while Nordmann *et al.* (2019) find recording use to be a positive predictor of study success.

3.3 Direct vs. indirect participation in language learning

When looking at vicarious participation specifically in language learning contexts, it is pertinent to revisit the roles that input, output and interaction are thought to play in language development. While the importance of output and interaction is well established in cognitive interactionist theories of language learning (Long, 1996; Gass, 1997, 2003; Myles, Mitchell and Marsden, 2013); input continues to be accorded an essential role in language acquisition. Saito and Hanzawa (2018) recently showed that intentionally accessing more input led to increased oral proficiency in university students, and time spent with input, task repetition, and frequency of exposure have all been related to language learning gains (Bygate, 2013; Ellis, 2015). Some researchers have also highlighted the potential of *indirect* participation in second language

interactions. Slimani (1989) found that listeners in an English class recalled more language from tutor-student interactions than direct participants, and that aspects topicalized by other students resulted in better uptake than those topicalized by the teacher. Breen (2001) describes how all classroom learners participate in social activity, even silently, and points to a lack of evidence that higher levels of participation lead to higher levels of productive competence (Breen, 2001; Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

Sociocultural theorists maintain that learning arises in interaction as meaning and social context are co-constructed between interlocutors, thereby making social interaction a prerequisite for any language development to occur (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). At the same time, these researchers, too, acknowledge the importance of covert learner activity for language processing. Savile Troike (1988) warns that we should not assume that nothing of significance is happening unless learners are talking to others, Lantolf & Thorne (2006) find offline-processing to be beneficial for internalization, and Swain (2010) sees ‘*linguaging*’ as a cognitive tool in both social and private speech. In an extensive classroom study, Ohta (2001, p. 79) demonstrates that overhearers learn from correct and deviant input and “unencumbered by the demands of production” have more attentional resources at their disposal and may notice more language than direct participants. She argues that processing constraints in direct interaction may prevent learners from attending fully to the linguistic input they receive (Ohta, 2001). Later, she explores how adult learners self-regulate and work within their zone of proximal development (ZPD) by harnessing mediational tools before, during and after social interaction because the interactions themselves offer limited opportunities for learning (Ohta 2005, 2010). The question of whether language learners can focus on meaning and form at the same time is still being debated (Morgan-Short *et al.*, 2018), but there is much evidence supporting the view that interactants

normally give primacy to meaning and that there are limits to what a learner can attend to in real time (Van Patten, 2015). Fernández Dobao (2016, p.55) finds that language-related episodes (LREs) in communicative contexts are beneficial to direct and indirect participants and argues that, in classroom setups where learners are sometimes allowed to disengage from overt participation, a private space emerges, “a space in which the silent learner through subvocal private speech, can repeat, manipulate and internalize the vocabulary afforded by the interaction”.

There is currently no research which explores indirect participation in spoken online language tutorials, and this is the gap the present enquiry aims to address. In contrast to classroom learners who are immersed in the interactions they observe, participants in this study are often working on their own while retrospectively accessing the, arguably, disembodied environment of the online classroom (Hampel, 2006). It is therefore highly pertinent to explore whether they, too, perceive benefits to their language learning or describe any of the processes previously identified in classroom studies (Ohta, 2001; Fernandez Dobao, 2016). The enquiry was conducted from a sociocognitive perspective (Batstone, 2010) as vicarious learning, by its very nature, operates at the interface of the cognitive and the social. The idea of learning languages by drawing on the affordances of the learning environment and the interactions we witness (Ohta, 2001), the relevance of interpersonal and intrapersonal speech (Dufva & Aro, 2015), the essential role of learner agency and self-efficacy beliefs for study success (Bandura, 2006) as well as the sociocognitive construct of alignment (Lee, 2005; Atkinson, 2014) were fundamental concepts to harness.

This article explores answers to two research questions related to accessing online group tutorials for language learning.

1. What are the perceived benefits for language learning of accessing recorded tutorials?
2. What affective or motivational benefits do learners report?

4 Research context

The research which is reported here was carried out at the Open University, the largest distance learning provider in the UK. Students are mature adult learners who often combine their studies with work and/or family commitments. Students register for a degree programme (e.g. BA Language Studies) and then study on a module-by-module basis. Undergraduate modules are classified as Level 1, 2 or 3 which is academically equivalent to first, second and third year of study although part-time learners will typically spread out their study over a longer time period. Part-time distance students often face difficulties in accommodating conflicting obligations (Rovai, 2003; Sataporn & Lamb, 2005), and the language modules investigated here make high demands on the learners who work their way through comprehensive study materials and complete assessments at regular intervals. Learners are encouraged to interact and collaborate online with their peers, but many express the belief that developing interactive skills is a challenge in a distance learning environment. Although, as distance learners, Open University students study independently, they are supported by a tutor and have opportunities to attend small-group interactive tutorials, some of which are offered face-to-face, but the majority are online, delivered through the AdobeConnect audio-synchronous voice conferencing tool. Attendance at tutorials is not obligatory and not all students make use of the tutorial provision. Some tutorials are recorded and made available to listen to in retrospect.

5 Method

The study used a mixed-methods embedded design (Ivankova & Cresswell) to explore patterns of recording use as well as learner perception of indirect participation. The study took place in the academic year 2017-18.

5.1 Sample selection

Sampling was performed at two levels:

1. Selection of modules for cohort-wide data analysis

Four undergraduate modules across three languages and levels were selected to ensure a wide coverage, and a total of 964 students were studying these modules. Table 1 provides information regarding student numbers by module, language level (Common European Framework for Reference, CEFR) and the use of live and recorded tutorials within each module.

<insert Table 1>

2. Selection of interview participants

13 interview participants were recruited from these modules in a ‘nested research design’ (Gray, 2014). The call for participants went to all 102 students from the four modules who met two criteria: they had accessed tutorial recordings in their study year, and they had not been contacted too often previously for other research projects, following university guidelines to avoid ‘overresearching’ individual students. Table 2 provides information about interview participants. Participants had accessed between 1 and 12 recordings during their study year, and all of them had also attended at least one live tutorial. Two participants exclusively accessed recordings of events which they had previously attended live, and, conversely, five participants exclusively accessed recordings of events which they had not attended live. Six participants did both, i.e. they

sometimes went back to re-listen to tutorials they had attended, and they sometimes accessed additional tutorials, which they had not attended live.

<insert Table 2>

5.2 Data collection and analysis

Permissions to access the data needed for this study were sought from the University's Student Research Project Panel and from individual module chairs and tutors. The author then accessed the four module websites to extract student-level user analytic information regarding attendance at online tutorials and access to recordings in 2017-18. The university's statistics team provided additional cohort data, including assessment results. Face-to-face attendance records were extracted from the tutorial booking system. Quantitative data were analysed within SPSS using appropriate descriptive and inferential techniques.

Qualitative data were derived from 35-50 min semi-structured online interviews with the 13 participants. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed before being uploaded to NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The data were coded and analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

6 User analytics

6.1 Live attendances and recording views

All students in the modules had the opportunity to attend live tutorials, or to access recordings of live tutorials, or to do both. A cross-tabulation of live attendance and recording use shows a highly significant link between the two activities. Live attenders are much more likely to access recordings than students who do not attend live (chi-square=63.887, df=1, p<.001).

<insert Table 3>

This is further illustrated in Figure 2, in which the term ‘vicarious attender’ is used for students who accessed recordings.

<insert Figure 2>

While some students only ever access recordings and never attend live, 76% of recording users are also live attenders, thereby combining live and vicarious attendance to support their learning. Some studies into lecture capture at traditional universities indicate that students access recordings instead of attending live (Edwards and Clinton, 2019), but this is not the case in this distance learning environment where the link between live attendance and recording use also extends to the strength of engagement with recordings, i.e. students who attend more live online sessions also access more recordings ($r=.319$, $df=191$, $p<.001$). This is shown in the scatterplot in figure 3 which plots live online attendances and recording use for each student who attended live at least once and accessed at least one recording. Each circle represents one or more students, the bottom line consists of students who attended live once. The diagram also indicates the position of interview participants to provide further context to the qualitative findings which will be reported in sections 6-8. For example, Rae attended twenty-five live tutorials and accessed twelve recordings.

<Insert Figure 3>

5.2 Assessment data

Studies of lecture capture in higher education arrive at conflicting results in terms of the relationship between recording use and assessment. The present study establishes significant correlations between higher grades and engagement with tutorials. The mean assignment grade across all modules is 79.3 [SD 12.55]; for students with at least one live attendance it is 80.5 [SD 11.91] and for students who accessed at least one recording it

is 81.0 [SD 11.26]. This is not a causative finding, i.e. it does not tell us whether engagement with tutorials leads to higher attainment or whether high-achieving students are more likely to engage with tutorials. Furthermore, figure 4 below indicates that the link between *recording use* and higher grades is not an independent effect, but a collateral of the strong correlation with live attendance.

<Insert Figure 4>

From this, we must conclude that no quantitatively demonstrable link can be established between attainment and recording use alone, although it is clear that recording use in this distance learning context is not linked to lower assessment scores, nor does it impact negatively on student success as suggested in some studies on lecture capture (Edwards and Clinton, 2019).

6 Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis of the qualitative data, which included coding of the interview material and detailed mapping of many different aspects and their relationships showed that students use recordings because they find tutorials central to their studies. It also revealed three further subthemes ('Structure and guidance', 'Input for learning, 'Time and timings') which help to explain why learners access recordings of interactive group tutorials. These subthemes are briefly explained below and will feed into the answers to the two research questions regarding perceived benefits for language learning and perceived affective and motivational benefits.

<insert Figure 5>

6.1 Structure and guidance

Both live and recorded tutorials can provide the structure and guidance independent learners need to ensure their study success. For example, assessment guidance is served

well by a recording. Students in a distance context have many questions about how to complete their assignments, but in any tutorial setting there are students who ask their questions out loud, while others, who may have been puzzling over the same problems, will listen carefully to the exchanges (Lee, 2005). In recordings, students can, in a sense, confer their ‘proxy agency’ (Bandura, 2006) to their peers, listening out for questions they might have asked themselves. They can also re-listen explanations and examples when it is most useful for their assessment preparation. For some learners, interactive recordings foster a sense of belonging to a peer group within a structured learning environment.

6.2 Input for learning

Interaction is the strongest motivator for live attendance and the most important aspect of language learning which recordings cannot offer. Recordings can, however, make the interactive input in tutorials more useful for learning in two ways.

Firstly, participants listen to recordings for *consolidation and reflection* and to study in more depth without the demands of direct interaction (Ohta, 2001).

Secondly, they provide access to *different voices and perspectives*, for example, where students attend one scheduled tutorial but then listen to other recordings on the same topic to deepen their learning. They appreciate the variety of perspectives offered by different tutors and other students confirming findings from studies which linked access to more perspectives to deeper learning (Rabold *et al.*, 2008; Mayes, 2015).

6.3 Time and timings

Time is the most important reason why part-time distance students who struggle with competing commitments will sometimes use recordings instead of attending live. Live

tutorials are scheduled events, and transport problems on the way home from work, a bad internet connection or a crying child can mean that the student misses all or some of the session. Participants in this study talk about childcare responsibilities, time for going out with friends, and their precarious work situation, which they do not want to jeopardize. For some students, quiet time, when they can concentrate, is scarce and may not fit in with tutorial schedules.

7 Perceived benefits for language learning

Tutorial recordings provide aural input in terms of tutor talk, learner talk and scaffolded target language interactions, as well as visual input such as PowerPoint slides and notes. The present study reports perceived benefits for language learning from listening to recordings which are related to finding input at the right linguistic level, time for processing input, noticing language and opportunities for vicarious participation.

Participants in this study are highly proactive in seeking out input which they perceive to be beneficial to their learning. Rae (Level 3 Spanish) thinks that recordings give her “experience with different speakers, different phrases, different intonation”, and Josh (Level 3 Spanish) finds it interesting to listen to lecturers giving “a different angle” on the same PowerPoint slides and to the contributions of different students. Most participants seek out expert performance in the first instance and turn to the tutors to listen to language which they know to be “absolutely correct” (Wendy, Level 1 Spanish). However, the data also suggest that participants effectively construct their own ZPDs (Ohta, 2005) by finding input which mediates their learning at the right level. Depending on their stage of linguistic development, participants find salience in input from students speaking slowly, students speaking fluently, tutors who are first-language speakers and tutors who are not. Some participants explicitly refer to elements

of teacher talk such as slower speech or redundancy in recordings, while others orient themselves towards learners who use language at a level they can realistically aspire to themselves. For John (Level 1 French) hearing language spoken at a slow pace by other students “who tend to use more simple language” is the most salient feature when listening to a recording. Clare (Level 3 Spanish), who is quite fluent herself, reports benefits from listening to proficient peers, positioning herself as a vicarious participant in a group discussion.

I realized it was really useful [... The tutor] only had three students who were all, they had a very high level of Spanish. And it was very interactive, they did exercises on using the imperfect subjunctive, they did a lot of discussion about linguistic diversity in the United States, in Peru, in Spain [...] I felt easily that I could have been part of the group. I could have kept up with them.

Rosemary (Level 1 Spanish) finds it helpful to re-listen to six students talking for one minute about a subject, a task she had previously attempted herself. She uses the approximations of competent performances by other learners as models to support her own progress.

They'd answered these questions really well, and I really had struggled. But I think because they'd done some preparation. So that's why I went back onto this tutorial, it's always something that I want to improve on.

‘Time’ is perceived as the main advantage of listening to recordings, students can listen in their own time, repeatedly, when they can concentrate. Recordings give participants the opportunity to process the input for longer and in different ways. While time and frequency of exposure are likely to benefit language learning (Ellis, 2015), processing constraints in direct interaction may prevent learners from attending fully to the linguistic input they receive (Ohta, 2001, 2010). John (Level 1 French) believes that “it's by listening repeatedly that I absorb it”, and Kate (Level 3 Spanish) further

explains the difference between tutorial modes.

The learning from each [live and recorded tutorials], it's a different kind of learning. I think the advantage of the recording is, you can obviously stop, you can go back you can take your time, you can take notes.

Repeated listening allows for increased focus on form and can lead to noticing both correct and deviant features of target language input. Rae (Level 3 Spanish) picks up on “phrases which sound very Spanish,” and Rosemary (Level 1 French) will make a note of what other students say “if they answer in a nice, in a good way and I like the turn of phrase”. Catherine (Level 1 French) compares her own linguistic representations with those of her peers: “Some of us make the same mistakes, and we learn through listening to others, correcting them and moving forward.”

Some participants in this study engage vicariously in the interactions they witness in writing or silent speech and may be “thinking frantically to answer the questions” (John, Level 1 French) as if they were attending live. Although doubtful of the benefits of recordings for their productive competence, many participants report highly agentive output-oriented behaviors. Clare (Level 3 Spanish), after claiming that listening to recordings “obviously doesn't help with the speaking” explains how noticing a specific structure has led her to use it more herself. “I'm noticing more the use of the subjunctive and now I'm trying to use it in my speech”. Betty (Level 1 French) likes to be able to hear other students because she can then “practise what they're saying as well”.

Of course, data gathered through retrospective interviews cannot show what learners did learn and how, but the contributions suggest that tutorial recordings create conditions which are likely to support language learning by providing extended

exposure to contextualized interactional language as well as opportunities for rehearsal through vicarious participation.

8 Perceived affective and motivational benefits

Previous studies of distance learning referred to feelings of isolation in contexts where the absence of tutor and peers may lead to low self-efficacy beliefs and even a sense of failure (Hurd, 2006, 2008). The present enquiry suggests that there are perceived affective and motivational benefits of vicarious participation and that these are related to alignment with peers, freedom from pressure, and learner engagement.

Josh (Level 3 Spanish) refers to his peers as “learners like me” and describes “checking [himself] against the others” in a recording. While this may contribute to ‘noticing the gap’, a potential driver of language learning (Schmidt, 2001; Ellis, 2015), it also allows him to position himself within the group and may thereby strengthen his belief in his ability to accomplish similar tasks (Mills, 2014). Laura (Level 1 French), too, takes courage from listening to her peers and their concerns because it helps her “studying and seeing that I’m not the only one who might be struggling on this precise point”.

Participants differ in their perceived distance from the event they access in retrospect, for Kornelia (Level 2 German) it’s like “looking in a shop window” while Betty (Level 1 French) feels “it’s almost as if I was there”. She cannot always access live tutorials due to illness, but the recordings connect her to others. “For me it’s so that I don’t feel that I’m learning all by myself, although I actually am, as such I’m still part of a group.”

Importantly, recordings allow learners to be in control of their learning in an environment free from pressure. While previous studies of anxiety in live online versus face-to-face settings report mixed results (de los Arcos, Coleman and Hampel, 2009),

participants in this enquiry report anxiety specifically in live online sessions. Although, generally, participants feel most engaged when attending live, this is not always the case as the absence of communicative apprehension in a recording can also be enabling. Josh (Level 3 Spanish) sometimes feels anxious about suddenly having to say something in a live session but enjoys recordings where “you can think of it, but you you’ve got more time to think of it.” Kate (Level 3 Spanish) explains how feeling out of depth affects her engagement in live sessions.

I think listening can be quite active, actually. So I don’t feel passive at all. In fact, I can feel more passive taking part in an online tutorial if I don’t feel I’ve quite got the level of Spanish to cope with it.

Overall, learners take reassurance from both live and recorded tutorials and both tutorial modes provide role models, which some researchers consider to be an important factor for language learning motivation (Dörnyei & Kubanova, 2014). Positive emotions also carry a high motivational force, and several participants in this study express their enthusiasm for distance learning or their love of the target language. Betty (Level 1 French) was asked whether she sometimes gets bored when watching a recording.

Oh goodness no, I do find it very stimulating and interesting. I just love French. I absolutely love it. And I just want to know as much about it as I can. So, I don’t get bored at all.

9 Conclusion

While there are limitations to this enquiry, which does not demonstrate learning gains, its strength lies in its explanatory potential in helping us understand the likely benefits of vicarious participation in online language learning contexts. By giving prominence to the pedagogic potential of vicarious participation it contributes to discussions in a

climate where student satisfaction is sometimes pitched against pedagogic concerns. It also feeds into the development potential of language learning provision online, which is likely to continue growing across the globe, and opens possibilities for further research.

Findings suggest that tutorial recordings help learners learn by giving them access to wider perspectives as well as the time to process input in more depth. Importantly, the study highlights the complementary benefits some learners perceive from accessing different tutorial modes. Far from seeing indirect participation as a substitute for live attendance, the participants in this enquiry use recordings precisely because they find tutorials so central to their studies. Recordings help make the ephemeral interactions in tutorials more permanent (Rabold *et al.*, 2008) and may thereby increase their potential for learning. One student expressed it like this: “You think on your feet, then you go back and reflect. I guess that’s how you learn.”

However, as this enquiry is specifically concerned with language learning in online environments, we also need to take account of the advantages and dangers inherent in these new learning spaces, which are blurring the boundaries between space and time, private and public, real and virtual (Thorne, Sauro & Smith, 2013). When turning synchronous interaction into an asynchronous resource for others, we must address valid concerns about privacy in an increasingly online world and ensure that there are spaces for unobserved practice while also making use of the learning opportunities afforded through combining direct and vicarious participation.

As university learning is changing and the move to better online provision has become pressing, the need to design for learning in a way which allows the meaningful integration of different study elements to support students’ academic development and

keep them connected to their community of teachers and learners is non-negotiable. By increasing our understanding of possible cognitive, social and affective benefits of direct and vicarious participation in online learning, the present study has the potential to feed into such a transformation.

10 Declaration of interests

None.

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Tables and figures (captions)

Table 1. The four modules* under investigation

<*footnote: The total number of students on the four modules is 977. A small number of students were excluded from the analyses in this paper due to missing tutorial attendance records.>

Table 2. Thirteen interview participants

Table 3. Crosstabulation of students who attended live and students who accessed recordings

Figure 1. Online classroom in a level 1 Spanish module

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Figure 2. Live and vicarious attenders in language tutorials

Figure 3. Scatterplot of live attendances and viewings (with names of interview participants inserted)

Figure 4. Correlation between live attendance, recording use and grades

Figure 5. Why participants use recordings: one theme and three subthemes

