Oral activities and language use with the help of digital tools: a field report from foreign language teaching

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ABSTRACT: In this article, we present the results of a project hosted at UiT – The Arctic University of Norway (2019-2021) whose aim was to explore ways to make students of foreign language practice their oral abilities in a digital context. We present the motivation and need for a focus on these abilities, and then present examples of the types of activities that we tried, both such activities that can be used both in a face-to-face setting and in a digital setting, and such activities that are maybe more specifically aimed to full-digital courses. Finally, we present four aspects that are perhaps more challenging when one uses digital tools for oral practice, specifically the spontaneity of the students' speech production, the use of the mother tongue when the students are not being supervised by the teacher and the reluctance to speak up in the digital plenary.

1   INTRODUCTION

In times of digitisation (Jianli 2012), there are growing possibilities of integrating new technologies into the foreign language classroom, including the option of moving the whole instruction in the digital space. Webinars and online classes offer new options that have some obvious advantages, such as letting students already employed full-time in the job market or students in geographical areas without a campus follow the classes in a more flexible way. However, like always, new possibilities imply new settings, and this makes it so that teachers are faced with new challenges (Wang 2012; Bilbatua & Herrero de Haro 2014).

An example of these new challenges concerns the student's oral use of language, which is an essential component of their foreign language learning process. As many of us have experienced before and during Covid-19, the oral practice of the students within a foreign language class often gets lost of sight in online-based education systems.

The challenge is, however, not restricted to digital teaching. In our experience, a very similar challenge emerges when adding digital tools or digital components to a classic (analogue) form of teaching. Most digital exercises in the platforms that are programmed to let teachers integrate tests within the material available digitally to students – e.g., Canvas, which some of us use at UiT – provide the teacher with options that focus on the written language – fill the gap-exercises, multiple choice questions, etc. – and are not easy to adapt to an oral methodology, unless there is some previous reflection by the teacher in order to achieve this goal.

Having these questions in mind, and already thinking about the development of fully digital and partially digital courses at UiT before the Covid-19 pandemic even existed, in 2019 we developed a common research project which explicitly focuses on oral activities by using digital technologies in our instruction of German and Spanish as a foreign language at UiT.

The goal of this article is two-fold: on the one hand, to share our experiences with some of the digital activities that had a positive effect on the students' learning outcomes, and on the other hand to present some of the challenges that we encountered when using these activities. In doing so, we have taken the conscious decision of leaving aside the discussion of any technical problem or any shortcomings of the specific digital tools used, because we know that the platforms, tools and apps available vary from one institution to another and focusing on those would restrict the usefulness of our contribution. Instead, we have decided to focus on the relation of the teacher, the student and the activity with each other, in order to concentrate on what we believe was a positive result of the activity, and the challenges that we could identify when using it.

With the following examples we present suggestions for practicing the oral language use and for integrating speaking activities with the help of digital tools. These examples rest upon our own experiences from both originally online-only and campus-based courses. On the one hand, we introduce

measures that we found to be enriching to invoke the student's verbal participation in the webinar as well as exercises for the learners and feedback options given by the teachers. On the other hand, we take a look at remaining challenges, in which it appears most demanding to involve all learners in speaking the target language through a microphone and in front of a camera, and hereby create a natural flow and conversation.

The rest of this article is structured as follows. After a general presentation of the project and what we aimed at when we developed it (§2), we dedicate one section to presenting the different activities that we tried out with the students, both in fully digital, hybrid, and face-to-face courses (§3). These activities are ordered sequentially, depending on whether they refer to the warm-up, the teaching itself, the *arbeidskrav* (work requirement) or the evaluation. Section §4 concentrates on new challenges that we encountered when trying out these activities with the students, and §5 concludes.

2   EMPIRICAL VALUES

The results presented here come from a project, internally financed by the Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education at UiT (*Program for undervisningskvalitet-utviklingsmidler*, 2019), where the groups of Spanish and German at the ISK-Department of Language and Culture cooperated. Furthermore, the project included a collaboration with RESULT, which assisted us with technical advice.

The project started in August 2019 and will finish in July 2021; the results that we present here involve our experience during four semesters, then, even if the last semester involving this project has not been completed when we write these lines.

The motivation of this project can be described as follows. In both the German and Spanish groups, we had already worked with flexible teaching forms for many years, given that a significant part of our students are people that either do not live in Tromsø – close to the campus where we have our face-to-face teaching – or they are individuals who are already fully employed in the job market and wish to acquire or develop their knowledge of German or Spanish; this involved online courses, courses that were partially online and were complemented with face-to-face, few-days-gatherings at specific points in the semester and other initiatives. Oral language use among the students is a big challenge in foreign language learning situations in general (Henriksen 2014; Lightbown & Spada 2013). In our experience, this challenge shows in particular in a flexible context where students sit alone at home or where students may only gather in the same classroom for a few hours per month, which gives them only a small chance to practice their oral skills under the direct supervision of the teacher. Written language use can easily be accomplished via online activities in the form of assignment writing, or other types of supported activities, but it was not as easy to develop activities that manage to integrate oral practice online. Oral practice in the foreign language is of course central in foreign language teaching – from some perspectives even more crucial than written language – and must therefore have an important place in the university education we offer, including the flexible courses that we design for this type of student. It is a very well-documented fact already that students do not prefer digital teaching, among other things, because that form of teaching increases their insecurity (Keeling & Haugestad 2020), something that directly affects their oral skills; this made it even more important to develop good techniques for students in those situations.

This need is even more crucial for education students, for whom this confidence in their own language use in general and their oral language use in particular, becomes an important basic competence that will influence their later work as language teachers. Importantly, for this type of students, experiences they themselves have gathered with oral activities (of all kinds) during their formative years will influence their choice of such activities in their own classroom (Krumsvik 2011a and b, 2014). The activities that they are confronted with as students should therefore involve a large diversity and be user-centred. At the same time, these student-active activities must ensure that all kinds of students can build up security in dealing with them, including students with little technical knowledge.

Once the methodology and the activities designed for digital oral practice were in place, we considered a secondary but also important motivation of the project to explore how those activities could also be implemented in face-to-face courses. The advantage of doing so in that type of setting would be double: on the one hand, students will be able to strengthen their digital competence by taking part on those activities, and on the other hand the use of digital tools for oral practice could open new possibilities,

allowing students to practice orally beyond the contact hours of the course. This would also give them the opportunity to try out and see possibilities and limitations for activities that can be used by school students outside the classroom.

Therefore, in the project we developed we started from two different questions:

1) How can we integrate student-active oral activities into a purely online course, a partially online course with a few *samlinger* (gatherings) during the semester, and a campus-based course in a way that suits all students, regardless of whether they start with a high degree of digital competence or not?

2) Which new teaching and learning methods related to oral practice can be developed with the help of new digital tools? Which digital teaching and learning methods can be used to integrate oral practice, and how do these fit different situations, students and levels?

Consequently, the project involved a variety of courses both in terms of their settings and their levels. The courses involved were mainly those related to language skills and grammatical knowledge. Our courses fall into several groups:

a) Purely digital courses, designed as internet-based courses with grammar and/or language skills training or as internet-based courses in the context of an internet-based teacher education in German

b) Partially digital courses – mainly in Spanish –, involving internet-based contents that are combined with gathering of students at particular points in the semester.

c) Face-to-face courses that are designed mainly as non-digital, but where the course is complemented with digital content (Spanish and German).

The courses included subjects that are part of the first year of study, the second year – *fordypning* (specialisation) – and the masters.

It is important to note, however, that the Covid-19 pandemic affected the face-to-face courses, as well as the partially digital courses, in the obvious sense that for some weeks during the spring semester of 2020 and the spring semester of 2021 it was impossible to hold traditional classes; at the same time, even during the periods where face-to-face courses could be hold, a significant number of the students involved decided to follow the classes digitally for various reasons. This had both positive and negative effects for the goals of our project. On the negative side, this meant that to some extent a few of the courses that were included in the project because they were designed as face-to-face courses where we wanted to explore how to integrate digital oral activities became almost entirely digital courses; on the positive side, however, this gave us room for a broader exploration and implementation of the activities designed for digital oral practice.

With this background in mind, let us move now to presenting the main activities that we developed.

3   SUGGESTIONS FOR DIGITAL ORAL PRACTICE USING DIGITAL TOOLS

Even though we tried the activities discussed in this section in both fully digital courses and face-to-face courses, we have chosen to present them in one section only. The reason for doing this is, as far as we can see, that all these activities could be implemented in traditional settings or in digital settings, without substantial differences. It is true, however, that oral practice in fully digital courses is more challenging in general. This means that the activities reported here could be even more useful for digital courses, even if they can be applied in traditional settings, too. Generally, the biggest challenge for oral practice in a digital course is the move to a virtual setting, with the subsequent removal or near-removal of the social aspects of teaching. Students sit alone in one room, instead of being together with one another and with the teacher in a shared space. Such a lack of real contact makes social cohesion and student-student dialogue more challenging (Keeling & Haugestad 2020). We must admit that we still view the development of oral skills in digital settings as challenging. Having this in mind, we use this section to present the activities that in our experience had a better effect in encouraging students to practice the target language, and leave the main challenging aspects for the following section.

3.1 Warm-up exercises

The very first sessions in a classroom are characterized by curiosity, hopes, expectations and a certain level of insecurity both socially as well as in regard to the class subject. If we assume that in a human's behaviour maintaining the feeling of self-worth is the main driving factor for interaction, e.g., for all the actions we take but also those we decide not to take (Birkenbiehl 1999, p. 36), it becomes clear that the teacher will have to face increased responsibility in the process of creating a functioning dynamic in an online group session, where no spontaneous student-to-student interaction is possible. By being aware of the emotional effects of these communicative limitations the teacher can contribute to a high degree to create a safe learning space and thereby paving the road to a successful start.

In the German classes the students do not know each other beforehand, so after a short introduction about the course, they get a list of get-to-know-each other questions, half of them on a personal level (name, hometown etc.), half have the aim to have them reflect about their own motivation to learn and use the target language. Here the teacher has an excellent opportunity to combine informal speech production in an unsupervised and thereby "safer" space (the breakout room), which automatically leads to more closeness between the students, and at the same time guide their thoughts towards the utility of the subject. In these exercises, it is also possible to include reflections from the students' own high school learning experiences *(Did you ever learn about phonetics at school? If yes, what do you remember*?) or have them reflect on the importance of a certain topic, again both on a personal level and a general one *(How important is a good pronunciation for you? In which situations do you think it is very important/not important?).* In order for them to feel safe, in the first sessions they are being encouraged to try speaking German and switch to Norwegian or English as soon as they start feeling uncomfortable. This technique is being used to evoke a feeling of self-efficacy in students, which makes it possible for them to control how much they are ready to leave their comfort zone. This approach also helps to increase the level of authenticity in the online classroom, when insecurities – which are inevitable in language acquisition – are allowed to be there. Students who expressed a general discomfort to press the "unmute" button and become "visible" in the group experienced this as a very helpful tool and voiced that it lowered the barrier for them to participate. Another valuable means that can benefit the group dynamics is the human's natural wish to collaborate, which can help to unify a group with very varying levels of German. In our groups at UiT we are often faced with very inhomogeneous groups in regard to their previous language skills. Having a starter quiz to refresh high school knowledge can be a useful activity to highlight the courses prerequisites and the teacher's expectations in an informal and maybe even fun way. In an actual classroom it is quite easy to sense the atmosphere in a group and react spontaneously to it, adding pressure or speed to the quiz in competitive groups as well as taking pressure out in more timid groups. In an online setting, it is more difficult for students to relate to and interact with each other, which makes it almost impossible for the teacher to develop a feeling for the atmosphere in the digital space at all during the first sessions. Here it can be beneficial to let students work in pairs or let them compare their quizzes two and two before going through it together. The wish to collaborate can help here to minimize insecurities and form a relationship between the students.

When it comes to Spanish, this type of activity has been mainly used in master and 2000-level courses (second year courses), in combination with a flipped classroom methodology (Lage, Platt & Treglia 2000). The goal of these activities, which were implemented in courses that were either fully digital or had to be given digitally because of the external conditions, was to activate students online, as an ice-breaker that would make them interact with each other and encourage them to participate in initial plenary sessions with small contributions that would pave the way for them to talk more freely in the rest of the session. The activities would generally involve a small task where the teacher would initially lead the discussion, making students follow each one of the steps in an exercise by asking them short questions one after the other. This warm-up activity would them be followed by a similar activity where, now, it would be the students themselves who would have to solve the exercise following the same steps. Time permitting, the students would ask each other the questions leading to the resolution of the exercise. This created a collaborative atmosphere where the students felt safe enough to contribute, having seen already an example of how the exercise is solved and having already talked to each other when solving the second exercise. In our experience, the two sequences would not take longer than 10 minutes, making it realistic that any 2-hour session would start with this type of exercise.

3.2 Working with their peers in breakout rooms

As stated in the paragraph before, the use of breakout rooms does not only provide an opportunity for group work but also impacts the process of building a group dynamics. In smaller groups it is much easier to ensure that every student gets an opportunity to speak the target language. Without a teacher being present the barriers to speak freely are likely to be lower, since no teacher is evaluating their spontaneous speech production. At the same time, it is important to ensure that the breakout room time is not used for private small talk in the mother tongue. Different exercises can provide a variety of learning goals and methods, from training new grammatical forms to reflecting on teaching methods, discussing topics, working with quizzes or in a role play. It seems to be most important to have a specific goal such as preparing some kind of presentation for the group work in these rooms. The work in a breakout room can be collaborative or competitive. When collaborating, it pays off to inform the students beforehand to pick a presenter who shares the group results orally or by sharing a screen in the plenary. In this way one can try to avoid awkward silence when asking them to present. Sometimes it is even possible that all group members can take active part in such a presentation. Whenever the students present something which has been produced jointly together with the other group members this might also further self-confidence in oral presentations in front of a bigger audience.

3.3 Oral and multimedia-based feedback from the teachers

During our work with oral and multimedia-based activities for the students, it became a necessity that we as teachers could develop our own experiences with the digital tools used by the learners – not least in order to guide them on a technical level. Furthermore, and even though oral activities consider the students' speech production, receptive skills such as listening to the response of an interlocutor is an equally important part of communication (Adelmann 2009; Rost 2015). Having that in mind, it was a natural development to use the same digital tools for giving the learners feedback on their work on an oral and/or multimedia-based level and in this way also be able to stimulate the students' listening skills when experiencing how it feels to receive student-centred oral feedback from teachers.

In the online courses for German teachers, we have provided written and oral feedback to the texts turned in by the students, on the learning platform. Written feedback is the traditional and most common way of giving and getting feedback both in university and in school contexts. When receiving such feedback as an audio or video text the students had to change their beliefs about how feedback has to be given. This new format of feedback forced the students to listen to unknown contents, with the authentic communicative task to really understand the university teachers' comments and to relate them to their own text. At the beginning, the students preferred the traditional written comments which are much easier to "consume". But after some weeks with written and oral comments many of these teacher students had and shared the experience that oral comments make you reflect more about the comments and give you a lot of real-life situations for practicing listening and comprehension.

In that online course for German teachers, we also tested a multimedia-based option for giving the students feedback on their delivered work. By recording ourselves, we were able to give the students oral feedback on their products while at the same time, we could highlight aspects of the text or grammatical errors on the screen. This option was originally designed for the mentioned online class but gives a flexible feedback alternative to all courses no matter if held complete digital, hybrid or on campus only.

This multimedia-based alternative has many advantages over a more traditional form of feedback, may this be a written text/correction or that the students meet up with the teacher. On the one hand, if the students get a written feedback only, they miss the opportunity to additionally improve their listening comprehension from the oral feedback part of the multimedia-based recording given by the teacher. On the other hand, the teacher tends to give a broader feedback while talking instead of only writing a comment, which will also tend to be more personal (*Let's have a look at your text together. On page x you write …).* Furthermore, a recorded feedback by the teacher gives the students the possibility to listen and watch it several times, while in a face-to-face interaction the students need to take notes or try to keep every word said in mind, when coming back to correct or improve their product. In the end, this option gives obviously more flexibility for both the learners and the teacher as the production as well as the reception of the recording can happen via the chosen digital device wherever and whenever it suits the teacher or learner.

In conclusion, our overall experience with these oral and multimedia-based feedback options was positive and we consider them as didactically valuable and flexible alternatives. Consistently with this, the learners emphasised, too, that they benefited from these forms of feedback.

3.4 Oral and multimedia-based student recordings: *arbeidskrav*

The German classes (campus and online) traditionally start with an introduction to the theoretical and didactical aspects of German phonetics. Since the majority of our students will be working in teaching positions later, in addition to acquiring a solid pronunciation themselves, they need to gain a good overview about the variety of means that phonetics can be taught with. The essential foundation of training pronunciation is the auditory differentiation of sounds, so the evaluation and development of listening and speaking exercises as well as own audio recordings are a crucial part of the phonetic training at UiT. In the end of the course, the students get the task (*arbeidskrav*) to develop a multimedia-based presentation in the form of a PowerPoint with audio or a video tutorial about a certain pronunciation challenge that they can imagine their future students would struggle with.

This *arbeidskrav* is training the students on many levels: the students work with and reflect on their own pronunciation since their recordings are the foundation of the *arbeidskrav*. At the same time, they get familiar with simple video and audio editing as well as certain programs to create presentations with for flipped classroom exercises. In addition to that, the students need to learn perspective taking as they are being asked to customize their presentation for a fictitious target group (e.g., 8th graders, no prior experience of German) and argue in an oral presentation on campus or via Zoom for their approach. The results of the *arbeidskrav* show that the students are benefiting greatly from this task. After having analysed different pronunciation tutorials beforehand, most students present a good understanding of what is important when creating those tutorials and they take that into account when producing their own material. They have gained good knowledge on how progression in phonetic training can be built up and how to implement this in exercises with different difficulty levels. They make sure their sound recordings are high quality and the potential listeners are given enough time to repeat single words. They have experienced first-hand at which point it makes sense to give vocabulary aid in the tutorial, either by presenting tasks in both languages to ensure that they are being understood, by the fictitious students or by simply translating new vocabulary within an exercise.

This task (*arbeidskrav*) has been given to both campus and online classes. In their work with that task both groups have spent a lot of time listening to presentations from others in the target language. The participants have experienced how important it is for presenters to use a language that fits the target audience and that their pronunciation is as correct as possible. When producing their own presentations, they have made some efforts to find out how to present the content in a language format which fits e.g. a given class at school and how to pronounce what they want to present orally. The students present good final versions. What is at least as important: they also can reflect about the process of learning and using a foreign language when planning, producing, and listening to their own first version products, revising and stepwise improving them, and finally producing a final version.

In the case of Spanish, this activity was implemented in one course located in the second year, where students started with a B2 level of proficiency in Spanish. The specific course, *Spansk i arbeidslivet*, is a course that involved 4 contact hours per week where students would practice their written and oral skills in Spanish with a focus on texts, structures and vocabulary that is relevant to different job situations. The exam requisites for this course involved a short video recording – 5 to 10 minutes – where students were asked to present their Curriculum Vitae with an emphasis on the tasks that they are qualified to perform within the job market, using Spanish. The students were allowed to edit the videos, but they were instructed not to read out loud from a document.

We considered that this activity could be adequate for students with an intermediate level of proficiency, because it involves a relatively free structure where the students could decide the contents that they wanted to highlight, and in which order they could be presented. Moreover, the goal of this text – introducing themselves to a potential employer – required that they showed some degree of self-confidence and security when talking. The learning goals of this activity were three: first of all, to make students more competent in presenting information in a digital format using audio-visual technologies, which are increasingly important in a work context; second, to structure a presentation in a way that could highlight the main aspects of their employable activities; third, to practice their oral fluency

showing not only control over the vocabulary and grammatical adequacy, but also transmitting a level of security that is enough for an employer.

3.5 Oral examination

This activity was tried in two different formats, one where Spanish concentrated and one where German concentrated.

To begin with, in the case of German, no digital oral exams were initially planned for the campus courses. Because of Covid-19 campus oral examinations after the delivering of the students (written) bachelor-papers had to be redesigned to become digital. At that point, the campus students had got some experience with digital classes, with Zoom and Adobe Connect. The new digital oral task then asked them to present the main content of their paper with two or three PowerPoint slides as a limit. That gave them the possibility to prepare a short oral presentation in advance, in the target language, with a few PowerPoint keywords only, as a memory backup for oral elaboration. This demanded and supplied some self-confidence before the students were expected to answer some questions from the exam committee. Sitting at home or another "safe" place with a specified assignment has obviously furthered a safe enough environment for an oral exam, even with a camera.

In the case of Spanish, we implemented an asynchronous digital oral exam in a 1000-level course (first year course), *Praktisk Spansk II*, where students come with a B1 level and acquire a B2 level during the semester. Traditionally, this course has always had two exams, one written and one oral where the oral exam used to be conducted as a synchronous face-to-face interview of 10 minutes. What we did here, in cooperation with the Exam Office and RESULT, was to turn this traditional oral exam into a digital delivery where students had to record a video of 7 to 10 minutes where they would present, in order, two things: a short introduction where they would talk about themselves and their reasons to study Spanish (c. 2 minutes) followed by a longer presentation of one of the 10 discussion topics that had been presented during the course, including issues such as the health system, the political system or the history of Norwegian society. The activity required, particularly the first time that it was implemented in the Fall 2019, a certain deal of preparation. The teachers prepared a guide for the students about the file formats that would be acceptable by the exam interface (in our case, Wiseflow), and some simple ways of recording the video with their mobile phones or the standard equipment in Mac or Windows. Students were told that they could not edit the video – in order to force them to talk more or less fluently for at least 7 minutes straight, instead of reading from a text.

The result of this activity, which was repeated in the autumn 2020, was extremely positive from the perspective of the students. The students mentioned, as positive outcomes, that the pressure of having a face-to-face interview with the teacher disappears in the digital exam, allowing them to concentrate on showing their oral skills and preparing in depth the topic that they considered more relevant for their formation in the future. Another immediate positive outcome of this activity was that the students had one week to prepare the presentation, eliminating irrelevant factors for evaluation, like whether the student was sick, nervous or had slept badly on the day of the exam.

4 CHALLENGES FOR FUTURE REFLECTION

However, in the course of the project we have also identified some areas as challenging, either because they are aspects where the activities, we tried did not solve the problems we were aiming at fully or because the digitalisation of the oral practice triggered new questions and problems. This section presents the four of them that we consider more relevant.

4.1 Avoiding that students memorise or read the text

A digital oral exam consisting of a pre-recorded text that students submit has obvious complications when it comes to the criteria for evaluating the students' performance, and that we believe that it is relevant to highlight so that anybody implementing this type of exam is conscious about them. In general, we believe that making sure that the student does not read a text out loud is easy to control: if the students submit a video showing their faces, the examiners can easily diagnose whether they are doing it or they speak without help of a text. However, it is less easy to determine whether the student is simply reproducing a text that has been learnt by heart. In order to make sure that the student is not automatically delivering a speech that has been memorised but not understood, the examiners have to make an extra effort to evaluate the rhythm and flow of the oral speech, making sure that the student

makes the pauses and intonation in the right places as a sign that the text has been understood and is being delivered in a more natural way, and not simply recited out loud.

We see as difficult to imagine ways in which an asynchronous oral exam could be modified to avoid that the students memorise a text; one could even argue that in any oral exam where students have to prepare topics, synchronically or asynchronically, digital or not, one has to accept that students will memorise at least chunks of text, although the asynchronous nature of a video makes it easier for the student to do so, if only because the contents that he/she presents are controlled by the student herself/himself without the interaction with examiners that can make them elaborate on some of the points.

There are some potential solutions for this problem, or at least measures that one could take in order to make memorisation less difficult and get a more direct example of the students' real oral performance. One could for instance give a relatively short time window to the students to prepare the video: in our tries we gave them around one week, but it is conceivable that we could have given the topic to each student two or three working days before the delivery time, making it less likely that they would have the time to memorise big parts of the text. Another option would be to complement the video delivery with a short 5-minute interview where the student and the examiners would interact.

In the light of our experience, it is important to "train" such different oral performance types in advance. If the students feel sufficiently familiar with recording short presentations without learning a text by heart or reading from a manuscript, the recording of an oral exam might become less threatening. Demanding a few PowerPoint slides with a few keywords only as a video background may have the side effect that students are less likely to read from a manuscript or learn a text by heart.

4.2 Use of target language in breakout rooms

In a classroom setting, students are – even when performing group work – in constant dialogue with the teacher. The teacher can overhear many groups at the same time, voice friendly reminders to stick to the target language and help to overcome barriers such as lack of a word/expression or the wish to elaborate certain formulations simply by reacting to students who search eye contact or seem stuck. In an online setting, the students can not address their need for help nonverbally. If they want to interact with the teacher, they have to use the "raise hand" function and call the teacher into their group. Our experience is that students are much more hesitant to use that function unless they are really struggling to understand the task or have technical problems. When in lack of a word, they would rather switch to Norwegian than making the effort to call in the teacher for a simple question. Here the differences between a classroom setting and an online setting become very noticeable. The teacher, however, also has the possibility to go visit the group work in the breakout rooms without being called in, but if he/she enters the room on his/her own choice and not in response to nonverbal signals sent by the students it can easily be perceived as incoherent, disrupting or even controlling. Offering assistance to the students gets thereby more difficult for both parts and can easily lead to the whole conversation being switched over to Norwegian.

4.3 Speaking up in the digital plenary

Speaking up in class – digital or not – means to become visible. The student has to stand out from the crowd for a moment and present and/or produce something, that will most likely not be perfect as of yet. Where some students do not struggle with that situation, others have difficulties and find strategies to overcome these situations that they perceive as unpleasant. When observing the students' participation in a traditional classroom, many different ways of speaking up come to light: some students seem to avoid direct interaction with the teacher and rather add something spontaneously to a classmate's contribution. The conversation that follows takes mostly place between the two students, yet the dialogue brings forth valuable comments when encouraged. Other students disguise their answers as funny comments, that may seem off-topic at first but turn out to be thought through after some further investigation. Those who are too timid to take the right to speak in class tend to search eye contact with the teacher, thereby signalling their willingness to answer if asked. In a classroom all those utterances can be taken up and guided towards a productive contribution to the topic, but in an online classroom all those students who cannot fall back on their proven strategies might choose to remain silent. In this respect we also discovered new ways that certain students can use to avoid oral participation that were unique for the digital classroom such as laying the blame on technical problems. Even when working

groups are asked to find presenters in advance, the most frequent outcome seems to be that the same persons tend to take the presenter role, all the time. It is overall an important and still open challenge to find better ways to encourage reserved and timid students to participate in an online discussion as well as to find possibilities to discover the students who would like to add a comment but are not sure how to phrase it.

4.4 Loss of interaction during the digital asynchronous exam

In §3.5 above we described how in Spanish we have implemented, already for two years on a row, a digital asynchronous oral exam. The design of this exam was made taking into account potential complications that we wanted to avoid preserving the evaluation value of an oral exam, including not letting students edit the video and showing at all times their face and hands, in both cases with the intention that what we would see in the video is a good reflection of the students' actual fluency and oral skills. However, the asynchronous nature of this type of exam makes it impossible to evaluate one aspect within oral skills that one can test, otherwise, in a synchronous exam: how well the student reacts to out of the blue questions from the examiner, where the student must deliver an answer that had not been prepared beforehand. We understand and share the view that this aspect could be relevant and becomes completely lost in this type of asynchronous exam, although we still believe that the gains – in terms of removing external factors from the evaluation – exceed this loss.

There are no obvious ways to re-shape the asynchronous exam to incorporate this type of spontaneous dialogue between the examiner and the student; one could consider, however, to complement the asynchronous exam with a small synchronous discussion with the student – perhaps just 5 minutes – where the student presents the video that the examiners have already watched, and the examiners have the chance to ask a few follow-up questions. In any case, a purely synchronous exam would clearly lack this spontaneous component.

5   CONCLUSION

In this contribution we have presented our own experience when developing a project that concentrates on the practicing of oral skills through digital tools. Oral practice is of course one of the central aspects especially of foreign language learning and an important part of all foreign language studies. It is obviously easier to formulate thoughts in one's mother tongue than in a foreign language. But we believe that the results obtained here can also be of interest for any course or program that tries to give the students tools to use oral language in verbal argumentation or discussion.

Using digital tools in higher education can deliver good solutions in difficult times where face-to-face-teaching is somewhat limited. But using digital tools for oral practice can be much more than that. Our overall results with oral activities with adequate digital tools are positive. Such digital activities can allow the students to make use of their oral skills outside the classroom. The students tend to (need to) spend more time on their own oral language use. All students have more opportunities than earlier to contribute orally, and almost all students used such opportunities.

There are still some challenging aspects. Including digital tools does not solve all problems, but at least some of them.

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