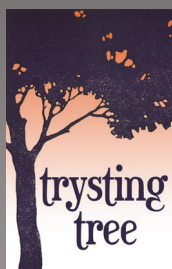




# — ONLINE — LANGUAGE TEACHING RESEARCH

*Pedagogical, Academic and Institutional Issues*



EDITED BY  
Israel Sanz-Sánchez,  
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# Online Language Teaching Research: Pedagogical, Academic and Institutional Issues

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# Introduction

Robert J. Blake

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Without any doubt, online teaching has finally come into its own. According to Allen and Seaman, online courses now make up a third of the higher education offerings. Second-language (L2) instruction has not lagged too far behind this general educational trend, with hybrid and fully online classes in ESL, commonly taught, and less commonly taught languages having now become an accepted part of many departmental offerings, especially in junior colleges and large state universities (Blake, “Best Practices”; “2013 Keynote Address”).

The reasons behind the popularity of these online formats readily come to mind: (1) the existence of a new generation of students who like learning via the computer because in their *real* lives they normally spend hours doing digital things; (2) the severe time limitations imposed by classroom language study with only 50 minutes of instruction per day (and even less actual language practice) three, four or, at best, five days a week; and, conversely, the promise of more time on task using hybrid and online formats; (3) the convenience of anytime and anywhere learning through online formats; (4) the treasure-trove of authentic materials available online in all the world’s languages; and finally, (5) the new digital affordances that promote L2 interactions in ways that parallel or even improve what can happen in the classroom, as we will discuss further below.

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Despite the attention being given to digital delivery, no one would suggest that online language education should entirely replace the experience of the *in-situ* classroom, but more off-campus options for students with complicated modern lives and schedules is a welcome innovation. The profession's reluctance to accept online language learning is selective, rather than a wholesale rejection. Although our profession has already embraced the usefulness of digital reading (with e-glosses and other types of digital support) and online collaborative writing (Oskoz and Elola, "Promoting Foreign Language"; "Integrating digital stories"), few language instructors think about doing L2 speaking practice online (Blake, "Technologies for Teaching"). Moreover, many language professionals question the value of L2 interactions taking place in these technologically assisted learning environments. We all would agree that a language curriculum without ample speaking and listening practice would fail to meet the gold standard; after all, language is inherently a social activity. However, few language instructors are willing to admit that their students normally only respond actively in class about three or four times an hour. This unspoken classroom reality makes reaching advanced proficiency in the L2 during the student's undergraduate lifetime difficult, to say the least.

Nevertheless, instructors correctly question how the use of the computer can approximate the face-to-face speaking experiences of the classroom, without all of the live interactions with the instructor, the idealized model for correct language usage. When contemplating fully online language courses, these concerns about speaking practice often become a serious impediment to granting course credit, let alone degree credit.

On the one hand, these doubts often arise because of the lack of knowledge about the many speaking affordances offered by computer-assisted language learning (Blake, "Technologies for Teaching"). On the other hand, many teachers simply refuse to relinquish their traditional role *as the sage on the stage* in favor of a more up-to-date function as *the guide on the side*. The language teaching profession also undervalues speaking practice with no direct involvement by the instructor, despite the many studies that have shown learner-learner exchanges contribute to L2 development both in the short and long run.

The literature on autonomous learning (Schwienhorst, *Learner Autonomy*) extols the virtues of letting students direct the course of their own learning. Nevertheless, it should be obvious that the teacher continues to control the curriculum, the activities, and the degree of student self-agency for any given language course online or in class. Little student autonomy and unsound class/CALL assignments will produce less favorable student outcomes in either learning environment. However, online language success also depends on whether or not the students themselves know how to take advantage of these new ways of communicating—and, in some cases, whether or not they have material access to computers or what some have called the socio-economic *digital divide* (Warschauer, *Technology and Social Inclusion*).

These issues form the backdrop for the current volume, which seeks to provide more information about second language acquisition in the digital age, online collaborative speaking opportunities, teacher computer training, and an examination of the institutional barriers or lack of infrastructure that might stand in the way of implementing a pedagogically sound online curriculum.

Ever since the heyday of Krashen (Chomsky's most ardent defender in the arena of L2 theory and practice), language instructors have single-handedly taken on the burden of providing comprehensible input for their students. Ironically, the field of second-language acquisition has long since moved in a different direction, inspired less by Chomsky, and more in tune with Vygotsky and his ideas about the *Zone of Proximal Development*, along with other constructivist notions about the importance of interactions, collaborations, explicit instruction, negotiation of meaning, *Focus-on-Form*, and feedback (Gass; Long and Robinson; Swain; Ellis and Sheen). Best language practices—with online learning environments being no exception (Chapelle)—put students at the center of everything by strengthening a sense of learner agency and autonomy (Little; O'Dowd; Schwienhorst; Guillén). In practical terms, this shift has relied on the basic concept of *task* (Robinson; Long)—learning by doing. L2 tasks ask learners to carry out goal-oriented activities by solving problems, doing puzzles, analyzing texts or videos from a particular genre, playing games, or sharing/ comparing experiences. In their essence, language tasks involve communication that is meaning-oriented, as authentic as possible, and goal-oriented so that the learners' performance can be directly evaluated according to the outcomes. Understandably, the computer can assist in the successful completion of L2 tasks in many new and creative ways, which is the subject of this volume's first paper by Anderson-Mejías. This researcher has analyzed syllabi and student survey data from 46 online language courses aimed at heritage bilingual students, with an eye to assessing pedagogical effectiveness and alignment with constructivist best practices. The results from her analysis reveal that students understand the importance of L2 social interactions, but teachers rarely included these speaking opportunities into the syllabus. Students only enjoyed some autonomy and self-regulations with respect to their writing assignments. Anderson-Mejías noticed that many instructors used the online infrastructure mainly as an electronic grade book for tracking of assignments. She ends this chapter by providing a series of helpful suggestions on how to squeeze more out of the online format, including a suggestion to explore social networking sites, such as *LiveMocha* and *Facebook*, the topic of the next article in this volume.

Working within the sociocultural framework (Lantolf and Thorne) and motivation theory (Dörnyei), Gonzales carries out a case study using *LiveMocha*, a popular social networking site, as a means to stimulate computer-mediated communication (CMC) with native Spanish speakers—in other words, *LiveMocha* was used as a vehicle for tandem learning (i.e. two way language learning). Gonzales' contribution to the volume is unique because relatively few L2 researchers have focused on social networking sites as a method of



L2 instruction (Lin, Warschauer, and Blake). This chapter consists of a case study of one particular student with the pseudo name *Cammy* and how she used *LiveMocha* and, subsequently, *Facebook*. Gonzales is careful to point out that the main affordance of *LiveMocha* is providing a safe social space where Cammy can come in contact with native speakers and then follow her own learning path. Despite being an uncontrolled public space, Gonzales provides language teachers a roadmap for how to incorporate these CMC exchanges into the foreign-language curriculum with the concomitant motivational benefits for L2 learning.

Guillén and Blake's study, the next one in this volume, looks closely at online strategies and tools that support L2 speaking practice, the Achilles heel, as it were, of online learning for many instructors. *Canvas*, the online delivery platform for this study, allowed students to post videos in response to an instructor's prompt that included both directions and a video model (e.g. INSTRUCTOR'S VIDEO: "Tell me about your daily routine...For example, I got up today very early..."). The students, then, crafted their responses after the instructor's example with the added benefit of extra processing time afforded by asynchronous video postings. This technique of posting the best recording increased the students' speaking complexity and accuracy because they got a chance to rehearse. Later via *Adobe Connect*, the students put their practice run to good use by carrying out live tandem learning assignments in small groups with a native speaker. The results from the tandem experiment underscored the need for careful training in tandem learning, especially with respect to satisfying the requirement for reciprocity, which in this case should mean correcting deficient English as well as Spanish structures and vocabulary.

Smidt, McAndrew, and McDyre also used *Adobe Connect* to engage their ESL students in online speaking. Kern has repeatedly warned the profession that the computer mediates these exchanges and even alters how people communicate. In other words, CMC is different from face-to-face communication in subtle and not so subtle ways. This chapter's researchers agree with Kern and echo what Guillén and Blake concluded about the need for more training so that students can effectively participate in videoconferences. In true constructivist fashion, Smidt, McAndrew, and McDyre present data collected from student blogs where the participants frequently voiced the need for more uncontrolled social interaction. In other words, online instructors must think about programming more digital social encounters; they also must intervene as *the guide on the side* to assist students in order to get the most out of these online speaking opportunities. However, the teacher's dilemma consists of finding the balance between assistance and disruption of the conversational flow. As discussed above, designing good online speaking tasks is one of the key components for success. Students cannot be turned loose on Adobe Connect and be expected to practice the L2. Likewise, both students and teachers need to unlearn certain communicative practices that may work in the classroom but not online. Both teachers and students will want to address both the new demands and

affordances of this digital medium. The researchers' recommendations are thoughtful, well grounded, and helpful for anyone attempting to add videoconferencing into the L2 curriculum.

Fernández Agüero and Alonso Belmonte complement the previously discussed article by assessing the effectiveness of an intermediate ESL hybrid course offered to pre-service teacher candidates in Spain. Over 72% of the students passed the ESL course at the B1 level (i.e. *intermediate-mid* on the ACTFL scale) but, more importantly, the questionnaire responses revealed that the participants were well pleased with the ability to read and study English literature autonomously, with the expected increase in motivation levels.

Evaluation, then, becomes an important consideration in order to keep track of both successes and failures in these new online learning environments. MacGregor-Mendoza's article reviews the most important design features that any course should embody and then adapts these principles to the online context with assessment very much in mind. She emphasizes the active role that the students should play, the teacher's willingness to listen, the crucial role of feedback, clear task communication, and respect for different ways of viewing and doing. By adapting the best teaching tenets to the digital learning environment, MacGregor-Mendoza has provided an excellent measure by which to judge the rest of the volume's experiments and implementations.

Lest we forget, online learning takes for granted a basic infrastructure, both digital and human. On the digital side, the networked support system has to function without interruption as well as with speed and large capacity. With this *sine qua non*, the users will be frustrated and blame the online course or declare that technology in general has failed them, once again. But on the human side of things, users must have some basic level of language and computer literacy, too. Unfortunately, not all learners start with the same set of learning skills or knowledge base.

In the last chapter of this volume, Heiduschke and Prats consider the institutional barriers to developing online language degree programs based on their state university experience with German and Spanish. They attribute their successful implementation to a series of factors: their institution's pledge to provide financial support for course development and marketing; a motivated faculty willing to dedicate themselves to online teaching; good technical support for the content developers; and, finally, cyclic faculty training because the technology is always changing. The article chronicles the lessons learned at OSU in online course development over a long period of time for German and more recently for Spanish. The researchers openly admit that faculty reluctance posed the greatest obstacle to developing online language courses and acceptance of an online degree program. As we commented at the outset, many members of the profession believe that L2 learning via online instruction is not possible. This viewpoint is not justified by any studies, but entrenched beliefs are formidable deterrents to innovation.

Our introduction to this most useful collection of online studies is not intended to demonstrate the superiority of online learning—far from it. Online learning, like the Internet, is another reality, but not *the* only reality. Each dimension has its own rules of play, although we tend to approach all innovations as if our old expectations and assumptions were still valid. The studies featured in this volume remind us that new educational spaces require new approaches and modifications of older ones if best practices are to be maintained. It's said that old dogs cannot learn new tricks, but our role as language instructors must be to change. After all, the act of learning an L2—finding your third place in a wide-open bilingual space—is what we demand of our students. If they can do it, so can we with respect to squeezing out the advantages in this new learning environment.

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# Between SLA Theory and Student Perceptions: Best Practices

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## Abstract

This chapter presents overviews of second language acquisition (SLA) and online (OL) theories juxtaposed with students' perspectives from evaluation surveys in online and hybrid courses available through the public record at a large Hispanic-serving institution in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. We evaluated both quantitative and qualitative data over a four-year period for all language-focused courses in English and Spanish. Based on student comments and a follow-up study reviewing course syllabi, we address two key questions: (1) What SLA practices are seen in the online and hybrid courses reviewed? and (2) What best practices do students indicate made online and/or hybrid courses successful? This chapter details results from the data and implications for language course design so that practitioners may incorporate all potential aspects from theory and assist their students to acquire language and become globally aware language learners.

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## Keywords

SLA, second language acquisition, online language courses, student evaluation data

## Introduction

Over a four-year period, the author reviewed syllabi and student evaluations from online language-focused courses through publicly disseminated information at a Hispanic-serving public institution close to the US-Mexico border in Texas. Students are bilingual in English and Spanish from their environment, and continue to acquire both languages at the university level. While they are not actual *second* language learners, the students are acquiring reading, speaking/listening, and writing language skills in English and Spanish from the courses reviewed for the data collection. Given the learning context, background information from SLA theory and practice in the online environment is the theoretical underpinning for the research studies presented here.

The initial study based on student evaluations of online and hybrid language-learning courses was exploratory in nature. The research question was threefold:

1. What aspects of online language learning courses were viewed positively?
2. What aspects of the same courses were viewed negatively?
3. Could the results from 1 and 2 be attributed to one or a combination of variables?

Preliminary results appear to indicate that the critical variables are how interactions were constructed, whether among students, instructor(s) and students, or students and the materials. Students did not seem concerned with variables such as grading or assignment types. The results of this initial study led to the second study, which considered syllabi to assess course interaction, as designed by the instructor, for the online course. The author reviewed the syllabi to determine if the course design fell primarily within any one given SLA model: psycholinguistic, constructivist, a combination, or a model which clearly reflected complexity theory.

After an extensive literature review of both SLA and online theoretical perspectives, the author juxtaposed the best practices from results of the student evaluation study, the syllabi study and the literature. Based on the literature and the results of the surveys, this chapter presents attributes of an optimized online language course design that can best meet the pedagogical needs of the students.

## Second language acquisition, computer assisted language learning, and online theory and practice

This chapter includes a review of SLA theory as one guide for course designers and instructors of language-focused online and hybrid courses. Data from the

two studies were analyzed in light of the works reviewed here. SLA theory tends to refer to the “lab” of the classroom, although that perspective is changing to include environments beyond the classroom.

SLA theory falls roughly into four general areas of practice. For many years, behaviorism and structural-taxonomic language theories were united in methods such as the “Army method”, audio-lingual method, and a series of offshoots. Few if any practitioners today use these exclusively and in their entirety, but much of competency-based, high stakes testing (as well as teacher observation systems) comes directly or indirectly from these theoretical bases. A key indicator of this is the “divide and conquer” analysis of language and/or learning skills into small parts which, when a sufficient number have been mastered (read “tested with a successful outcome”), the whole is deemed learned. Some instructors include useful techniques from this perspective in the classroom, such as repetition drills and sound discrimination exercises, but by and large, the profession has moved beyond these practices.

Following the rejection of behaviorism by applied linguists and second language teachers, more cognitive theories came into play. Discussions centered around how the mental processes and knowledge of the system happen, with reference to the native speaker’s target language system.<sup>1</sup> Second, language acquisition is considered a cognitive event, where learning means changing how the student approaches a native-like competence in the target. Ellis and Collins’ introduction and special issue of the *MLA Journal* in 2009 on input and SLA provide a good example. (Collins and Ellis).<sup>2</sup>

Another direction within SLA theory is the constructivist perspective, which states that the students must co-construct a target language system with their peers, the teacher, and the materials. Language learning is based on social usage within the students’ limited abilities, to interact with others and thus gain more insights and understanding, leading to additional learning. In these theories in general the learner’s system is constructed through interactions (Vygotsky); however, even with constructivist perspectives, many still consider progress in learning based on a target “native-like” usage and employ cognitive progression models.

A “call to arms” in SLA occurred in 1997 in the seminal work of Firth and Wagner. They posited that psycholinguistic theories were insufficient to account for actual L2 learning, and that few practitioners were using the available constructivist theories to actually conduct classes and ensure student learning. Of major concern was the view that SLA learners were “defective communicators” (*On Discourse* 285). Firth and Wagner called for greater awareness of the learner as user of the target language. In their 1998 reply to critiques, they argued for the need to collect data from learners in social contexts outside the “lab” of controlled language acquisition classrooms. The article generated a number of reflections, critiques, and discussion. Throughout the next decade, SLA research into student learning blossomed, as did many discussions refuting or supporting Firth and Wagner. In 2007, Firth and Wagner identified further distinctions between cognitive SLA positions and constructionism,



wherein learners base their learning on social contexts and interaction (*Second/Foreign Language Learning*). Online language learning began to emerge during this decade (Chapelle, *English*). Chapelle presents a review of SLA theories and perspective in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), including a particularly helpful chart for language teachers (*Relationship* 744). She considers the issues facing research into SLA using technology, revealing that theoretical discussions had rarely been the focus up to that point. Larsen-Freeman (*Reflecting*) posits SLA as a complex adaptive system, adding to the theoretical mix concepts from chaos/complexity theory presented in some of her earlier works, as well as those from game theory and elsewhere, such as Mitchener and Nowak. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron expand the use of complex systems perspectives to research paradigms in SLA, noting the need for blended methods.

The practitioner will find in the literature many articles reviewing Vygotsky and other socio-constructionist theories, but recapping them all would refocus this chapter away from its empirical basis. Furthermore, the SLA literature contains many theoretical proposals, not quite full-blown theories, meant to assist learners in acquisition. These range from Lantolf's activity theory to Young and Astarita's practice theory, which attempts to bridge the cognitive and social divide. Lee also tried to reconcile the language acquisition/language usage dichotomy by encouraging researchers and practitioners from each side to evaluate their methods at a descriptive level of adequacy. As applied to research, Menezes also reviews theory and focuses on Ockerman's concept, wherein learning must occur at the "edge of chaos" (409), which she relates to SLA learning experiences. Jenkins' work on English as a lingua franca, with communicative ability rather than native-like competence as the logical target, is of particular relevance to this chapter. She highlights the need to remove the "monolingual bias", replacing it with the social context. Jenkins' work focuses primarily on English as a lingua franca, but the principles can certainly apply to the wider context of SLA. Ortega refines this discussion in a call to reframe SLA's views of bi/multilingualism and acquisition of language. Nelson supports expanding connectionism vs. information processing approaches in SLA theory, providing biological examples, and calling for increased explanatory adequacy for second language acquisition processes.

Numerous works are available on online (OL) learning, but their discussion is beyond the scope of this chapter. Nonetheless, several key theoretical principles on adult learning must be acknowledged, such as Knowles' discussions of andragogy, or the concepts vital to teaching adult learners. Anderson discusses theories of OL and distance education with chapters such as Moisey and Hughes, on supporting the OL learner (419–439). Cercone, among others, discusses the characteristics of adult learners based on Knowles, and is a good starting point for considering the limitations and needs of adult OL learners. Wicks reviews theory from the perspective of avoiding barriers, such as learner isolation, which are counterproductive to socially constructing knowledge. She presents concepts for students' roles, training of instructors, and delivery of course materials. Dede (*New Horizons*) considers the shift from a traditional education model, where

instructors control course content, to a Web 2.0 world where users generate content using social media, blogs, and share sites. Dede also explains OL requirements to ensure quality education (*Connecting the Dots*). Downes presents further suggestions using Web 2.0, such as MOOCs and the social contributions to knowledge by users based on the principles of connectivism.

OL learning and second language acquisition theory intersect through constructivism, use of computer mediated communication (CMC) strategies, and CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), although not all CALL programming is constructivist. IGI Global publications are an excellent source for OL information, including techniques for teaching, research paradigms, and reviews of literature (Cássia Veiga Marriott and Lupion Torres; Zhang and Barber; Chang and Kuo; Bertin, Gravé, and Narcy-Combes). IGI Global has recently expanded into the area of OL SLA as exemplified by Aitkin.

Many resources for OL language course design and teaching are available from both OL and SLA perspectives. Swaffar et al. discuss theory and practice for ESL and L2 classes using computer assistance. Ariza and Hancock advocate using SLA theories to create a framework for OL courses. They remind course designers to be aware of students' needs for "processing time" while still encouraging risk taking. Reviews of research in SLA and OL environments range from Leloup and Pontero's two-page summary to Thouëshy and Bradley's book-length work. Wang and Vasquez also review Web 2.0 and SLA from a research perspective and the state of the art in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), while Dooly and O'Dowd review research regarding student interaction OL.

Likewise, there are numerous works on useful techniques in SLA theory which we can incorporate into the online learning environment. These include web-based portfolios (Pearson), the effects of technology on L2 composition (Oxford), noticing and negotiating meaning in the OL environment (Shekary Tahririan), use of chat for improving oral proficiency (Blake), application of computer mediated communicative models (Görtler), use of open content resources and knowledge mapping for SLA (Okada), and use of online mentoring for sheltered instruction (SIOP) (Ware and Bauschoter), among others. Research on online language learning techniques also expands our understanding. For example, Heift and Rimrott's results indicate that meaning-focused tasks reap greater rewards in learning of grammar and other aspects of language than grammar-focused tasks. Dooly is useful for hybrid courses, as she considers how online tasks are best incorporated into a partially face-to-face course, and pinpoints critical factors in language learning through teleconferencing.

From this brief review of the SLA, OL, and related literature, a series of guiding principles emerge to inform best practices in second language teaching for online environments. First, since language acquisition is chaotic, students should be allowed to explore their linguistic world to that "edge" of the chaotic language learning paradigm. Further, instructors and instructional designers must acknowledge the myriad distinctions among individual students and treat them collectively and individually as agents in creating their own language learning,

which adds to the chaotic learning environment. Instructors can more effectively use the OL environment to create co-constructed language when they recognize that students do not need to focus on native speaker competence, but can actively engage in communication using many varieties of the language, whether dialectal or sociolectal, and not necessarily the codified “standard” language.

Within constructivism and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) the link to the community of knowers is the state of the art in the field: students are encouraged to work together to create their knowledge, with the teacher as the support system. The teacher helps to construct the online environment to scaffold students’ learning. The process of gaining knowledge as a member of a community is key, even if that community is only other students in the class. Through Internet communication the community may be expanded to include others throughout the world who are also learning the language and/or culture. Since the online environment contains vast amounts of information, much of which is not regulated in the traditional, academic sense, students will need the teacher’s support while socially constructing their own knowledge. The teacher will assist them in learning how to find quality materials online and determine fact vs. opinion in materials students have contributed from internet sources, and other vital learning process tasks.

Finally, online learning has recently moved toward a theory of connectivism. The Internet offers an incredible amount of continuously changing, upgraded, downgraded or simply reformatted information, with immediate and often overwhelming 24/7 access. Instructors in online second language acquisition courses will want to focus on helping students critically evaluate the information they find in the target language, deciding which sources are trustworthy and support their learning accurately, and which are merely available opinion. Even when considering such opinion, if it is presented in the target language, students are actively learning to connect information and are constructing their language acquisition.

The investigations in this chapter consider how many of these theoretical concepts were important to students when evaluating their online courses, and which were incorporated into OL course design by instructors.

## Methodology

The two related empirical studies addressed the questions of (1) which aspects of online language learning courses students viewed positively, (2) which they viewed negatively, and (3) how the instructors designed their language learning courses with respect to interaction among students, instructor(s), and materials. The initial student evaluation study addressed points 1 and 2, and the qualitative analysis indicated the importance of considering all 3 points as key variables which impact positive course evaluation. The second exploratory study considered course design contained in syllabi, which are part of the public record, hereinafter referred to as the *syllabus analysis study*.

Students were bilingual in Spanish and English and were engaged in language acquisition at the university level; i.e., most already used both English and Spanish in daily life, and were learning skills in speaking, listening to academic discourse, reading academic articles or literature, and responding using appropriate academic writing strategies. None of the online courses used in these two studies were for non-native learners; all were for heritage and/or bilingual continuing learners of Spanish and English.

Importantly, all instructors teaching fully online courses must have successfully completed a nine-week online training course. This training requires potential instructors to read and review literature on teaching adults, student learning/cognitive styles, the tools available through differing platforms at the university, common practices for planning, organizing, and keeping abreast of grading or responding, and various critical needs of online courses which are distinct from face-to-face classes. These faculty must participate in the various discussions, chats, live-feed sessions, quizzes, and exams as OL students themselves, while also designing their own courses for the online environment.

Furthermore, a number of the instructors had additional training using the Higher Education Quality Matters curriculum, a five-year certification (MarylandOnline). Instructors teaching hybrid courses are likewise recommended to complete either or both of these trainings, and minimally, to attend monthly workshops on aspects important to quality of online portions of hybrid classes. Of the instructors, 50% were lecturers on either a three or one-year contract, and 50% were tenure-track or tenured.

## Analysis of results

### *Student evaluation study*

The author collected and analyzed 1,106 individual student evaluations for all 46 entirely online English and Spanish classes available over five semesters. The student evaluation form included nine demographic data statements, 17 statements regarding the course with a Likert-type scale response, 10 open-ended questions, and a request for additional comments (See appendix). The 46 courses included Spanish language and writing courses, and English core courses in writing or introduction to literature that included at least 50% writing and at least one presentation.

### *Demographic data*

Please see appendix as necessary for demographic variables reported here. Respondents were 76.5% female and 23.5% male. Only upper division Spanish writing had more males than females (15 to 13), and the remaining 45 courses

had more females than males. Upon further analysis this variable may prove important; however, such was not found in the literature for online SLA. Data for other demographic variables are given as average percentages from all sections; i.e., on the item of classification, 45.87% of the students answering the question were at the level expected for the course; i.e., in a freshman English writing course, freshman would be counted for this variable; in a junior/senior Spanish writing course, juniors or seniors would be counted. The percentage at the appropriate classification for the Spanish language courses was 14.48%; 70.54% of the students enrolled were at the appropriate classification for the Spanish writing courses. It should be noted that this breakdown is used only for describing the demographic information; data from all students were used in the analysis and results.

Among all 46 sections, the majority claimed a GPA of 3.01+ (on a 4.0 scale). Seventy-six percent of all students claimed to be at the B or better level. The majority of students responding were enrolled in 12–14 hours of study. There were student majors from all seven university colleges: arts and humanities, business, computer science and mathematics, education, health and human services, science and engineering, and social/behavioral sciences. Another important demographic for students in the Rio Grande Valley is time spent working. One hundred percent of the respondents worked in addition to attending university. For the English language courses, 29.0% worked 20+ hours/week. For the Spanish language courses, 50% worked 20+ hours/week. Eighty percent of all students responding in the Spanish courses worked more than half time, whereas 70% of respondents for English courses worked less than half time.

### *Course evaluation data*

Likert scale items (excellent, good, average, fair, poor) were all considered and results tabulated (see appendix). No obvious differences between any of the items and the most general item, “overall rating as an instructor in this course” were found; thus, only negative and positive responses for that item are presented. Of all 46 instructors, the range of *excellent*, *good* and *average* responses was from 0% to 100%. *Fair* and *poor* responses were few. As Croushore and Schmidt point out, the data are ordinal not interval, thus a percentage has no meaning. The analysis was conducted by reviewing instructors at the two end points. The “best” of all teachers described with the most superlatives in the open-ended section received a total of 91.9% *excellent* and *good* responses on the “overall rating” item, receiving 64.9% *excellent*, 27% *good*, and 8.1% *average*. The instructor described with the most negative comments (the “worst” teacher according to students) received 63.1% responses in the *excellent* and *good* categories, receiving 26.3% *excellent*, 36.8% *good*, and 10.5% *average*. Only 26.4% of the responses were *fair* or *poor*. Consideration of all Likert items for the end point instructors yielded little information, but analysis of a larger data set

might prove more meaningful. For discussion of student evaluation validity and reliability, see Spooren, Brockx and Mortelmans.

### *Open-ended data*

Student comments in the open-ended section (see appendix) were analyzed qualitatively. The author recorded all comments and sorted them until general groupings were formed for instructors whose overall evaluations were either more positive or more negative. From the over 1,000 forms analyzed, 100 with the higher percentages in the *good/excellent* ratings for the “overall course” question, with the largest number of positive comments, were arbitrarily selected for analysis of positive traits from the students’ points of view. The 100 with the lowest percentages in the *good/excellent* ratings for the “overall course” question with the largest number of negative comments were selected to represent negative traits from the students’ points of view. Forms that included no open-ended comments regardless of the *good/excellent* ratings were not included in either group.

Organization emerged as the most important aspect contributing to satisfaction with the course and positive evaluation of the instructor in the area: “What single aspect of this course did you like the most? Dislike the most?”. This was applied to presentation of information, choices offered for online assignments, possibilities for interaction or any other aspect of the course. Despite course requirements that might be challenging or require going beyond the students’ “comfort zones”, if the information was organized and if the interactions among students were constructed clearly by the teacher, the course was evaluated more positively. Students wanted less teacher driven than student discovered materials, as indicated by comments such as: “Although I like the readings, I wanted to get credit for finding some others I found online cuz [sic] that took a lot of time and there was no credit grade”. The aspect most disliked was lack of clarity or unexplained changes. When assignments were changed with no given reason or were not clearly explained, students rated instructors negatively and considered these qualities as bad planning or organization.

Responding to the item: “What do you think of the instructional methods used in this course?”, students remarked most positively on response time. The most positive responses occurred when the instructor commented on every assignment, within a few days, and was continually connected through e-mail and/or discussion boards or blogs. Professors who appeared uninvolved or did not interact often with the group and/or individual students received the most negative comments.

Responses to three open-ended items (key aspects of the course, difficulties with that course, and changes needed) all reflected similar issues, including problems with taking online exams, such as the lockdown browser, the inability to review earlier questions, or the lack of feedback on exams. Difficulties

all were related to exams or quizzes and timing, whether these were instructor imposed or due to the software used. Among the changes needed, in addition to those noted above, instructors were asked to give sample assignments or practice worksheets, to ensure that grades were visible (and recorded promptly), and to answer e-mails quickly.

Comments referring to what motivated students to work harder included primarily that the professor/instructor had high expectations for students and gave positive, qualitative feedback every time on all assignments. Four students from the most positive 100, all in one class, indicated they were motivated to work in their groups so their peers would not be disappointed in them. In considering whether students found their instructors interested and/or enthusiastic, similar comments about answering e-mail, quick and quality feedback, as well as online availability surfaced together with being in a good mood when answering e-mail and generally being available to students.

Responding to “What do you think of the evaluation methods used by this instructor?”, students considered quizzes and/or exams online too easy and vague. Students preferred the longer assignments requiring some research and more writing to the easier exams. Most students, whether in the 100 more positive or the 100 more negative group of evaluations, believed course objectives were met.

A final open-ended item regarding how to improve teaching effectiveness reflected most of the above concerns: keep up with grading, communicate more, revise exams both in type and procedure, inform students of what to look for in the materials. Additionally, however, were numerous comments about the need for effective use of the OL environment. Examples include comments like “videos don’t teach!” and “DO NOT use ‘talking head’ online—LECTURE does not work”, or “so many PowerPoints are so very boring!” Students in both the 100 positive and 100 negative groups indicated that added assignments and credit for independent use of online resources, and more interaction among the peers, would have improved the presentation of materials as well as encouraged them to work harder. One particularly insightful comment was: “. . . to avoid the video after video, why don’t you have us look for interesting stuff in YouTube or online that meets some of your objectives? BTW those were clear. It is boring to just read or listen to your info but I know we all surf the ‘net all the time and that could be useful to this course”.

Thus, the student evaluation data show that organized, yet flexible teaching which utilizes a variety of available tools, includes some student to student interaction, asks students to discover information and contribute materials, and in which the instructor communicates often in a thoughtful, expanded manner are key strengths in the online environment. Negative aspects of online courses are longer presentations, such as PowerPoints or videos, lack of student-to-student interaction, little or ineffective use of the Internet and WWW, inconsistent or insufficient communication, and disorganized, often changing, elements of the syllabus.



*Syllabus analysis study*

Based on the positive or negative qualities indicated in the Student Evaluation Study, the author wanted to investigate syllabi to see how online instructors structured the course to present materials, use available Internet tools, organize interactions, and communicate with students. This investigation considered the third research question: which variable(s) led to more positive or negative student evaluations. Because the freshman writing program was in the process of suspending fully online courses in favor of hybrid courses, two hybrid courses in English writing and two in Spanish writing were included along with two fully online courses in English writing, Spanish language, and English literature courses where more than 50% of the class was geared to improving reading, writing, and oral communication using appropriate academic discourse. Sixteen online or hybrid courses that included high levels of language development in writing and/or all skills were reviewed during the following year through public information available on the syllabi. Of the 16 syllabi used, 12 were for entirely online sections of the courses and four for hybrid sections. For the hybrid courses, only the online portion of the course was evaluated (see table 1 for a summary of courses included).

Faculty whose syllabi comprise the data were all trained for online course delivery. Many had either taught hybrid sections prior to putting the course entirely online and/or had alternated delivery. In addition, 62% of the OL instructors had completed a highly competitive training grant. To receive this grant, faculty proposed a specific course for extensive revision with assistance from course designers, thus creating an Online Exemplary Course (OEC). Participation was highly competitive for the OEC grants, faculty were given a university laptop to use, and needed to have department chair and dean support to ensure their course would be offered the next academic year in order to receive the grant. The exact number of faculty who receive this award is not public record, but of those whose course syllabi were reviewed, 62% were participating in the OEC grant program and 100% had completed the Teaching OnLine

**Table 1:** Summary of information for the syllabus analysis study.

Online Courses (N = 12)	Hybrid Courses (N = 4)
Spanish language – 6 sections, 178 students <sup>*</sup>	English writing – 2 sections, 50 students
English language in literature – 4 sections, 162 students	Spanish writing – 2 sections, 71 students
English writing – 2 sections, 50 students	

<sup>\*</sup> This was the number originally in the course; not all students may have participated in the evaluation.



training as well as between one and six additional “Tools of the Trade” trainings. Ten of the sixteen courses were designed by faculty who had OEC grants.

### *The course syllabi*

Course syllabi fell into two general categories. One was the writing/reading courses required in the general education curriculum for all students of the university. The other was introductory courses in one of the modern languages offered at the university; those reviewed were all Spanish for heritage or bilingual language learners; these courses are not part of the general education curriculum but one means of meeting the language proficiency requirement for graduation. The 16 syllabi reviewed represent a census of all possible courses meeting the description for online, introductory writing/reading and Spanish language or writing courses.

No one set of guidelines in the literature, for example McClary, seemed to cover all of the issues brought up by student responses on the *Student Evaluation Study*. Therefore, based on the online literature and aspects desired by students in the positive evaluation group for greater use of constructivist student-generated learning, the author devised a series of continua to focus the review of these 16 course syllabi. Here the syllabus, not the actual teaching of the course, is reviewed. Each continuum of the criteria outlined below had to be observable in a syllabus regardless of how it was to be executed, hence, some definitions as in 4 “climate” are exact opposites of others. The five continua (and definitions within #4) are the following:

1. teacher directed assignments and assessments ↔ student determined assignments/assessments
2. materials provided by instructor ↔ materials contributed by participants
3. learner becomes part of a community ↔ learner may participate entirely on his/her own
4. climate of course includes a large variety of interactions ↔ includes only one-or-few types of interactions (see the sub-headings below for descriptors)
  - a. interaction student-student; in this type of interaction, students must connect regarding topics, assignments, understanding of the materials, etc. without direct instructor participation;
  - b. interaction student-instructor; in this type of interaction, the student questions, comments, or otherwise engages the instructor on a one-to-one basis in turning in his/her assignments, using the mail functions, or otherwise generating communication;
  - c. interaction instructor-group; this is the most prevalent interaction where the instructor uses push notifications for materials, assignments, assessments to the whole group;

- d. interaction instructor-individual student; where the instructor addresses students one by one, individually, to give assignments, evaluations on papers/homework or other assignments, address concerns in the mail functions, etc.;
- e. interaction material-student; this category requires that the material presented (whether directly from the instructor, residing in the course textbook, or from internet sources) impact the student as an individual (and as part of the group) in a meaningful way;
- f. interaction student-material; the converse of (e) where the student interacts with the materials (regardless of how those were presented) by selecting those s/he chooses to use in order to show mastery of the knowledge or skill to some degree;
- g. OL environment beyond the course-student; this category requires the student to essentially create his/her own learning through a MOOC or other Internet activities, such as when a language learning student in one country interacts with one in a second country (target or otherwise) and those OL interactions to engage student learning occur without direct instructor oversight;
- 5. course objectives clearly relate to content, assignments and assessments  
 ↔ course objectives have an unclear relationship to either content, assignments and assessments or both/all.

While most of the above items are undoubtedly clear to readers, the distinction between 4(e) and 4(f) could be confusing without an example. A syllabus including 4(e) would require students to reflect on how a given text, as specified by the instructor in the syllabus, impacted their learning, whereas a syllabus including 4(f) would require students to select among materials available but not required by the instructor (textbook, additional readings, online video clips, etc.) in order to showcase their language knowledge by discussing how their selection impacted them. A typical assignment for 4(e) would be: discuss how the poem X has affected your understanding of the issues and changed your own perspective. A typical assignment for 4(f) would be: discuss how your perspective has changed regarding culture reflected through literature based on the readings you have found during our semester. Be sure to include copies of the works you selected and discuss both how and why each work contributed to your changed perspective.

Syllabus design and whether the same information was presented in multiple formats or how intuitive it may be was not reviewed, because these issues were at the heart of the OEC and TOL trainings. Furthermore, the author did not consider issues of quality, timeliness or relevance for the content materials selected by the faculty member. These issues are part of faculty expertise and the author's opinions on these would not have furthered the investigation of critical variables considered within the third research question, particularly in reference to interactions among students, instructor(s), and materials.

### *Course syllabus results*

The outcomes from analysis of the 16 courses are presented below. The course syllabi reviewed indicated that faculty were creating one of three basic types of OL environment, whether the course was entirely or only partially online.

1. Placement of the coursework, assignments, assessments into a new environment with minimal change from the face-to-face (f2f) classes. This type of course OL environment for presentation and major assessment was seen in 83% of the Spanish language classes, 25% of the freshman writing classes, and 50% of the literature with writing components in the English courses. The types of activities seen in such a syllabus required students to review a mini-lecture either using Tegrity, a course capture platform used during a f2f class then uploaded as the presentation portion of the OL course, a PowerPoint, or short bursts of written discourse. Students would then answer prompts either in a discussion board or blog-type arrangement. Next, students may/must respond to a given number of peers' posts, and the instructor summarizes the activities, gives a quiz, exam, or requires a mini or longer paper. Students then move forward to the next set of materials. While there were some variations including groups set up by the instructor or other features, these types of courses generally mirror what is traditionally happening in f2f classrooms.
2. The second type of OL class generally mirrored the traditional f2f classroom in presentation of information, as in (1) above, but then required students to find added materials in cyberspace and manipulate them by creating a PowerPoint, Prezi, summary/critique, or other means to demonstrate the new material to peers in the course. From the syllabi reviewed, 50% of the literature with writing courses, one portion of one hybrid freshman writing course, one of the Spanish language classes and both Spanish writing hybrid classes contained some elements in this area either as student presentation to peers or for at least one instructor graded assignment.
3. The third general type of course, found in only one of the entirely online courses, but in 50% (two) of the hybrid courses, included much less traditional f2f material (i.e., (1) above) and more student searches for materials which they then presented to the whole group, as seen in (2) above. Based on the information obtained from the analysis of these syllabi, it cannot be ascertained whether much of the general presentation in the f2f section of the hybrid courses was conducted similarly to (1). The one entirely online course which falls into this category required students to find oral and written information OL in the target language, then summarize these items for one assignment using Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) and for another using a Prezi or PPT, and give the source for others to have available. All students then were to comment, in the target language, on the summarizations and sources of their peers. The instructor stated s/he was available to help students through e-mail or discussion

boards, but the search, selection of materials, critiques, and presentation were controlled by the students. For this syllabus, there were only two instructor-prepared presentations of materials, one of which was to show the steps to find and evaluate quality information online.

Consideration of these 16 syllabi on the rubric discussed above prepared from SLA and OL best practices with adult learners yielded the following results:

1. All sections fit most clearly in the teacher-directed assignments and assessments. While students were able to add to the information in some courses, there were no completely student-determined assignments or assessments.
2. For nine of the 16 courses (56%), all materials were provided by the instructor. Five courses (31%) included less than 25% of the materials contributed by participants, and only two courses (1%), both in the freshman writing area, included more than 50% of the course material contributed by the group of students.
3. All sections included some assignments (usually discussion areas or blogs) that encouraged/allowed the learner to become part of a community. In no course could a learner participate solely on his/her own without any peer-to-peer interaction.
4. Only one course included a large variety of interactions, as part of continuum (4) above, using all of the sub-headings except g.

This information is abbreviated in table 2 summarizing interaction. The other fifteen courses generally included one or few types of interactions. The most

**Table 2:** Summary of interaction types found in syllabi.

Type of interaction	# of courses using this according to the syllabus	Courses where students contributed material and percentage
a. interaction student-student	2	Not indicated in syllabus*
b. interaction student-instructor	16	
c. interaction instructor-group	16	
d. interaction instructor-individual student	1	Not indicated in syllabus*
e. interaction material-student	7	9                    0% 5                    <50% 2                    >50%
f. interaction student-material	2	Not indicated in syllabus*
g. OL environment beyond the course-student	0	Not indicated in syllabus*

\* These actions may have occurred but were not designed within the syllabus.

common were instructor to group, material to student, and student to instructor. Among the fifteen remaining syllabi, which included somewhat more interaction, the sub-headings added were student-to-student and instructor-to-individual student.

5. All sixteen syllabi clearly related course objectives to content, assignments and assessments. While students might become confused, the fact that objectives, assignments, and assessments were clearly stated may be expected to reduce that likelihood.

### Discussion and best practices

From all of the above, it appears that students are aware of the importance of socially mediated online second language acquisition/language learning, but that this is missing in instructor-designed syllabi. SLA literature on constructivism (Vygotsky) and OL literature on Computer Mediated Communication (Görtler), how to best present materials for connectivism (Dede, *Connecting the Dots*) or the usefulness of MOOCs (Downes) support student comments regarding presentation styles that do not effectively teach online such as “lecture does not work”. The syllabi indicated few cases where students constructed their own learning or connected to information available online in the target language, and few opportunities for oral practice even in the Spanish language acquisition courses. Generally in courses with the most language interaction, this was somewhat artificial and mediated through writing. Newer technology may improve this last area as voice protocols and other free direct communication can be used OL for an approximation of f2f communication, through Skype for example.

The data indicate further that students value organization and flexible presentation of materials as well as interactions rather than presentations for learning language. Practices for instructors to consider when preparing online language learning courses include (1) announcing in the syllabus, from the beginning, times when the instructor will consistently check e-mail: this will prevent students from expecting answers at all hours when the teacher only checks once per day, (2) at various times throughout the course, asking students for input and using their ideas, and (3) varying the interactions and tools but not the due dates, i.e., keeping a clear calendar. Students prefer to have all assignments due on the same day of the week, for example, including discussion posts and quizzes. This helps them manage their time for the online course more effectively.

From the instructor perspective, it would appear that once the initial preparation of the online language learning experience was completed, the primary teaching function was grading and monitoring the communication with students through discussions and e-mail. While this may be viewed as an important advantage of online teaching, teachers using courses with more Computer

Mediated Communication (CMC), constructivism, and/or connectivism, will need to monitor the information, sources, and presentations by their students more actively. Many believe that one of the challenges in teaching online is the loss of immediacy (Moisey and Hughes) in the ability to interact with students, as teachers might miss those teachable moments where they can observe and engage the student just ready to leap forward in his or her learning. While this may be true to some extent, in syllabi which include more student-prepared and presented materials, the teachable moments may appear more readily than in the types of courses indicated by syllabi in this investigation. A needed caveat for teachers who have prepared online courses is to be aware of the newer technologies which can improve the course. It is tempting to simply use the same course, much as the f2f instructor uses the same, yellowed notes. With the online changes teachers need to keep abreast of the improvements, consider how these can impact student learning and engagement, review research as it appears, and incorporate the information and resources into their courses.

Unfortunately from the data, the online classes mirrored f2f classes so closely that some students, particularly in the hybrid courses, did not even consider the course “online” or special in any way. This indicates that these L2 instructors were not using the Internet environment effectively nor utilizing its unique properties to best benefit our students in their learning of the target language. Nor, it would seem, are instructors basing decisions on the second language acquisition (SLA), online (OL), or Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) research, and information available from these theoretical perspectives.

Most of what was observed in the syllabi and student comments appeared to be grounded predominantly in cognitively based SLA theories, although the instructors might have believed that they were creating socially interactive learning environments by having students react to peer submissions or interact with native speakers via some Internet assignments. The target for all of the objectives appears to be progress toward native-like usage of the language. In a linguistic situation such as the lower Rio Grande Valley where our students leave the classroom and can get both input and social interaction in the two target languages of English and Spanish, the online portions of the courses are not necessary for learners to reach the point of engaged language learning. Social constructivist experiences as well as those recreating the complexity and chaotic nature of language environments exist regardless. However, for students learning languages other than Spanish or English, such as Korean, Japanese, German, Portuguese, or Chinese (also taught sporadically at the university) the paradigm observed in the OL SLA learning environments would not move students into social constructionist or complexity theoretic learning. And, this is precisely where the OL learning environment can excel for SLA.

SLA theories and the calls for reconceptualizing SLA into socio-constructionist paradigms, recognizing the interactions between chaos/complexity theory (e.g., Larsen-Freeman) and its interface with OL didactic ergonomics (Bertin,

Gravé, and Narcy-Combes) as one example, or Downes's use of complexity as another, indicate a need for students to learn at the edge, where their previous knowledge meets the messiness of real language. A major part of that messiness includes interacting with other learners whose linguistic knowledge is incomplete, as well as many whose dialects and usage are variable. Thus, instructors and students must accept the fact that SLA can benefit from less than native-like input (Jenkins; Ortega). The native-language user need not be the goal of instruction; communication with other users of the target language can become the goal in its stead.

If OL SLA teachers are able to make this key shift, and to bring the students along in rejecting previously held assumptions that they can only learn from "perfect" or native target language users, then all can use the OL environment to benefit students' SLA enormously. Instructors, particularly those who have been trained using typical linear learning patterns, as many OL training series, including at this institution, emphasize (create course goals, state objectives within each goal, relate information presentation to objectives, relate each activity to objectives, relate each assessment to activities, information, and objectives), should relinquish control of each and every student move and get out of the way of unplanned, yes even chaotic, learning. It will occur regardless; practitioners must learn to use it effectively. Students must move beyond expecting classes to be linear and boring whereas their own surfing of the 'net is unpredictable, segueing from topic to topic and OL page to page without planning, is exciting. What both teachers and students must recognize is that learning occurs through this apparently random process of OL surfing. Teachers must utilize this type of learning and then help students reflect on it so that their learning becomes available to them consciously.

To best utilize the knowledge of SLA from all perspectives, the OL environment provides L2 teachers throughout the world with unlimited potential. Consider the availability of free OL language learning at sources such as LiveMOCHA. Finding resources for students to interact with others throughout the world using written and Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) is a few clicks away, and often at no cost as with Open Learning courses. Pen-pal interchanges with real-time cyberspace friends in chats, even through Skype or Wimba or other VOIP, present students with a means to interact online; blogs creating online journals of their OL language experiences, views, or comments assist in writing in the target language; Wikis created either with instructor-generated topics or entirely by students themselves based on areas of their mutual interests give SLA students plenty of room to work collaboratively, uploading pages from OL sources, commenting on these, and creating a summary. Instructors can merely observe, using the tracking functions, or they can be more actively involved as community members. Before and/or after, instructors may focus assignments to encourage noticing (Shekary and Tahririan) which seems to help in the learning curve. While this is not necessary for learning, it helps students realize that they are indeed learning.

The OL environment provides phenomenal wealth of input for L2 students (Görtler). MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, Teachertube, FaceBook or Edmodo, SecondLife applications, currently all allow students to engage with others using the target language, and this list will undoubtedly continue to grow. An important consideration then becomes not allowing the OL environment to control the course, but rather organizing the course by objectives, then allowing students to decide how they as agents of their own learning wish to address those objectives using the OL effectively as adult individuals (Knowles). Although there are usually more teacher driven assignments in the earlier levels of learning, instructors should strive to encourage student exploration of the target language online early on. At intermediate and advanced levels, students should be encouraged or even required to contribute much of their own content as well as method OL. To do so, guide sheets for each objective are useful tools. These state the objective, state what must be learned to meet that objective, give options for finding instructor, library, and online resources to meet those requirements, and then provide a timeline to assist students in organizing their work. Students must then reflect on their search, the objective, and how they believe they should be evaluated as successful, and meet the instructor-generated requirement for assessment whether it be a paper, an exam, peer student evaluations, or another means of ensuring that the objective requirement is met. Some instructors in face-to-face syllabi use these in a contract with students. A sample contract might state that if a student completes five objectives and passes the required evaluations, plus turns in a quality portfolio reflection on each, s/he will get an A; if four, a B; if 3, a C and so forth. Other instructors use rubrics built into the course. These can apply equally well to OL language learning courses.

This chapter has covered a number of issues related to improving online second language courses. In order to clarify these practices and their source, table 3 on best practices sums up both.

## Conclusion

This chapter has presented the data from two related but independent investigations into online language learning courses at the university level for students who were mostly bilingual in the languages but learning how to navigate academic discourses. The Student Evaluation Study indicated key features which are viewed positively or negatively in such courses, and illustrated the forms of awareness students have developed about their online language learning. The follow-up Syllabus Analysis Study considered variables in instructor's designs as these related to the factors observed from the previous investigation. Both were combined to consider (1) the aspects of online language learning courses viewed positively, (2) those viewed negatively, and (3) if the results from (1) and (2) could be attributed to one or a combination of variables. The literatures from



**Table 3:** Overview of best practices and source for the information.

<b>Practice:</b>	<b>SE sy</b>	<b>SLA lit</b>	<b>OL lit</b>
Student generates information from OL sources and presents to peers	✓	✓	✓
Student interacts with students to evaluate/critique information presented by students	✓	✓	✓
Students learn to use instructor as guide		✓	✓
Students learn from others who are not native speakers, required to encounter others and communicate with them online regardless of their proficiency in the lang.		✓	
Students are responsible to construct their own knowledge		✓	✓
Instructor presents few informational sessions/lessons	✓		✓
Instructor does include one informational session on internet safety			✓
Instructor organizes content presentations (by instructor and by students) and timeline clearly	✓		✓
Instructor is willing to change but ONLY when flexibility is needed (assignment takes longer than anticipated . . . power outage)	✓	✓	✓
Instructor generates learning objectives which are clear and demonstrates how these can be met by various assignments (gives options not only one assignment per objective)	✓		✓
INSTRUCTOR ANSWERS E-MAIL quickly, gives specific times s/he will be available online to answer	✓		✓
Instructor monitors course daily	✓		
Instructor critiques quickly any student-generated info which may not meet an objective/or may be inappropriate	✓		✓
Instructor posts grades for assignments/assessments quickly so students know where they stand	✓		
Course syllabi should include content information learning objectives	✓		✓
Syllabi should include timeline for student presentation/ participation	✓		✓
Syllabi should include requirements to meet objectives for each content learning area	✓		✓
Syllabi should include info on contacting/getting help from instructor	✓		
Syllabi should include info on “how to” especially on internet safety issues			✓

second language acquisition (SLA), Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), and the online sources juxtaposed here have indicated that acquisition occurs at the edge of the messiness of language learning through student active exploration and experiencing the language. Student data indicate that they are aware of the need to socially construct their language learning, and primarily want the instructor to organize the learning environment and be available. Syllabi often do not address these needs. As language professionals, instructors must reflect in their syllabi for online and hybrid courses as well as face-to-face courses, that they value communicative goals which can be reached regardless of reference to the native language as the target. For OL instruction, this recognition permits effective use of the Internet with its amazing access to global communities as an integral part of the classroom.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This was not yet considered as psycholinguistic theory. The concept here is more general (mental processes became associated with the psycholinguistic models at a later date) early on, language learning was construed as finding the mental equivalents to real world events.
- <sup>2</sup> Ellis and Collins is the author order for the Introduction while Collins and Ellis is the author order for the Special Issue.

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## Appendix: Student Evaluation Questionnaire

Questions on the Student Evaluation used (both online and face-to-face)

### Demographics:

- My classification is \_\_\_\_\_ Gender
- Overall GPA Grade I expect in this course
- My major
- I took this course to satisfy (major, minor, university, other specific degree, elective)
- Number of semester hours in which I am enrolled
- Number of hours per week I spend working
- Avg. number of hours per week I spend studying for this course

### Instructor Rating Scale (excellent, good, average, fair, poor)

- Overall rating as an instructor in this course
- Explanation of subject matter in this course
- Availability for help online
- Clarity of communication in lecture
- Encouragement of students to ask questions
- Encouragement of students to express ideas
- Acceptance of disagreements with students
- Interest and enthusiasm in the subject by the instructor
- Courtesy to students in the course
- Pertinence of assignments to subject matter in the course

Comments on assigned work

Advanced notice of major exams

Explanation of grading procedures

Application of announced grading procedures

Clarity of assignments

Enthusiasm with which you would recommend this instructor to other students

Professional level maintained by the instructor

### **Open ended responses**

What single aspect of this course did you like the most? Dislike the most?

What do you think of the instructional methods used in this course?

What do you think of the following aspects of the course: textbook, assignments, exams

What difficulty, if any, did you experience in completing the required work? Explain.

What changes, if any, would have enabled you to gain more from this course?

Were you motivated to work for a higher level of skill and/or knowledge in this subject by the instructor? Why or why not?

Did you feel that the instructor was interested and enthusiastic about the subject field? Why or why not?

What do you think of the evaluation methods used by this instructor?

How could this instructor improve his/her teaching effectiveness? Explain.

Do you think the stated course objectives were achieved?

Other comments.

# Social Networking Site Participation and Language Learner Motivation

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## Abstract

The foundation of online social networking sites (SNSs) is the social dimension commonly found in second language (L2) motivation models (Dörnyei, “Attitudes, orientations, and motivations” 3). From a sociocultural theoretical perspective (e.g., Lantolf; Lantolf and Thorne), these sites, particularly those intended for language learning, can provide the requisite environment for scaffolding, self-regulation, and agency that lead to learner motivation. This chapter will present a case study of one Spanish language learner’s participation in Livemocha over the course of one academic year and her subsequent participation on Facebook pertaining to the continued study of world languages. Through participant user-perception interviews and observation of the learner’s activity in these SNSs, the data reveal the ways in which participation affects learner motivation and the ways in which this motivation manifests in participant behavior. The discussion will include pedagogical recommendations and implications.

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## Keywords

Motivation, social networking sites, case study, Livemocha

## Introduction

Motivation, as summarized by Dörnyei and Ushioda, “concerns the *direction* and *magnitude* of human behavior ... [and] is responsible for *why* people decide to do something, *how long* they are willing to sustain the activity, [and] *how hard* they are going to pursue it” (4). As such, it is a key point of interest in all fields of teaching and learning, and because of the nature of learning a second language (L2), the role of motivation in the learning process is particularly interesting and relevant.

Language is a medium for self-expression, communication, and accessing information and resources. An L2 is not simply something to add to our repertoire of skills, but a personalized tool that enables us to expand and express our identity or sense of self in new and interesting ways; to participate in a more diverse range of contexts and broaden our horizons; and to access and share new and alternative sources of information, entertainment, or material that we need, value or enjoy (Ushioda, “Motivation” 82–83).

The unique way in which language learning can tap into a learner’s identity should be considered an advantage for motivation and a resource for teaching. However, as Ushioda points out, in many cases language teachers regard the topic of motivation as a problem (“Motivation” 77). Educators continue to look to technology to provide assistance and solutions for the difficult questions regarding how to engage and retain student interest and how to deal with necessary but potentially discouraging elements such as assessments and assignments. This chapter will discuss social networking site (SNS) participation and its effects on language learner motivation.

### *The evolution of L2 motivation theory*

In the field of language teaching and learning, there is a long history of the study of motivation. Over the past few decades, the field of psychology has seen several paradigm shifts that have impacted L2 motivation theories and research. Dörnyei and Ushioda summarize the history of language learning motivation theory into four phases of thought: the social psychological period (1959–1990), the cognitive-situated period (during the 1990s), the process-oriented period (turn of the century), and the socio-dynamic period (current thinking).

Characterized by the work of Robert Gardner and his colleagues in Canada, the social psychological period considered the motivation to learn an L2 to be a “primary force responsible for enhancing or hindering intercultural communication and affiliation,” since L2s are the bridge between ethnolinguistic communities (Dörnyei and Ushioda 40). What begins to differentiate language learning motivation from other types of learning motivation in this period is that learners’ attitudes and ethnocentric orientation influence their learning. They are expected to, as Gardner and Lambert explain, “identify with members of another ethnolinguistic group and to take on very subtle aspects of their behaviour, including their distinctive style of speech and their language” (135). This period focused on integrativeness, which “implies an openness to, and respect for, other cultural groups and ways of life; in the extreme, it might involve complete identification with the community (and possibly even withdrawal from one’s original group)” (Dörnyei, “Attitudes, orientations, and motivations” 5). Popular theories during this social psychological period included Gardner’s theory of L2 Motivation, the concept of linguistic self-confidence (Clément, “Ethnicity, contact and communicative competence”, and “Second language proficiency and acculturation”; Clément, Gardner, and Smythe), the intergroup model (Giles and Byrne), acculturation theory (Schumann “The acculturation model”, and “Research on the acculturation model”), and the situated identity theory (e.g., Clément and Noels; Clément, Noels, and Denault; Noels, Pon and Clément). These eventually segued into a deeper consideration of situational factors that affect language learning motivation.

The cognitive-situated period arose in response to the cognitive revolution in mainstream motivational psychology and represented the “desire to move from the broad perspective of ethnolinguistic communities and learners’ general disposition and attitudes to language learning, and sharpen the focus on more *situated* analysis of motivation in specific learning contexts” (Dörnyei and Ushioda 46). By broadening the existing theoretical framework on motivation to include “a more practitioner-validated concept of motivation shaped by insights from motivation research in education,” theories in the cognitive-situated period were able to address the concerns of classroom teachers and consider learner motivation within that setting (Dörnyei and Ushioda 47). From this expansion arose the three-level framework of L2 motivation (Dörnyei, “Motivation and motivating” 280) and the social constructivist model (Williams and Burden 121). In describing and classifying the many factors that shape language learning motivation, the above frameworks identified several relevant areas of inquiry, including attributional processes (e.g., Skehan 100–118), self-determination theory (e.g., Deci and Ryan), autonomy theory (e.g., Allwright 212–226; Dam 1–84; Dickinson) and task motivation (e.g., Crookes and Gass *Tasks in a Pedagogical Context*, and *Tasks and Language Learning*; Long; Long and Crookes; Willis). The increased attention to the role of autonomy in motivation led to more interest in its temporal dimension and the idea of motivation as a process over time.

The main areas of inquiry during the process-oriented period shifted to focus more heavily on the dynamics of L2 motivational change at both micro and macro levels. Such areas included global changes in motivation (e.g., Chambers; Dörnyei, Csizér, and Németh; Gardner et al.; Williams, Burden, and Lanvers), motivation across the lifespan of a learner (e.g., Lim; Shoaib and Dörnyei), and motivational self-regulation (e.g., Dörnyei and Otto; Ushioda “Effective motivational thinking”, “Language learning at university”, and “Motivation as a socially mediated process”). Recently, process-oriented research has been shaped by several critical factors that have come into view: the complexity of the interrelationship of motivational factors, the integration of motivation and social context, and the rise of global English (Dörnyei and Ushioda 71). These considerations have made way for a more socio-dynamic approach to the study of motivation.

The most current work in learner motivation has been centered on socio-cultural theory. This present-day socio-dynamic period considers “the situated complexity of the L2 motivation process and its organic development in dynamic interaction with a multiplicity of inter, social, and contextual factors... [and] the broader complexities of language and use in the modern globalised world” (Dörnyei and Ushioda 72). Communication and connectivity within and among this modern world involves participation with technological mediums. In a discussion on digital games for language learning, Sykes and Reinhardt draw from a sociocultural perspective to explain that “motivation is not something that precedes or results from activity, but something that emerges with it” (92). The idea that motivation is not only inseparable from activity, but in fact intertwined with it, is fundamental for the ever-evolving field of second language teaching and learning (L2TL) and technology.

### *Learner motivation, L2TL, and technology*

The increasing use of technology for language teaching and learning greatly impacts learner motivation in and out of the classroom context. In their work on digital games for L2TL, Sykes and Reinhardt point out that technology, such as digital games and media, is often blamed for the seeming lack of learner motivation in academic work. They suggest that rather than jump to blame the current trends, we should instead strive for a thorough understanding of these technologies. A solid grounding in emerging digital tools and practices can position teachers to thoroughly take advantage of these tools’ many affordances, while optimizing the potential for learner engagement and motivation. The philosophy that “teachers need to promote a sense of continuity between what [students] learn and do in the classroom, and who they are and what they are interested in doing in their lives outside the classroom...” is one that Ushioda considers crucial for classroom practice, and the theme of “socializing language learners’ motivation from within” is growing more significant as learners become more connected to and involved with the digital realm (“Motivation” 83).

In his discussion of the process-oriented approach to motivational strategy, Dörnyei explains components of motivational teaching practice in the L2 classroom (*Motivational Strategies* 28–29). In this model, making teaching materials relevant for the learners is a key aspect of generating their initial motivation. The practice of drawing a connection between course activities and the immediately relevant world of the learner is something for which Thorne and Reinhardt strongly advocate. A principle underlying premise for the bridging activities pedagogical model is that it draws from digital media and the emerging literacies associated with these media to find content that is “highly relevant to [students’] current and future lives as language users” (560). Technologies such as instant messaging and synchronous chat, blogs and wikis, digital games, and others, permit and even facilitate integration that allows students to seamlessly bridge their personal e-routines with school-specific ones, allowing teachers to, as Ushioda suggests, link student activity with learning objectives (“Motivation” 83). In doing this, educators inject a much more present sense of purpose, and therefore motivation, into activities and lead learners to advanced L2 proficiency.

When the lines are blurred between what students consider to be schoolwork and what they consider to be personal, students are more likely to experience a sense of flow. The concept of *flow*, which Salen and Zimmer define as “a particular state of mind in which a participant achieves a high degree of focus and enjoyment” (336) and which Sykes and Reinhardt call “the ultimate manifestation of motivation” (97), is one that has great importance in L2 teaching and learning. Flow states allow learners to become so immersed in their learning experience that it ceases to be considered “work”. Being able to achieve flow states can be hugely beneficial for learners, particularly those who are less successful in traditional learning contexts, and knowing how to create the proper environment or activities in which a learner might achieve a state of flow is a powerful resource for teachers to harness. As Sykes and Reinhardt discuss, flow states are not limited to game play experiences; they can occur in a number of contexts, including participation in social networking sites (SNSs), which are the focus of this chapter.

### *Learner motivation and social networking sites*

Dörnyei discusses the “inherent social dimension of language learning motivation,” distinguishing learning an L2 from other school subjects (“Attitudes, orientations, and motivations” 3). SNSs are one way to tap into the intrinsic social nature of language and encourage learners to communicate with others. SNSs are a hot topic in the fields of education, and previous work has shown them to have the potential to improve learner motivation (e.g., Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds 12). One way in which SNSs can create higher levels of learner motivation is through connections with the instructor. Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds discuss how instructors have a freedom of expression on SNSs that is not necessarily matched on university websites, permitting higher levels of

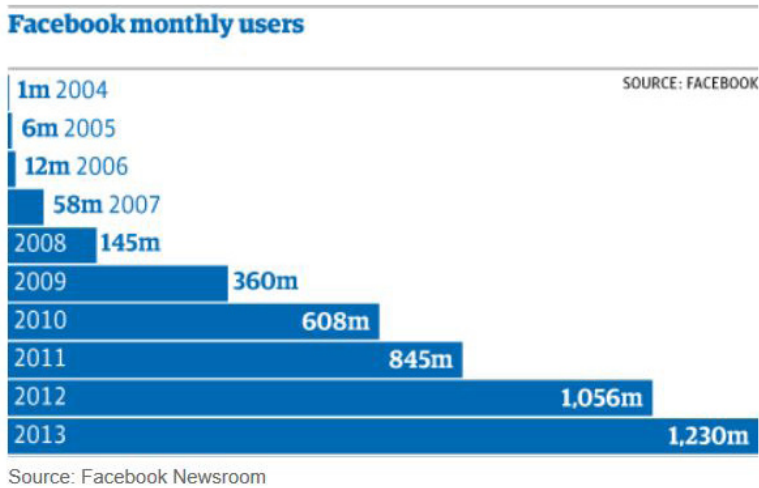
self-disclosure, which result in a “more comfortable classroom climate” and “higher levels of anticipated motivation and affective learning” (12). This idea ties in well with Dörnyei’s previously discussed motivational strategies (*Motivational Strategies* 28–29). The opportunity for uninhibited self-disclosure between learners and teachers or language partners, as the case may be, can improve the sense of relevance in their interactions. The process of sharing oneself and creating an identity online has become normalized as SNSs gain ubiquity.

In the past decade, SNSs have grown tremendously in popularity and usage. Table 1 below illustrates the dramatic increase in participation that Facebook saw in fewer than ten years.

In 2012, the number of Facebook users surpassed 1 billion, and as of the end of the first quarter of 2015, Facebook had 1,441m active users (Statistica). Much of this growth is the result of a growing international participation. The international reach of common SNSs gives participants the opportunity to easily connect with other users from across the globe. As of the beginning of 2014, there were 70 languages available on Facebook, and 75% of its users are outside of the U.S. (Statistic Brain). There are also now SNSs created for this purpose of connecting people from different backgrounds.

Livemocha is an SNS designed to provide a venue in which people can learn and practice languages. Since its launch in 2007, Livemocha has grown to be a community of more than 16 million members, representing 195 countries

**Table 1:** Facebook Growth (2004–2013)



Source: Sedghi, Ami. (2014, February 4). “Facebook: 10 years of social networking, in numbers.” *The Guardian*. The Guardian, 4 Feb 2014. Web. 28 Sept. 2015.

(Livemocha).<sup>1</sup> Members of Livemocha create user profiles, which are used to attract and select language partners who will engage in self-initiated and self-guided, text-based chat. The understanding among the Livemocha community is that there will be an exchange of expertise. Everyone is an expert speaker of someone else's target language (TL), and the relationship between the conversation partners is mutually beneficial.

This study will investigate whether authentic use of the TL through participation in Livemocha can yield positive effects for learner motivation by seeking to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways can participation in an SNS help and hinder language learner motivation?
2. How does this motivation manifest in participant behavior in SNSs?

## Methods

### *Participant*

This study will focus primarily on SNS activity and interviews from one participant, Cammy (a pseudonym). Cammy voluntarily made her Facebook activity available for analysis, and this additional data made her a unique case for this particular investigation. At the time of data collection, Cammy was a 33-year-old returning student who had begun a second bachelor's degree in biology. While attending classes, she worked as a programming assistant at the local public radio station. Prior to this study, she had lived in a number of cities in the Southwest and Western coast of the United States as well as in India. She had also travelled recreationally for one week in Mexico.

Cammy was an outgoing, eager, and confident Spanish language learner. She showed no hesitation in initiating and holding conversations with strangers in order to practice using Spanish. Her previous formal study of Spanish included a college-level course in medical Spanish one year prior to this study and a course in high school fifteen years prior to this study. She had, however, maintained some consistent exposure to the language, using it in her job at the radio station and at her former job as a medical assistant.

Cammy had previous experience using online social networks and online text chatting programs, communicating in both English and Spanish. She also had experience using Livemocha prior to the study as a means to connect and speak with native speakers of Spanish in order to improve her abilities with the language, and she expressed interest in using the program to learn other languages as well. Additionally, Cammy used Facebook frequently for both chatting and social networking purposes and Myspace occasionally to explore music. She expressed eagerness to use these tools as part of the Spanish curriculum.

### *Data collection and analysis*

The data used in this study form part of a larger corpus of longitudinal conversational data from a group of learners who used Livemocha's chatting function in class as a course supplement for one academic year. These learners received a participation grade for their Livemocha interactions as part of an intensive beginning and intensive intermediate Spanish course (fall and spring semesters, respectively). During the first semester, learners logged in to Livemocha every two weeks for 30–40 minutes, for a total of 6 sessions. During the second semester, data collection procedures were modified to consist of five tri-weekly, one-hour sessions. Learners were instructed to log into Livemocha, seek out chat partners, and engage in conversation. When they finished their conversations, participants left their chat windows open and the researcher copied the text and pasted it into *Microsoft Word* files for storage. Screen recordings were also taken of the students' time logged in to Livemocha (using *Snappz Pro* during the first semester of data collection and *QuickTime Player* for the second semester of data collection). However, the screen recording technology was unreliable with a high rate of data loss. As a result, the resulting corpus was compiled from the copied typed transcripts.<sup>2</sup> In addition to conversations, study participants completed an introductory questionnaire to gather information about previous language study and experience with SNSs. Participants also had the opportunity to participate in user perception interviews at the end of each semester. The data being analyzed for this study consist of Cammy's introductory survey, her two user perception interviews, and researcher observations of Cammy's Livemocha and Facebook activity.<sup>3</sup>

## **Results**

From the beginning of the academic year, Cammy was open-minded about Livemocha's involvement in her course. In her introductory survey, she expressed her interest at the prospect of chatting online to learn Spanish, stating that she believed it would provide "spontaneous, good real practice" (Participant Introductory Questionnaire). Through her Livemocha activity and her interviews, Cammy exhibited two primary ways in which her participation was augmented through Livemocha.

### *Increased participation*

Cammy continued her participation with Livemocha beyond the scope of her course's requirements, both through the conversation function of the SNS and through engagement in other activities on the Livemocha platform. Cammy

logged in to Livemocha and initiated conversations with other participants outside of her required, in-class lab sessions.<sup>4</sup> After her first semester, she discussed her out-of-class participation in Livemocha: “I really thought I’d do it more, but I haven’t been really outside of class except for like twice” (Participant Interview 12/3/09). However, after the second semester, Cammy revealed to the researcher that she had voluntarily logged in to Livemocha to practice conversation during the month-long winter interim period.

While the class used the SNSs purely for the conversational function, Cammy also embraced the opportunity to become involved in Livemocha on a deeper level than was required for her course. In her interviews, she discussed the various other modes for participation in Livemocha, including completing language exercises and providing feedback for other participants’ exercises. Describing her involvement with feedback requests, Cammy said:

I have a lot of pending requests. I actually want to do all of them because I find it really interesting, and I think it helps with our learning of another language because you can project yourself into that ... because I think when we’re learning, like right now the articles in Spanish, it sounds like, ‘Oh yeah, just throw one in there or whatever,’ but it sounds so wrong when you use the wrong one. It helps to be aware of what is right in your own language (Participant Interview 12/3/09).

Her involvement in this feature, however, was not reciprocal. At the time of her interview, she had not yet submitted any exercises to her Livemocha peers for feedback but stated, “I will I think” (Participant Interview 12/3/09).

In addition to engaging in the Livemocha activities, Cammy used the “friending” function to create links between her and other Livemocha participants. Adding friends to build a personal network within Livemocha was not a required action for her course, and when asked who she indicated as a friend and why, she explained,

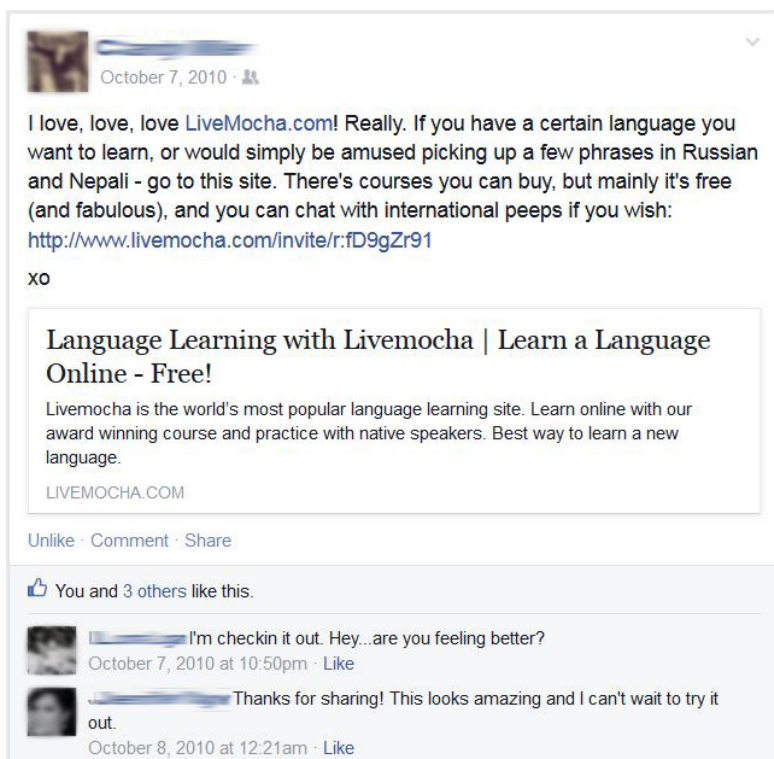
People I talked to that I liked or that I started talking to and wanted to sort of save to talk to again, and I’ve actually requested a couple people that ... just looked really interesting, mostly because they spoke a lot of languages... if I’m gonna use [Livemocha] I don’t want to be having the same exact conversation with different people. I want to kinda get more in-depth about that person or see that they are interested in things that I might be interested in so we can talk more and not just be like ‘Where do you live? What’s it like there?’ (Participant Interview 12/3/09).

By engaging more fully in Livemocha, Cammy considered efficiency and effectiveness to strategically curate her participation and build a network that most supported her personal path to language learning.



### *Extended participation*

Cammy also extended her participation with Livemocha beyond the span of the course, both by continuing to use it after the course was finished and by incorporating it into her personal routine, independently of her formal study. Cammy discussed Livemocha on her Facebook wall, a strong indication that she was accepting Livemocha as more than simply a course tool or requirement. Five months after her course obligation to use Livemocha (and after the official data collection period) had ended, Cammy logged into her Facebook account to praise and advertise Livemocha. Example 1 shows Cammy's post regarding Livemocha. Names and identifying photographs in examples have been blurred to maintain confidentiality.



**Example 1:** Facebook wall post (October 7, 2010)

Cammy's Facebook status update in example 1 reads:

I love, love love LiveMocha.com! Really. If you have a certain language you want to learn, or would simply be amused picking up a few phrases

in Russian and Nepali - go to this site. There's courses you can buy, but it's mainly free (and fabulous), and you can chat with international peeps if you wish... (Facebook status update).

She then linked directly to the site. Cammy's enthusiasm for Livemocha is apparent in the language and tone of this post, and her post elicited a response from her Facebook network. The post received three "likes" (one from the researcher), and the two comments that followed show a positive reception by Cammy's Facebook friends. The first stated, "I'm checkin it out" and the second exclaimed, "Thanks for sharing! This looks amazing and I can't wait to try it out."

Further evidence of true adoption of this network into Cammy's ritual can be found in the extension of her Livemocha participation through the linking of her account with her Facebook account. This is shown eight months after her obligation to use Livemocha has ended when Cammy posted information to her Facebook wall about her Livemocha participation, *via* the Livemocha web-site. Example 2 shows the post sharing her Livemocha activity on Facebook.



**Example 2:** Facebook wall post (January 4, 2011)

The post in Example 2 reads: “I just learned 40 new Norwegian (Bokmal) phrases—can you top that?” This post received two likes, and the seven comments that follow are an exchange between Cammy and three of her Facebook friends, one of whom was a classmate from her Spanish course and a participant in the study. Her classmate’s reply on January 5, 2011 reads, “I keep thinking I should use Livemocha again. *Quizas puedo hablar contigo* (Perhaps I can talk with you)?” Cammy’s replied on January 10, 2011 by agreeing to her classmate’s request, “*Por supuesto* (Of course), [name extracted]!” While it is uncertain whether these two former classmates did in fact begin communication via Livemocha for the purpose of practicing their Spanish language communication skills, it is clear that the opportunity to do so is both present and becoming integrated into their regular daily activity on SNSs.

## Discussion

This study aimed to explore the ways in which participation in a SNS can help and/or hinder language learner motivation and to gather insight into not what is guaranteed or expected from SNS participation, but rather what is possible. The study did not attempt to quantify or compare Cammy’s motivation to that of other learners or to speculate on her personal intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Rather, this discussion focuses on the ways in which SNS participation affected Cammy’s motivation and the ways in which this motivation manifests in her behavior. In Cammy’s case, there is no evidence to suggest that participation in a SNS resulted in any hindrance to her motivation to learn Spanish. On the contrary, participation in Livemocha and subsequent participation in Facebook helped to bolster Cammy’s motivation by providing her with opportunities to engage further with her TL and a community of learners and experts of that language. The results of this study illustrate a number of ways in which we see motivation arise through Cammy’s participation in SNSs. It is not the SNS itself that affects her motivation, rather it is the unique affordances of the virtual space – and the common interest of language learning around which the space is organized – that influences her experience with her TL study. Gonzalez described how Livemocha complies with the characteristics of Gee’s affinity space model (104–5), in which a learner can embark on a “unique trajectory through a complex space of opportunities and a social journey as [the learner] shares aspects of that trajectory with others...” (Gee 89). Sharing the learning experience with others plays an important role in learners’ navigation of any affinity space, making them ideal venues for individualized, but social, learning.

Peer influence is, therefore, a powerful consideration when examining the effects of SNS participation on learner motivation. This is apparent in the interactions that occurred in Cammy’s Facebook posts. The positive reinforcement received in the form of likes and comments, as discussed in Examples 1 and 2, does more than simply reinforce Cammy’s participation; it also motivates her

to take her participation even further by reconnecting with a former classmate to continue practicing their TL. Cammy also experiences peer influence within her network of learners in Livemocha, since the entire platform is based upon the philosophy of reciprocal participation. By appealing to the good nature of its community of members, Livemocha evokes a sense of good will or obligation to motivate users to participate in an exchange of expertise. As described above, Cammy finds it interesting and helpful to provide feedback to learners of English. Since it is encouraging to be viewed as an expert of one subject while navigating the novice levels of another, this model is another potential benefit for motivation.

Another way the connection with her peers helped to increase Cammy's motivation was by providing her with a space in which to display her accomplishments. The significance of the connection Cammy formed between her SNSs (Livemocha and Facebook) is that it allowed her to advertise language learning goals and successes through the more expansive scope of her personal Facebook network, increasing her accountability to stay on her goal to continue to pursue the study of L2s, while working to recruit others to join her endeavor. This integration and continuity created between her life and "classroom" is precisely the idea for which Ushioda advocates in order to positively impact learner motivation ("Motivation").

The apparently blurred lines being formed between her "personal" and "educational" spaces might also suggest a deeper level of engagement. Flow states, as previously discussed, have been described as the point of high engagement during which a certain activity ceases to be perceived as work. While Cammy's participation does not necessarily fill the definition of flow states as the term is used in previous work (i.e., during a single sitting or action), it can be argued that her increased participation, through engagement in Livemocha elements outside of tandem chat and interaction outside of class time, and extended participation, by continuing to interact with Livemocha beyond the scope of her requirements, models the same overarching concepts of what occurs for learners during a state of flow, but on a larger scale.

Another possibility to consider is the idea that her previous exposure to the SNSs for language learning set Cammy up for increased motivation. In Cammy's case, she found the idea of participation in SNSs for the purpose of language learning favorable from the beginning. She had a positive outlook of the possibilities of this activity for language learning and had previous experience, albeit minimal, with this specific endeavor. The fact that her previous experiences with Livemocha paved the way for motivation makes sense in the socio-cultural theoretical framework, which views motivation as an epiphenomenon of development and interaction. As Sykes and Reinhardt so simply stated, "Motivation emerges from meaningful engagement with material" (94), and Cammy consistently worked to find meaning in her interactions.

Taking into consideration the shifting trends in L2TL, it is critical that instructors begin to leverage tools such as SNSs to better position their courses

and their discipline within the framework of evolving institutional standards and requirements. The ability to involve digital literacies (such as the savvy to use social media to connect with a larger network of TL speakers) in L2 curricula is necessary for students' future success in a globalized world and for the long-term viability and survival of language programs in higher education.

For traditional classroom-taught courses, SNSs can provide a link to an authentic network of native and heritage speakers and other language learners, broadening the reach of the classroom content and providing learners with the opportunity to connect with a literal world of users of their TL. Participation in SNSs does not need to occur during class and, as such, can be a valuable resource for flipping or blending traditional face-to-face courses by providing learners with TL interaction outside of class and through various mediums. In blended and online course contexts, SNSs can be a link not only to the outside world of TL speakers, but can also be an effective and efficient way to foster a class community that can support each other long after the traditional course period has ended. As illustrated in Example 2, Cammy was able to maintain connections with her classmates via Facebook and make plans to continue practicing her TL with her former classmate in the familiar and comfortable environment of Livemocha.

In any context, SNSs are a practical, easily accessible, and financially viable venue for real-life, meaningful application of the TL. The personal and highly adaptable nature of SNSs allows for a variety of applications and a high level of differentiation. Each user has the ability to individualize a personal network to achieve his or her specific goals, which can lead to improved personal connections between students and the TL and culture, and in turn positively influence their motivation for learning. On a larger-scale, institutions or programs can more heavily facilitate and curate SNS participation to achieve specific curricular goals, while still offering learners a sense of agency.

As with any technology, it is important for teachers to consider best practices when contemplating the incorporation of SNS participation into language learning curricula, considering both the desired learning outcomes and the desires of the students. The bridging activities model (Thorne and Reinhardt 558), as previously discussed, "offers principled instructional parameters for the development of digital L2 literacies" since SNSs are textualized socio-literacy practice (Lamy, Reinhardt, and Zourou 161). This is one model to help inform teachers' integration of SNSs into language activities. To ensure student engagement, this model calls for student selection of material and voluntary participation in activities, however for the purposes of language development, in some cases (as with Reinhardt and Zander 339) mandatory participation might be appropriate.

Teachers do not lose their relevance as learning becomes more individually directed and achievable with the help of an online network. Rather, the role of the teacher is more important than ever, essential to guiding learners' journeys with their TLs through strategically designed activities. Since no two learners

or groups of learners are the same, teachers take on the challenging role of determining how to best connect students with the TL. Teacher training and professional development opportunities will be critical for providing a forum in which best practices for implementation of SNS activities in language courses can be discussed and established. These discussions should be ongoing to adapt and refine methods as students' needs and learning styles shift with evolving and emerging technologies. It is also critical for teachers to practice what they preach and acquire first-hand experience, experimenting with and participating in the SNSs that learners use. Future research should continue to examine ways in which teachers can effectively and efficiently incorporate these tools into their curricula to give learners the skills to use the TL in an ever-expanding number of digital contexts.

## Conclusion

While the learner in this case study illustrated motivation manifesting in various ways throughout her involvement in the Livemocha SNS, this style of undirected participation may not be effective for all students. In the present study, data was not available to thoroughly investigate the SNS activity of Cammy's class peers, and since Cammy's demographic profile does not represent the typical college learner, generalizations should not be drawn from this one case. These data do, however, justify further exploration of this topic, and additional studies are required to determine whether these findings might be generalizable across different populations of students, studying different levels, and through different modalities.

It is also important to note that SNSs are not without limitations and concerns. Working with a public SNS, while providing invaluable authentic context, can be inconsistent and may not provide learners with an equal experience in terms of the type and quality of their interactions. Teachers should always have a backup plan in the event that the present climate of the SNS is not conducive to the activity or task. Additionally, as with any technology, there are issues regarding access and inclusivity of students who may not have the resources readily available to participate in a SNS outside of class, and it is important to ensure that all learners have access to the technology necessary for participation. Above all, teachers should take special care to educate learners about safe online behavior and, in K-12 contexts, should work closely with administration and parents to ensure learners' safety online.

Motivation will become an increasingly crucial issue as the world of higher education continues to evolve. As institutions begin to expand and adapt to current technology and trends, it will be more and more important to ensure that opportunities to foster motivation are built into the modalities through which content is delivered. Social networks and social media are one potential source to continue to engage students in their individual process of meaning

making. Furthermore, as self-directed and independent language studies become more commonly used models to allow students to study less commonly taught languages, it is crucial to consider the power of connectivity through SNSs and their affordances' potential effect on learner motivation.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> While it still upholds the same philosophy of using a “collaborative approach to language learning,” Livemocha was purchased by Rosetta Stone in 2013, changing the network's format and accessibility.
- <sup>2</sup> At the time of data collection, time-stamping technology was unavailable for the Livemocha chat conversations. While this information is valuable for analysis, manual timing is not a reliable or feasible option for this particular set of data. For the sake of natural and spontaneous conversational data, very few limitations were imposed upon the learners during their chat time. Oftentimes, while waiting for responses from their interlocutors, the learners would minimize or hide the chat window in order to open internet browsers, using this time to use online dictionaries, explore the Livemocha website and other potential conversation partners, or hold additional conversations. An audio cue would inform them when the interlocutor had entered a reply and they could return to the conversation at their convenience. With other windows in the foreground of the screen recording, it is unreliable to manually time-stamp conversations with any accuracy or precision.
- <sup>3</sup> Activity on Facebook was outside the scope of the original study, but the researcher received the participant's permission to include Cammy's Facebook activity in the data.
- <sup>4</sup> Cammy printed these conversations from her home computer and voluntarily shared them with the researcher.

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# Can You Repeat, Please? L2 Complexity, Awareness, and Fluency Development in the Hybrid “Classroom”

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## Abstract

This article analyzes two online Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) activities in the context of a hybrid intermediate Spanish course for the purpose of measuring students' fluency and complexity development. First, we examine the use of interactive asynchronous video forums, inspired by the “best recording” technique (Nation, *Learning Vocabulary*; Wood) where students react to other students and record their responses according to a model given by the instructor. Second, we reflect on an experiment with synchronous tandem learning within the same hybrid course, in response to O'Dowd's (“Online Foreign Language Interaction”) suggestion to include telecollaboration projects within the core language curriculum. The satisfactory results, including the increase of complexity, language learning awareness and automaticity among

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hybrid students, should encourage instructors and administrators to implement these types of asynchronous and synchronous speaking activities.

## Keywords

Hybrid language teaching, computer-mediated communication (CMC), tandem learning, asynchronous video forums

## Introduction

Grgurović, Chapelle and Shelley in their thorough review of the Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) literature from 1970 to 2006 concluded that “second/foreign language instruction supported by computer technology was at least as effective as instruction without technology” (27). CALL groups often outperformed non-CALL groups, when rigorous research designs were applied. However, they also pointed out the difficulties of carrying out comparison studies (2). These types of experiments have been widely cited in the field of hybrid language teaching research, seeking to prove that hybrid courses are as effective as traditional language courses (Blake et al; Rubio; Guillén, “Expanding the language classroom”).

The present article, rather than focusing on comparing hybrid and traditional language instruction, describes a model for hybrid language learning, combining both asynchronous video recordings and synchronous tandem sessions. This paradigm is inspired by previous studies of tandem learning, vocabulary development, and fluency gains, and should provide online instructors and administrators with a sound basis with which to implement a hybrid curriculum. It could also inspire teachers working within the traditional face-to-face format. Face-to-face language teaching tends to encourage oral interaction, although it is often limited by time and space constraints, and by assignments and assessment that do not necessarily favor speaking skills. For instance, the standard face-to-face syllabi for the intermediate level at the institution where this experiment took place specify homework for each of the class sessions and none of these assignments involve oral production.

The hybrid course used the CANVAS Learning Management System (LMS), which is an online platform that supports face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses. CANVAS is free for individual instructors and fee-based for institutions and provides L2 learners with a number of unique *affordances*, a term that refers to the use of technological tools to allow learners to engage with the L2 in new or more productive ways. Although the field has recently become especially enamored with synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) tools, the use of asynchronous video –the ability to record video on-the-fly and then post it within a single

learning management system– also constitutes a potentially attractive tool to augment L2 practice.

Along with CANVAS, this study also used ADOBE CONNECT to create a synchronous CMC space where learners were able to interact with a native speaker of Spanish on a weekly basis. If the video recordings promoted time on task and L2 complexity development, the video chats encouraged synchronous communication and L2 fluency progress through language exchange sessions (25 minutes in English and 25 minutes in Spanish). The affordances of tandem learning fit naturally in the pedagogical landscape of a hybrid course, focused on increasing language learning awareness and autonomy, particularly if the instructor allows students to find their own tandem partner and asks them to write reports on each of the sessions (Guillén, “Awareness and Corrective Feedback”). Weekly tandem sessions allow learners to practice and expand thematic vocabulary and reinforce classroom language learning goals, while developing intercultural competence. In the context of this study, the instructor (a native speaker of Spanish) was the tandem partner for all of the learners in order to favor uniformity. Still, tandem reports were assigned and amounted to 20% of students’ final grade in the class. Each of the tandem sessions was guided by a prompt with ethnographic questions related to the grammar and vocabulary on focus.

Taking into account previous literature and the promising agenda for language development in the context of hybrid learning, this study attempts to respond to the following questions:

1. How an asynchronous video forum activity would or would not improve L2 complexity, in contrast with synchronous tandem sessions and videochats;
2. How a hybrid course with an e-tandem learning component would or would not improve L2 fluency and language learning awareness;
3. How fluency develops through e-tandems.

Of these three concerns, fluency, research question (3) is at the heart of everything because it is “an important element of L2 performance, yet so marginalized in the language curriculum” (Wood 1). Fluency is not considered knowledge but a skill (Schmidt, “Second Language Fluency” 359) and it is directly related to complexity. Authors such as Towell defined fluency by the “length and complexity of the linguistic units which are uttered between pauses” (112–113). Providing L2 students with more time to process and prepare their answers is one of the most frequently cited benefits of CALL and online courses (Blake 83). L2 learners, especially those at the novice and intermediate levels, are overwhelmed with L2 processing demands and routinely suffer from chronic deficiencies in their working memory capacity in the target language. When asked to carry out an L2 task, they are faced not only with the burden of creating coherent ideas, but also with making L2 discourse, syntactic, lexical, and morphological choices, to say nothing of assigning these structures

a comprehensible phonological form. It's no wonder why the extra planning time afforded by asynchronous video postings helps to stimulate students' oral language production.

Understandably, not all asynchronous video tasks are alike or entail the same level of difficulty. Schmidt observes, "task demands are a powerful determinant of what is noticed" in experimental settings "and provide one of the basic arguments that what is learned is what is noticed ("The role of consciousness" 143)." Likewise, Skehan suggests that tasks often "consume more attentional resources...with the result that less attention is available for focus on form" (97). Finally, Robinson submits that tasks can lead either to increased complexity or better accuracy, but not to both. More importantly for the present study, Robinson suggests: "Making a task complex by removing planning time does not direct the learner's attention to specific aspects of L2 code but rather disperses attention over many linguistic and other features" (15). Asynchronous video postings, however, appear to foster more complexity as well as accuracy precisely because of the increased planning time, as we will examine below. In the present study, then, L2 learners all benefited from the affordances provided by doing oral discussions in deferred or asynchronous time by posting online video records through the CANVAS platform, following what Wood and Nation (*Learning Vocabulary*) have called the *best recording* technique whereby participants rehearse and practice their final video output beforehand.

With respect to the synchronous assignments, we decided to use tandem learning (Brammerts), which consists of two individuals of different native languages (English and Spanish in the case of this study) helping each other learn the target language. Brammerts claims real tandem operates under the principle of reciprocity: Learners must devote the same amount of time to both languages, so that the contribution and benefits are similar; an autonomy: the responsibility for learning, rests with the student, who needs to understand what he or she wants to learn and how. The student is not self-instructing but rather assumes control of this learning (Little).

The tandem assignments are informed by interactionist and awareness principles. Language learning is a social process and active interactions prime the pump for second language development (Long; Mackey). Reinforcing the role of attention, metalinguistic awareness (Schmidt "Attention"), and explicit knowledge (Ellis "Frequency Effects") are equally important notions involved in tandem language tasks. As Schmidt (24) has stated: "In computer-assisted learning contexts, instructional treatments can be designed to focus learners' attention on crucial aspects of input." Awareness is directly related to growth of knowledge, the establishment of new representations and the access to those representations (Schmidt, "Attention, Awareness"). Finally, it is also assumed that "by pooling their linguistic resources, learners can serve as experts, coaches, or more competent peers during their CMC interaction and that they can and do learn from one another" (Smith 388).

The primary goal of the tandem encounter consists of not only promoting intercultural competence but also fluency development, "an important element

of L2 performance, yet so marginalized in the language curriculum” (Wood 1). Rather than knowledge *per se*, fluency is a skill (Schmidt, “Second Language Fluency” 359), thus there is no fluency store but there are fluency indicators such as pauses. Towell related fluency with procedural knowledge: the transformation of linguistic knowledge previously *acquired* into *rapidly-usable* online production.

Automatization is related to a higher use of formulaic language, i.e. fixed expressions, chunks, collocations or formulaic sequences: multi-word units that are stored in the long-term memory and are treated as single words (Wood). It is assumed that “language knowledge is collocational knowledge” (Nation, *Learning Vocabulary*) or sequence learning (Ellis, “Sequencing in SLA”). In other words, “the knowledge underlying fluent use of language is not grammar in the sense of abstract rules or structure but a huge collection of memories of previously experienced utterances” (Ellis, “Frequency effects” 166). These memories are generally associated with formulaic language, rather than single words – a significant portion of our regular conversations are, in fact, formulaic (Pawley and Syder, qtd. in Wood 5). This study will understand fluency as the ability to automatize language, while considering individual and cultural factors. For example, in order to analyze L2 fluency development, it is important to take into account interferences from L1 fluency (Wood, Segalowitz), both individually and culturally. We may conclude that tandem learning is a useful strategy to promote language automatization within a context of spontaneous communication with native speakers:

If possible, students should interact with native speakers to develop second language fluency. This provides students with the speech patterns and discourse rhythms of genuine native speaker production. (...) Unlike student peers, they bring a different set of expectations of discourse to the communication (Wood 189).

As Segalowitz mentions in regards to speech elicitation tasks, “speaking spontaneously is what people do most of the time” (44). Synchronous tandems are an ideal scenario for spontaneous speech –there is no script, beyond tasks, goals, or guiding questions. Similarly, the inclusion of tandems as part of the curriculum follows the demand of more telecollaboration projects in the core of the language curriculum (O’Dowd, “Online foreign language interaction”).

The role of attention, metalinguistic awareness (Schmidt “Attention”), and explicit knowledge (Ellis, “Frequency Effects”), would also be important in this study. Awareness is directly related to growth of knowledge (establishment of new representations) and development of fluency (access to those representations) (Schmidt, “Attention, awareness”). According to Schmidt, noticing is a requirement for language acquisition. It is also expected that “by pooling their linguistic resources, learners can serve as experts, coaches, or more competent peers during their CMC interaction and that they can and do learn from one another” (Smith 388). Students should use metalinguistic strategies and give



specific feedback, focusing on language form since it seems to be one of the e-tandem advantages (O'Rourke). In other words, implicit learning, derived from repeated exposure and interaction, would be enriched by language learning strategies and attention.

## Method

The focus of this study was two successive hybrid college courses of Spanish at the intermediate level (HyC1 and HyC2) at a public university in California. HyC1 was the first hybrid Spanish intermediate course at this institution and consisted of two 120 minutes sessions per week, Tuesdays and Thursdays, plus online assignments and activities such as the tandem encounters. HyC2 was a continuation of HyC1.

All of the students were undergraduate and taking the course as part of a language requirement. None of them were taking the course as part of their major or, at least, they had not declared their Spanish major before the moment of this research.

Classroom sessions provided support for the course themes (based on specific vocabulary and grammar) that were carried out through synchronous tandems (HyC1), videochats in the context of HyC2, asynchronous video postings, and compositions (including assignments such as critical responses and e-mails). Tandems involved the interaction of a native speaker of Spanish with each of the students and videochats consisted of two students interacting with each other and the instructor (who guided the interaction and provided feedback).

### *Asynchronous video forums*

The CANVAS platform provides users with an integrated tool to record video responses, erase them if so desired, and then re-record them until the best performance is obtained. The asynchronous video recordings completed by students are organized in a forum manner, allowing students to listen to peers' responses and provide comments or pose questions at will. The instructor may also record a model answer and provide feedback to the students in both written and video form. This versatile video recording tool encourages increased time on task with regards to both listening comprehension and oral production. These linguistic rehearsals are eminently suited to practicing complex L2 structures that would normally be well beyond the learner's short-term memory capabilities. The video forums are also aligned with Nation's best recording technique ("Improving Speaking"): repeatedly record a speech until the learner is satisfied with the result.

Students from two intermediate Spanish hybrid courses (HyC1 and HyC2) were asked to use the CANVAS video tool to post their answers in response to a

series of discussion prompts: a personal introduction, a description of the ideal job, a memorable trip, the most important human virtue, ecological concerns, internet use, money management, childhood experiences, winning the lottery, health care issues, etc.

Our asynchronous data come from students who enrolled in both hybrid courses ( $n = 7$ ). Although present tracking analytics are unable to tell us how many times or for how long they practiced their answers before locking in the final video posting, it was obvious from the videos themselves that no student spontaneously posted a recording without some type of previous preparation, including the use of vocabulary from the prompt, the higher linguistic complexity of the recordings (compared to the synchronous tandems and videochats), and the fact that some of the students seemed to be reading from their notes or recalling rehearsed chunks of information. Data from the asynchronous video forums will be analyzed in terms of discourse markers and linguistic complexity, primarily using T-units as a measure. A T unit is any main clause and any other clauses embedded or subordinated by it.

### *Synchronous tandems*

One of the researchers was the HyC1 instructor and the tandem partner for all of the students ( $n=15$ ), in order to facilitate data collection and reduce the impact of individual differences and self-reporting confusion. Each learner participated in 8 tandem sessions with the instructor/researcher, and each of these sessions lasted 50 minutes each. A total of 120 tandem sessions were conducted. Learners wrote reports about each of the tandem sessions, specifying words they had learned during the tandems and a brief personal reflection (no more than 8 lines) for each of the tandem reports. The tandem experience reports were graded and amounted to 20% of students' final grade in the class.

### *Additional data analysis*

HyC1 students were administered the Versant Spanish test (15 minutes), before and after the treatment. The Versant Spanish Test, based on Levelt's model of speech production, has a high correlation to OPI results and has been used before in CALL contexts (Blake et al). The instructor also recorded a 5 minute interview with them in Spanish and English. In total, students spent an average of one hour with the instructor during the interviews. The instructor also recorded the first and the last tandem sessions with the HyC1 students. A traditional course of intermediate Spanish (5 sessions a week as opposed to 2 days a week) was used as a control group (TrC1). Both groups consisted of undergrad students between the ages of 18 and 25 years old. The analysis for this

experiment will be based on researchers' analysis and observations in regards to complexity, language learning awareness, and fluency development (automation). Versant Spanish Test results will be used to back quantitative findings.

## Analysis of results

### *Asynchronous video forums*

This section displays results from the asynchronous video forums in regards to complexity, and in contrast with tandem sessions, videochats, and course compositions. One of the greatest challenges for L2 intermediate students arises from the need to employ more sophisticated linguistic structures, which in Spanish necessarily implies frequent use of coordinate and/or complex sentences with fully conjugated verbs. In spoken discourse, speakers –and L2 speakers, in particular– resort to the common strategy of stringing together one idea after the other in a series of stripped-down rudimentary sentences, fragments, and/or run-ons. This is exactly what we find in the oral transcriptions below from student HyS9, who is representative of what the other students were doing with their video forums. Notice HyS9's discursive dependence on the conjunction *pero* ('but'), not in a contrastive sense as would be dictated by normal Spanish grammatical usage, but rather as a paratactic discourse marker similar to what speakers of colloquial English do in order to patch together their ideas: 'but like...' or '(be)cause/cuz'. It appears to be a case of transfer of discursive strategies from HyS9's L1, English.

HyS9: Yo [sic] no me gusta mirar béisbol en la tele tampoco/ **pero** en persona sí/ **pero** me gusta mirar baloncesto mucho/ **porque** es muy rápido/ **y por eso** no es aburrido/ **pero** no tengo un equipo favorito/ **pero** mi papá es de Nueva York/ **y por eso** cuando era niña me gustaban los Yankees/ **pero** ahora me gustan los Giants.

(I don't like to watch baseball on television either/ but I do in person./ But I like to watch baseball a lot /because it's very fast /and that's why it isn't boring/ but I don't have a favorite team /but my dad is from New York/ and that's why when I was a little girl I liked the Yankees/ but now I like the Giants.)

HyS9: Es muy tarde/ **pero** también tú tuviste ROTC esta mañana también, no?/ Yo tengo uno problema diferente/ **porque** yo jugaba fútbol y voleibol y baloncesto/ **pero** yo soy alta/ **pero** no puedo saltar mucho, **entonces** [sic, 'para aquel entonces'] no era un buen jugadora de baloncesto/. **Pero** jugaba fútbol por toda mi vida hasta la universidad/. **Y** ahora no me gusta correr/, **pero** creo que tú corres mucho, sí? / **Ahora** no me gusta correr/, **pero** yo practicar yoga/ **y** nadar mucho y sí...

(It's late/ but I also had ROTC this morning as well, no?/I have a different problem/because I was playing football and volleyball and basketball/ but I am tall/ but I can't jump much/ back then I was not a good basketball player/. But I played football all my life until the university./ And now I don't like to run/ but I practice yoga/ and swim a lot/ and yes...).

It could be argued that this is an interlanguage strategy of discourse marking (represented by the use of a single element). However, HyS9 showed an evident preference for similar markers in English during the tandem sessions:

**And** she came to the line to like, buy something, I don't remember what it was **but** something uh, oh her, her credit card wasn't sliding **and** I was like, sometimes if you wrap receipt paper around it you know, it works better, **but** I couldn't get it to work so the manager that was her in line was like, oh it's like this, he was showing me how to do it **and** I think she thought that he was a customer who just happened to know...

As evidenced in table 1, HyS9 favors the use of paratactic *pero* in 44% of the cases represented, whereas this student uses the conjunction *y* ('and') in 35% of the coordinate sentences. Causal *porque* accounts for 10.5% of the total conjunctions, while the logical connector *y por eso* and the consecutive conjunction *entonces* (although she used this form inappropriately in the text cited above) represent only 7% and 3.5% of the cases, respectively.

However, when given access to a tool that affords the opportunity to post her *best recording*, we observe that this L2 student makes a considerable effort to create more elaborate constructions, within the limits imposed by the present

**Table 1:** HyS9's complexity measures for oral chats, video postings, and compositions.

HyS9	Asynchronous chat	Video Postings	Composition
<i>pero</i> "but"	44%	28%	38%
<i>y</i> "and"	35%	45%	58%
<i>porque</i> ("cuz")	10.5%	26%	8%
<i>Coordinate Ss</i>	61 (77%)	25	25
<i>Complex Ss</i>	18 (22% = <i>creo que</i> *)	33	27
# of Words/T unit	4	9	9

\* *Creo que* ... is being used exactly like paratactic *pero*.

state of her interlanguage. As they formulate responses to the assigned asynchronous tasks, these L2 students tend to morph the basic run-on discursive strategy into a predominately paratactic style, but with much richer lexical choices and phrasal constructions. Student HyS9 still relies overwhelmingly on the conjunction *y* ('and') in about 45% of the total connector tokens, as well as *pero* ('but') 28% of the time, but this student also uses paratactic *porque* ('because') 26% of the time, as illustrated below:

HyS9: *Estaba montando bicicleta, **pero** cuando regresamos a mi casa, yo doblé a la derecha y me caí en mi bici y el freno de mano de la bici entró a mi pierna y necesitaba tener 31 puntos.*

(I was riding my bicycle, but when we were returning to my house, I turned to the right and fell on my bike and the bike handbrake punctured my leg and I needed 31 stitches.)

The additional planning time afforded by the video postings also allows HyS9 to generate approximately equal number of complex sentences with subordinate clauses to coordinate structures (25:33), rather impossible to avoid in conversational Spanish given the necessity of marking mood choices (the indicative versus the subjunctive) with fully conjugated verbs and the lack of infinitive complement like in English (e.g. "I want you to go the store" → *quiero que vayas al mercado*). Only once did HyS9 transfer from English the practice of omitting the complementizer (e.g. *I thought Ø you were going to town*), even though in one example given below the complementizer is elided where no one would drop the word *that* in standard English. In other words, HyS9's interlanguage reflects a more enlightened knowledge of Spanish syntax, one that realizes that fully conjugated verbs are needed with each new idea or action expressed.

In terms of the frequency of complex sentences and words per T units, the language found in HyS9's video postings (see Table 1) resembled more closely the patterns found in their formal written assignments than their synchronous oral chats, as can be seen by comparing the following video posting with one of her compositions:

[VIDEO RECORDING] HyS9: *Si me tocara la lotería, creo **que** me [sic] pagaría por el resto de mi educación **porque** ahora mis padres lo pagan y me gustaría eliminar los [sic] responsabilidades del precio de mi educación de mis padres.*

(If I were to win the lottery, I think that it would pay for the rest of my education because right now my parents pay it and I would like to eliminate the responsibility of the price of my education from my parents.)

[WRITING SAMPLE] HyS9: *He estudiado el español durante varios tiempos de mi vida **pero** no creo **que** defina bilingüe ahora, **aunque** me*

*gustaría serlo. He aprendido mucho en los últimos tres años y por eso he avanzado a nuevos niveles en mi hablar. Ahora puedo comunicar en español en un nivel relativamente alto y tengo la confianza [sic] a hablar con personas españoles, pero a veces es difícil hablar con los habladores nativos.*

(I have studied Spanish for several years of my life but I don't think that I define [meet the definition of a] bilingual right now, although I would love to be one. I have learned much in the last three years and for that reason, I have advanced to new levels in talking. Now I can communicate in Spanish on a relatively high level and I have confidence talking with Spanish-speaking people, but sometimes it's hard speaking to native speakers.)

The use of contrary to fact *if* clauses in her video posting, along with the conditional tense morphology and even one token of the past subjunctive, is truly impressive for this intermediate level. Correct mood choices throughout her postings, however, seem beyond HyS9's linguistic competence at the intermediate level. In the cases where the subjunctive needed to have been marked, HyS9 repeatedly failed to do so in all but two instances out of eleven cases (one in oral speech and one in written prose). The additional time afforded by writing compositions –where she enjoyed ample time to compose, review, and correct her writing– did not improve her performance on mood choices whatsoever. Again, notice that HyS9 knows not to eliminate the complementizer *que* in Spanish that would be eliminated in the English equivalent.

HyS9: *Es posible\* que necesito [sic] estar en la U por 5 años.*

(It's possible Ø I need to stay in the university for 5 years.

HyS9: *Es posible\* que voy [sic] a ganar mucho dinero.*

It's possible Ø I will earn a lot of money.

These difficulties with mood choices should not be surprising if careful note is taken of when the *Common European Framework of Reference* suggests that the subjunctive be introduced into the curriculum: at the B1/B2 level or after a minimal of 480 contact hours with the target language. Students in HyS9's cohort had only logged a maximum of 250 contact hours by the end of the two hybrid courses (transition from A2 to B1 levels) –too little time to reach proficiency with this tricky part of Spanish grammar.

Although HyS9's asynchronous postings reflect greater syntactic complexity, this does not mean that her spontaneous oral speech or chatting somehow miraculously avoids the heavy reliance on paratactic *but*, as can be seen in the excerpt below taken from her last synchronous chat in the second hybrid course (HyC2):

HyS9: *Yo tampoco/ no tengo algunos exámenes esta semana/ **pero** tengo un proyecto que debo entregar el viernes/ **pero** no me importa mucho/ **pero** creo que no va a ser bastante difícil.*

(Me neither.../ I don't have any exams this week/ but I have a project that I have to turn in on Friday/ but I'm not worried much/ but I believe that it's not going to be very hard.)

The asynchronous video forums allowed HyS9 to increase complexity and control over her target language production, bridging the gap between interpersonal and presentational communication.

*Synchronous tandems*

Despite HyS9's paratactic strategies in the oral chats, she was, nonetheless, one of the learners who progressed more in the first hybrid crosses, according to quantitative and qualitative data, as shown in Table 2. The table shows the overall and specific Versant Test results before and after the treatment, as well as the final grade in the course for each student. Overall, most HyC1 students showed progress, particularly in regards to sentence mastery and vocabulary. More interestingly, the quantitative results showed that HyC learners can perform comparably to the TrC1 learners –both groups progressed at a similar rate, as can be inferred from comparing table 2 and table 3 using statistical analysis.

**Table 2:** Hybrid pre and post Versant test results.

	Overall	Sentence Mastery	Vocabulary	Fluency	Pronunciation
HyS1	47–52	35–56	39–48	56–49	59–53
HyS2	49–60	49–72	52–60	43–48	57–59
HyS3	41–41	27–43	40–41	48–35	54–46
HyS4	49–47	46–45	49–50	48–47	53–48
HyS5	32–34	25–26	31–42	32–30	44–45
HyS6	33–39	35–44	28–40	27–28	42–46
HyS7	33–42	20–45	33–43	34–35	52–44
HyS8	38–43	52–58	26–32	28–31	45–48
HyS9	62–73	57–76	52–71	69–71	70–75
HyS10	46–49	46–55	41–38	48–47	49–56
HyS11	56–52	59–51	47–52	54–49	62–57
HyS12	45–44	52–49	50–45	34–35	48–51
Mean	44–48	42–52	41–47	43–42	53–52

**Table 3:** Traditional pre and post Versant test results.

	Overall	Sentence Mastery	Vocabulary	Fluency	Pronunciation
TrS1	34–39	33–37	22–23	36–44	42–50
TrS2	54–57	53–66	44–45	58–55	61–60
TrS3	47–53	51–59	44–53	40–43	53–57
TrS4	72–69	80–67	65–66	64–68	79–78
TrS5	52–62	44–65	42–49	58–63	62–70
TrS6	53–55	53–66	35–54	63–50	56–50
TrS7	39–48	33–54	37–45	41–43	47–49
TrS8	35–41	37–47	26–35	31–35	45–46
TrS9	62–68	64–80	46–46	64–65	72–74
TrS10	52–59	49–67	47–49	53–56	63–63
TrS11	49–55	45–63	44–46	51–53	56–53
TrS12	42–44	37–47	39–36	44–47	47–50
TrS13	43–46	35–56	59–38	38–36	47–52
Mean	49–54	47–59	42–45	49–51	56–58

In both tables, the first number corresponds with the pre-test and the second number reflects the result of the posttest (both of them out of 80).

A dependent sample *t*-test was conducted to assess if there were statistical differences between the pre and post Versant test overall results for both groups. The results of the dependent sample *t*-test were significant for the HyC group,  $t(11) = -2.60, p = .025$ , and the TrC group,  $t(12) = -5.07, p < .001$ , suggesting that there was an overall improvement for both groups, within the ACTFL intermediate level (33–62 in Versant). In other words, the hybrid learners improved as much as the learners in the traditional class, taking into account the Versant overall results.

HyS9 reached the ACTFL Advanced Mid level (73–79 in Versant), starting in the ACTFL Intermediate High (53–62), thus advancing two levels, as shown in Table 2. Although her fluency score only went from 69 to 71, HyS9 sentence mastery progressed from 57 to 76 –sentence mastery is related to fluency development and it is considered a strong indicator of language automatization. In fact, the only difference between the sentence mastery and fluency scores in Versant is that fluency takes into account a reading exercise, only measuring speech manner. The other two fluency exercises, repeat sentences and build sentences, are the only basis for the sentence mastery score.

HyS9 was among the few students who decided to correct instructor errors in English, although the instructor, the Spanish tandem partner, requested all



of them to do it. HyS9 (together with HyS2) provided explicit feedback, as happened here:

HyS9: I was going to say two things uh, two things on pronunciation uh, that I, sorry, you want to speak correctly, right? [Laughing] Okay uhm, energy has like, a hard “g.” I know it’s hard to pronounce, because you know in Spanish you don’t pronounce those hard letters but instead “energy.”

NSS: Energy, energy, energy.

HyS9: Yeah, there you go.

NSS: Energy.

From the first session, HyS9 asked explicit questions about the language. For instance, HyS9 asked if “senderismo” (hiking) was a noun:

HyS9: *Uhm, también uh, juego deportes* (Uhm, also, uh, I play sports).

NSS: *Oh, muy bien. ¿Qué deporte...? (Oh, great. Which sport?).*

HyS9: *Me gustaria uh...uh football* (I would like... uh football).

NSS: *Oh, qué bien* (Oh, great).

HyS9: *Y uhm, a veces tenis y cómo se dice (...) me gusta senderismo, no, es un noun, right? (And uhm, sometimes tennis and how do you say... I like hiking, no, it is a noun right).*

NSS: It is a noun. You would say, “*me gusta hacer senderismo*.” (I like hiking).

HyS9: *Hacer senderismo* (Hiking).

HyS9 had questions about communication needs regarding tenses, pronunciation, and spelling:

HyS9: *Uh, no me [sic] recuerdo, creo que tenía muchos. Uhm, uh, cuando era niña me gusta, me gus... (Uh, I don’t remember, I think I had a lot. Uhm, uh, when I was younger I like...) How would you talk about when you were little but like in the future?*

(...)

NSS: *Medioambiente. Repite conmigo, “conservación del medioambiente”* (Environment. Repeat with me, environmental conservation).

HyS9: *Conservación del mediaambiente, ambiente.* (environmental conservation).

NSS: *Del medio ambiente, uh-huh, muy bien.* (emphasis on preposition).

HyS9: No, oh, oh okay. I couldn't see it, there we go. *Del medio ambiente* [reading from the screen] (emphasis on preposition).

The conversations also revolved around language learning strategies, such as repeating questions after they are formulated in order to gain processing time:

NSS: That, and sometimes repeating the question when you are having a conversation by repeating the question that allows you to save time and think about what you want to say.

HyS9: Uh, I noticed uh, ....

NSS: Yeah?

HyS9: I noticed Pablo did that too, actually [Pablo was one of the protagonists of iCultura, a multimedia textbook developed by the researchers]. He would, he would ask something and then he would repeat it. You could see that he was thinking about what he was going to say.

In the previous excerpt, it seems obvious that HyS9 is an exceptional language learner, paying attention to the content and the way L1 speakers talk and prepare their responses. Automaticity development was evident, even among students who did not show progress or showed limited progress in the results from the Versant test. It is the case of HyS1 whose posttest fluency score was lower than the pre-test score. In the recordings from the first session, HyS1 had difficulties expressing basic communication needs, as judged by word order in Spanish and automation (*díganme* instead of *me decían*).

HyS1: *Uhh, un doctor.* [Laughing] *Porque, uhh, todos los pers... todas las personas, uhh.. como mis padres.. Uhm.. mis parientes. Y díganme.* (Uhh, a doctor. [Laughing] Because, uhh, all peo.... all people like my parents... Uhm, my relatives. And tell they me).

NSS: *Me decían* (the used to tell me).

HyS1: *Sí, díganme. Oh. Me de.. me decian que, ehh... Uhh, yo, uhh... Yo, uhh... Uhm... look like... (Yes, they tell me, oh, they used to tell me, ehh... Uhh, I, uhh... Yo, uhh... Uhm...).*

Similarly, he did not ask questions spontaneously. The instructor requested him to do it:

HyS1: [Overlapping] *Sí. Y, ehh.. Es... (Yes. And, ehh, it is...).*

NSS: *Pregúntame. Pregúntame a mí* (Ask me).

HyS1: *Sí. ¿Te pregunto a, a ti?* (Do I ask you?).

NSS: *Sí. Sí, sí, pregúntame* (Yes, ask me).

HyS1: *Oh, uhh, ¿qué tal?* (Oh, uhh, how is it going?).

NSS: *Bien. Yo estoy bien. Ehh... Pero pregúntame sobre profesiones, ¿no?* (Good. I am fine. Ehh... But ask me about other professions, no?).

HyS1: *Mhm. [Laughing] Okay, uhh... Uhm... ¿En qué querías trabajar tú cuando eres pequeño... ¿Eras pequeño?* (Okay, uhh... Uhm.... What did you want to do when you were a kid?).

After 8 tandem sessions, HyS1 showed improvement from a quantitative perspective, as an apparent outcome of the HyC1 course with e-tandems.

NSS: *¿Cómo estás?* (How you doing?).

HyS1: *Hola. Muy bien, gracias. ¿Y tú?* (Hi, really good, thank you, and you?).

(...)

HyS1: *Uhh... Uhh, yo... hago mi, ehh, tarea y, ehh... tengo... un reunión, con, uhh... con la, uhh... club de economía después* (Uhh... Uhh, I... am doing my, ehh, homework and ehh... I have... a meeting uhh... with, uhh... the economy club later).

(...)

HyS1: *Hoy, uhh, vamos a... uhh... brainstorm. ¿Cómo se dice brainstorm?* (Today, uhh, we are going to...uhh... brainstorm. How do you say brainstorm?).

(...)

HyS1: *Muy bueno para, uhh... la gente. Pero, uhh... Es no... bueno, es no bueno para economía porque... uhh... vamos, vamos a... a... a... tener más, uhh... más, uhh, taxes. ¿Cómo se dicen taxes o... otra vez?* (Really good for, uhh... the people. But, uhh... It's not good for the economy because... uhh... we are going, going to... have more...uhh, more taxes, how do you say taxes).

HyS1 displayed more power and autonomy in the conversation, asking questions, self-correcting, and completing (mastering) sentences. In a personal interview he also showed a strong willingness to keep learning Spanish in the near future.

Still, there were speech disfluencies. Also, HyS1 did not seem to incorporate the new vocabulary in his speech.

HyS2 was a completely different case than HyS1. Overall, this student showed the most improvement among the Hybrid Course (HyC1) participants in the Versant Test (from 49 to 60), even though the final grade (82) for this student was the lowest one in the HyC1. Strategies such as asking questions about lexicon and collocations, or repeating the new words, are frequent, even in the first tandem session:

NSS: Yeah. [Overlapping] *¿Tú eres... extrovertido, no? ¿Tú eres extrovertido, no?* (Are you an extrovert?).

HyS2: *Es, es...* what is it?

NSS: *Extrovertido, ¿no?* Can you see what I'm typing? *¿Puedes ver lo que escribo?*

HyS2: Yeah.

NSS: *Extrovertido. Okay? Entonces, como en inglés, "EXTROVERTido"* (so like English, EXTROVERTed).

HyS2: *Extrovertido. Extroverted. Okay. Like, you like talking*

(...)

HyS2: Uhm... Mi... *Todos mis parientes son abogados - mi madre, mi padre, mi, uhh, hermano. ¿Qué es la palabra mom and dad? Like, it's not... No es parientes. Parientes son, "like," relativos\*, ¿verdad?* (All of my relatives are lawyers, my mom, my dad, my, uhh, brother. What's the word for "mom" and "dad"? Like, it's not... It's not relatives).

NSS: *Padres, ¿no? Padres ¿no?* (Parents, no?).

HyS2 was not particularly engaged in the last tandem session. Nevertheless, this student still shows awareness as a language learner and recognizes the need of acquiring formulaic language, beyond a mere list of words.

HyS2: Okay. Uhm.. [Clears throat] *Pienso que mi español, uhm.. puedo decir que tengo que decir sí no sé una palabra. Puedo, uhm.. uhm.. puedo.. reorganizar las palabras.* So, if I don't know how to say something, I can find another way to say it. *Puedo encon.. encontrar un otro.. o puedo buscar un otra vía para decirlo. Uhm.. Pero tengo que ir.. Yo sé mis, mis... like, mis "tenses" of "presente, futuro, and perfecto".. presen.. presente.. Uhm.. Pero los "ires" y "ares" son un poco difíciles. Y, no sé.. Tengo que subir.. Tengo que.. aprender mas, uhh, palabras y verbos. Y tambien, uhm.. Yo.. Yo hablo muy liter.. literalmente porque no sé la cultura y, like.. so, uhm.. yo he dicho, uhm.. puedo ordenar algo o.. y no es el correcto manera.. uhm.. manera correcto. Pero.. like in English.. Como en inglés ay, uhh..*

*diferentes cosas y diferentes vías para decir algo y no es literalmente y ens.. es.. en español es lo mismo. Pero no sé las frases y...*

(I think my Spanish, uhm .. I can say what I want to say if I don't know a word. I can, uhm .. uhm .. I can .. rearrange words. So, if I do not know how to say something, I can find another way to say it. I can w .. find another .. or I can search for another way to say it. Uhm .. But I have to go .. I know my, my .. like my "tenses" of "present, future, and perfect" .. presen .. this .. Uhm .. But the "ir" and "ar" endings are a bit hard. And I do not know .. I have to climb .. .. I have to learn more, uhh, words and verbs. And also, uhm .. I .. I speak very liter .. literally because I don't know the culture and, like .. so, uhm .. I said, uhm .. I can order something or .. and it is not the right way .. uhm .. right way. But .. like .. in English ay, uhh .. different things and different ways to say something and it is not literally and ens .. is .. in Spanish is the same. But I do not know the phrases and ...).

The qualitative analysis of the synchronous tandem sessions with the most successful HyC1 students (from a quantitative perspective) reinforces the importance of automaticity and language learning strategies (asking questions, repeating new words, completing sentences, correcting, asking to be corrected, and reflecting about language learning).

## Discussion

Asynchronous video forums (using the CANVAS tool) allow students to respond to the prompts using syntactic structures similar in complexity to that found in their written production, thereby sharpening their linguistic skills through forced output as Swain has described so clearly in the literature. In the case of HyS9, words per T units, a much used measure of syntactic complexity (Larsen-Freeman), in synchronous chatting hovered around 4 words per T unit while both her video posts and writing averaged about 9 words per T unit. A T unit is any main clause and any other clauses embedded or subordinated by it.

The ability to make correct mood choices will be consolidated later, but for the moment, real progress can be seen with respect to the increasing number of complex sentences facilitated by this on-the-fly video recording tool. Although HyS9's synchronous online chats still relied on terse sentences, the overuse of paratactic *but*, and the relatively low inclusion embedded clauses, her oral fluency will increase with the additional practice afforded by these asynchronous recordings and her continued language study.

With the extra planning time granted by the CANVAS video tool, students like HyS9 were able to produce more complex linguistic structures, which will improve their proficiency level over the long haul of second language development.

These qualitative results are essential to understand the nature and evolution of the hybrid course. Paying close attention to the tandem transcripts, it is possible to argue that tandem learning and video recordings as part of a hybrid course promote automaticity and fluency development. It was normal to hear students repeating or using some of the instructor's expressions, together with learning autonomy and language awareness. The most successful students, represented by HyS9, indirectly embraced the need of language awareness (Schmidt "Attention") and explicit feedback (Ellis "Frequency Effects"), by asking questions, requesting feedback, repeating the new words and expressions, and completing their sentences, in spite of any disfluencies or breakdowns.

However, in spite of the satisfactory results, most learners did not put into practice one of the main principles of tandem learning, reciprocity, which requires that both participants contribute equally to their language development. This is perhaps one of the few shortcomings of using the instructor as a tandem partner: There is a chance that learners did not provide feedback because they were intimidated. However, as seen in the literature, corrective feedback tends to be minimal in e-tandem contexts (Bower and Kawaguchi), even if strenuously requested by the tandem partner. On the other hand, a majority of learners gave the impression of being comfortable with the instructor within the tandem context. Only one of them pointed out that it was not ideal to have the instructor as a tandem partner because it was not, in their view, comparable to chatting with a friend or another student.

Students should be trained in the principles of tandem learning –how to participate successfully in the exchanges (O'Dowd and Eberbach)– and receive training about how to find the ideal partner and "coach" for their tandem exchanges. It is not difficult to imagine a future where teachers become real learning facilitators, in charge of connecting students with communities of practice, beyond the time and space constraints of the classroom. Accordingly, one of the unexpected outcomes we can extract from the tandem experiment is that personalization matters –the classroom experience could be replaced by a one-on-one (or two-on-one) consultation format where instructors provide feedback on asynchronous and synchronous assignments, and a plan of action for the incoming week, including a tandem component.

This tandem component should be assessed through written and, if possible, audiovisual reports (or collaborative projects in the case of tandems that are organized by instructors). These reports are critical not only because they allow instructors to assess the assignment but also because participants can and should use them for reflecting about language learning specifics. For instance, learners can store and analyze larger chunks of words, explicit feedback on grammar, cultural and intercultural information.

From the students' perspective, both the video recordings and the tandem experiment yielded positive outcomes and stimulated the developing of language awareness, autonomy, and complexity. From the research perspective,

these CMC practices fully integrated into the hybrid curriculum help reveal the slow advance toward increased proficiency, one utterance at a time.

## Conclusions

L2 learners produce more complex language and are able to show automaticity and language learning awareness through this combination of asynchronous video recordings and synchronous language exchanges. A hybrid course should emphasize speaking assignments, making the most of tools and spaces such as CANVAS (free for individual users) and ADOBE CONNECT (free for two users). The results are particularly satisfactory, taking into account that these two hybrid classes only met twice a week and they were being taught for the first time.

A deeper analysis of video recordings and tandem sessions revealed a qualitative progress in terms of complexity, awareness, automaticity, and autonomy. Learners were more reflective and independent at the end of the course. The most successful Spanish learners asked questions about the language, culture, and personal life of the English learner (the HyC instructor), and were truly engaged in the video recordings.

However, more training is needed in regards to video forum task design, the principles of tandem (autonomy and reciprocity), and the characteristic of effective language feedback and strategies. The pre-task tandem workshop was not sufficient. Instructors should not only reinforce how to give feedback during the pre-task workshop but also organize monthly follow-up sessions with the students in order to ensure optimal tandem learning will take place. Likewise, the whole course could be designed around the idea of substituting the traditional language class with individual sessions to establish weekly goals and give immediate feedback based on recordings, writing assignments, and reports from the tandem experiences.

The following guidelines can serve as a starting point for pre-tandem workshops:

1. Pay attention: what they say, how they say it. Take notes, even if they are mental notes.
2. Ask for clarification! Ask for corrections!
3. Correct if your partner is ok with it. . But don't overcorrect! Let the conversation flow.
4. Elicitation is better than explicit correction. Let the other person self-correct ... Provide explicit feedback if necessary.
5. Finish your sentences! Don't give up. We are all learning.
6. Ask questions in your target language!
7. Rephrase! ... If you are not understood or you don't find the right word.
8. Use comprehension check! Keep eye-contact and make sure you are participating in a dialogue (as opposed to a concatenation of monologues).

9. Use examples!
10. Repeat what the other person says. Repeat what you say. Repeat and automatize!

Hybrid classes have often been described as offering the best of both worlds, the classroom and the online environment. By leveraging the CMC tools and tasks in ways similar to what we have described in this study, the hybrid format can change the language teaching paradigm for the better, taking full advantage of digital affordances.

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# Synchronous Video Chat Sessions in a TESOL Online Graduate Course: Instructor Roles and Best Practices

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## Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates instructor roles and best practices in the synchronous video chat sessions of an online graduate course, *Teaching English Language Learners PreK-12*, at a midsized, mid-Atlantic state university. Participants consist of two first-time online graduate facilitators and the instructor of record. The principal research questions are: What were the experiences of the first-time online facilitators? What hindered learning in the synchronous video chat sessions? What are the suggested best practices? Data sources consisted of blog entry reflections and comments. Data were coded using the qualitative research software, NVivo 10. Discussion centered on first-time online facilitators' comfort with their roles and styles of facilitation, the obstacles of initial uncertainty and bandwidth problems, and pedagogical and technological best practices. Results suggested that there needed to be an unlearning and relearning of social norms, and that there existed a continuum of hands-on to hands-off facilitation.

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## Keywords

Synchronous, instructor roles, best practices, Adobe Connect

## Introduction

The role of the instructor in the synchronous distance education classroom is different from that of the instructor in the brick-and-mortar classroom, and the educational theory that best explains the online instructor role is the constructivist theory. In particular, the interactivity this approach espouses leads to increased positive emotions from both instructor and students. Therefore, understanding this theory and the best practices that arise from its implementation can optimize the online learning experience. In view of this, the present study seeks to investigate first-time online facilitators' experience of both comfort and uncertainty in teaching an online course, the obstacles of teaching in a distance education classroom, pedagogical and technological best practices, and the implications of the findings for online second/foreign language teaching and learning.

### *The constructivist approach in distance education*

The distance education environment is a complex system consisting of numerous variables which must work in concert to be successful. To achieve this success, instructors adhere to defined best practices as outlined in certain theories. One such theory is the constructivist theory, which emphasizes hands-on, activity-based teaching and learning that in turn allows students to develop their own frames of thought (Keengwe, Onchwari, and Agamba 888). In a constructivist classroom, the role of the educator takes on a unique form. Because constructivist learning environments are created to provide multiple paths for students to explore, rather than just transmitting knowledge, "constructivist teachers perform the role of mentor, facilitator, or guide" (897). As guides, teachers strive to incorporate mediation, modeling, and coaching as well as seek to provide rich environments and experiences for collaborative learning (Sharp, qtd. in Keengwe, Onchwari, and Agamba 889).

In the ideal constructivist distance education classroom, the facilitator allows students to create their own learning experiences. When students are working effectively in a collaborative classroom, they are helping to create their own higher-order learning environment. Neo found that the constructivist learning environment emphasizes active learning rather than teaching. It supports learner ownership of learning which takes place in a meaningful, authentic context and becomes a social activity, where peers play an important role in encouraging learning, and in developing critical thinking skills, problem-solving and team

skills (7). Ultimately, it is the instructor's responsibility to guide students to this way of learning. Therefore, the online instructor should not present course content and simply await students' questions regarding the content. Doing so would likely result in an interaction process that is inconsistent, content driven, and labor intensive for the instructor as dialogue will be dominated by instructor-student interactions. Instead, Rovai advised that interaction be design-driven and carefully planned before the start of the class to promote a balance between instructor-student and student-student interactions and to ensure that the instructor implements an effective communication strategy (85).

It is also important to note that since every student is unique and every class has its own dynamics, the role of the facilitator in a constructivist classroom may vary depending on the situation. Rovai explained that at times, the instructor is the expert and source of knowledge and understanding, and in this role, provides answers to student questions. This role is particularly evident in discussion forums where students are responding to discussion topics and asking questions. At other times, the online instructor assumes the role of a tutor, particularly in collaborative activity forums where small groups of students are engaged in problem-based learning (85).

Even though each class of students (i.e., each different constructivist classroom) has unique needs that must be catered to, a key characteristic of the constructivist classroom is the interaction between instructor and students. An important goal of adult education is to promote independent, self-directed attitudes and social interaction while discouraging excessive dependence on the instructor (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, qtd. in Rovai 87). According to Huang, online courses need to provide opportunities for educators and learners to interact, which is possible through several methods including e-mail, synchronous discussion, and asynchronous discussion (30). In order to create interaction, Jonassen suggests that constructivism should be applied to distance education and proposes a constructivist design model for online learning that includes the following guidelines:

1. Focus on knowledge construction, not reproduction
2. Present authentic tasks that provide real world case-based learning environments
3. Foster reflective practice, and enable context- and content-dependent knowledge construction
4. Support collaborative construction of knowledge through social negotiation, not competition among learners for recognition (35).

These guidelines are particularly relevant in the language learning classroom. When language learners are presented with authentic tasks that serve as a guide to future situations in the real world, the learning experience becomes deeper and richer, allowing students to negotiate the language situation with their peers in a safe environment. Another guideline that is important in the

language learning classroom is co-construction of knowledge. In communicative language teaching, interaction is vital to language acquisition. Students learn better through collaboration and discussion, which result in more acquisition of language. The same is not true of a competitive learning environment.

### *Issues in the synchronous environment*

There are certain issues that can arise in the synchronous classroom because of its strictly online environment. These problems should be addressed immediately by the instructor in order to maintain interactivity in the class and to avoid disrupting the learning process.

One issue many educators face is the interaction between themselves and students. Mihai found that some educators who taught synchronously felt they could not engage in conversational teaching, while other instructors found it difficult to react quickly enough to questions to avoid the undesired long breaks, especially since silence is amplified in the virtual classroom when compared with the traditional setup. Conversational teaching is particularly important in the language teaching classroom because the language learner needs to engage in the language to achieve a viable level of oral and sociolinguistic proficiency. Other challenging aspects identified include being able to control and motivate the group without having direct contact, as well as the novelty of the tool and all its functions having to be constantly discovered by both teachers and students (10).

A second issue educators confront is disruption of learning due to technological problems. Soong et al. indicated general technological infrastructure and platform were crucial for success (107). These researchers concluded that careful consideration was required when designing, implementing, and updating technologies. As Menchaca and Bekele so aptly stated, “in short, *infrastructure* was significant” (234, authors’ emphasis).

A third issue educators encounter is the design of the online course. In computer-mediated instructional design (including e-learning, e-tutoring, and course development), instructional design plays a critical role in enabling immediacy of response and in creating social presence. In the synchronous cyber classroom, the immediacy of participants’ behaviors becomes more prominent. The role of the teacher shifts from discussion leader to discussion facilitator as students assume more responsibility. This facilitates technology-based learning, which enables students to solve their specific learning problems (Nichols and Anderson). Because the students are striving to learn the content of the course as well as the language in which the materials are presented and interactions are expected to take place, there is an immediate need for the course design to be visual and user-friendly. Creating an environment that relies not on words but on visuals that are universal in nature will allow students to thrive in their navigation of the course. In other words, course design that allows for immediate understanding and comprehension is vital to student success. To summarize, optimal

course design provides the infrastructure within which comprehensible input or  $i+1$  (Krashen, *Principles* 24) can be provided by both instructor and students, for instance, orally through video chat and in writing via discussion forums.

### *Best practices in synchronous distance education*

In order to alleviate issues that disrupt the online learning environment, the instructor must follow certain guidelines. When instructors and students are interacting in the synchronous environment, there are certain practices that are deemed optimal in terms of creating a productive, enriching, and safe learning environment. First, Yamagata-Lynch stressed that “ground rules need to be enforced” (198). Establishing ground rules ensures that students know their expectations in both the synchronous and asynchronous learning environments.

Secondly, the design of the course is key to productivity. In the arena of the distance education classroom, the easier it is for students to navigate the course, the greater the chances of their success. Hastie, Chen, and Kuo found that when the teacher adopted a simplified and ‘minimalist’ approach to instructional design, the students contributed significantly more information and demonstrated higher levels of learning. They regarded this as ‘real’ collaborative learning—the students’ rate of responses increased and involved an integration of visual, auditory and kinesthetic processes, which was attributed to the unique and ideal learning environment that was created in the synchronous cyber classroom (292). Guernsey also suggested that the structure provided by the professor was key to increased interactivity. However, although instructors must convey clear expectations and guide online discussions, they must be careful not to stifle discussion with long, overly articulated statements. In addition, Berge and Muilenburg offered the following advice to online instructors: “If things are going well, do not interfere” (55). Flottemesch also listed a number of tools for stimulating interactivity, including e-mail, letters of welcome, study groups, and instructor questioning (qtd. in Larson 266). Other authentic communication options include having learners participate in meaningful social dialogue through discussion threads, chat rooms, and other synchronous and asynchronous activities (Dantonio and Beisenherz, qtd. in Legg et al. 68). However, Legg et al. discovered faculty participation in these communications is still necessary to provide role modeling for students—intervention in inter-student communications may be needed if students do not show that they can interact using positive and constructive dialogue on topics that provoke strong emotions (68).

Thirdly, when an instructor allows students to create their own higher-order learning environment, greater learning is produced. Deeper understanding can occur when the instructor encourages the development of critical thinking skills by involving students in participatory activities such as discussion threads, group projects, practicum, and field experiences (Legg et al. 68). Since an important goal of adult education is to promote independent, self-directed attitudes and



social interaction while discouraging excessive dependence on the instructor (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, qtd. in Rovai 87), the instructor could participate on a random basis as needed. This allows for language learners to practice their fluency while working to achieve overall proficiency. It is almost impossible for instructors to participate in the discussions of all groups and it is unnecessary to do so. Permitting language learners to interact and converse without the instructor's presence provides a sense of comfort to the students and will enhance language learning. Interaction amongst peers will allow for growth and push students in their zones of proximal development (Vygotsky and Cole 86). However, instructors should facilitate discussions when students need advice on their collaborations or if they are stuck on any issues that they are unable to resolve within the group (Maushak and Ou 168). In other words, as long as learners are provided i+1 (Krashen, *Principles* 24), interaction does not have to be limited to that between instructors and learners, even novice learners.

Moreover, the use of computer-mediated communication tools in the synchronous environment allows students to develop all four language skills of writing, speaking, reading and listening while interacting in the online classroom (Satar and Özdener 595). For example, students' literacy benefits from chat tool use and communicating with peers while their oral proficiency may improve via presentation of activities or participation in class discussions. More specifically, Siltala found that breakout rooms "enable synchronous interaction and implementation of versatile language activities" (229) that incorporate all four language skills while Longhi and Angelini believed that software like Adobe Connect can be optimized for oral language practice (143).

Having reflected on what the literature reveals about the role of the instructor in the synchronous distance education classroom, this chapter seeks to examine this role by considering the following research questions as applied to the analyzed group of students:

1. What were the experiences of the first-time online facilitators?
2. What was the role of the instructor of record?
3. Were there factors that hindered learning in the synchronous video chat sessions, and if so, what?
4. Were there any factors that helped learning in the synchronous video chat sessions, and if so, which factors?
5. What are the suggested best practices?

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants in this study consisted of Kristine, the instructor of record, and Marshall and Suzie, two MA TESOL graduate students at a midsized

Mid-Atlantic state university who were taking an independent study entitled *Teaching ELL Teachers Online* with Kristine.

As part of the independent study, Marshall and Suzie assisted in the online graduate course *Teaching English Language Learners PreK-12*, a five-week summer course that ran from 5/27/2014 to 6/26/2014. Students in this latter course consisted of 25 pre-service and in-service teachers enrolled in education programs at the university. Some of these teachers had taught English language learners (ELLs) while others had not.

The 25 teachers were divided into two groups with 11 and 14 individuals respectively. Each group met twice-weekly for an hour-long synchronous video chat using Adobe Connect for a total of eight meetings per group. At each meeting, two student-led *Activity on Topics* were conducted, which were student-centered, active-learning activities on the topics of the sessions' assigned readings. Marshall and Suzie facilitated the synchronous chat sessions.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Data sources consisted of two sets of blog entries. The first set consisted of (1) reflections written by all three participants on the course textbook, Moore and Kearsley's *Distance education: A systems view of online learning*, and (2) comments by all three participants on the reflections. The second set consisted of (1) Marshall's and Suzie's reflections on the synchronous video chat sessions, and (2) comments by all three participants on the reflections. It is this second set of blog entries that is the focus of this chapter.

Since a large part of the reflections focused on the student-led *Activity on Topics*, some elaboration on their requirements is in order. In accordance with the constructivist approach, students signed up to lead a 20-minute activity on the topic of the week, focusing on student-centered activities and not on dissemination of material. Resources that students could use for the *Activity on Topic* included interviews of teachers and students, videos, lesson plans, and question prompts, among others.

The blog entries of the synchronous video chat sessions were coded using the qualitative research software, NVivo 10. Emerging themes were identified and representative excerpts were chosen.

## **Discussion**

### *Research question 1: What were the experiences of the first-time online facilitators?*

Since every online educator was new at one time, there is value to exploring the experiences of first-time online facilitators, such as those of Marshall and Suzie,

so that their experiences can inform other distance educators. Marshall's and Suzie's experiences can be divided into (1) comfort with their roles as online facilitators, and (2) styles of facilitation.

### Comfort with role

Both participants were initially uncertain about what their roles as online facilitators entailed. For example, Marshall shared "I wasn't sure myself whether typing at certain times was appropriate, or whether it might be rude because it could distract from the person speaking" during the student-led *Activity on Topics* (M5/29)<sup>1</sup>, to which Kristine responded "Typing while someone else is talking is OK ... I feel this is a value-added feature of synchronous video chat" (KM5/29)<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the integration of literacy and oral proficiency is beneficial in the language learning environment, particularly since the facilitators would be there to encourage target language use, whether orally or in writing. It should be noted, however, that synchronous video chat sessions do lend themselves better to practice of fluency than accuracy, although a focus on accuracy can still be obtained through the use of textchat transcripts and video recordings.

As time progressed, both the students in the course and the facilitators became more comfortable with the technology used—"the novelty of the tool and all its functions [were] being constantly discovered by both teachers and students" (Mihai 10). The facilitators also became more comfortable with their roles—Suzie shared "I ... felt much more confident ... and [felt] in control" (S6/19).

### Styles of facilitation in the constructivist approach

*Personal strengths.* Suzie was a practicing English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher—"I think your greatest contribution [to the course] is as a practicing ESL teacher" (KS6/2)—who liked contributing "'real-world' example[s] ... from [her] teaching experiences" (S6/2). For example, Suzie shared "the students were asking me what I would do in certain situations when ELL students were having difficult[y] pronouncing words" (S6/2).

Marshall, on the other hand, was in the final semester of his MA TESOL program. He was more tech-savvy and had a more theoretical mindset, and noted that "it was a crazy realization that I have legitimate insights to offer to these (mostly) practicing teachers" (MS6/2).

*Hands-on and hands-off facilitation.* In the spirit of constructivism, Suzie and Marshall took on the roles of facilitators (Keengwe, Onchwari, and Agamba 897). They both noted that they had different styles of facilitation. Suzie reflected:

I noticed that as facilitators, Marshall and I are very different. He uses text box to communicate with the students while I like to use the microphone. I'd rather [sit] in a DE class with vocal discussion and light text box comment. (S6/26)

To the above, Kristine responded, "It's all about who has the floor, I think—only one person can have the floor (with the mic) at any one time—but multimodal discussion can occur via both text and voice" (KS6/26). Marshall concurred:

I tend to think it is really just a difference in the way you and I are using the technologies available ... I am hyper-conscious of making sure the presenter feels like he or she has control. If it becomes unclear who "has the floor" as [Kristine] said, it creates all kinds of issues for etiquette (e.g., if a classmate has a question, who do they direct it to? Who is setting the agenda and saying "ok, let's continue"?). (MS6/26)

To elaborate, according to Marshall:

[A]s the moderator I don't want to interrupt, since I don't know exactly what direction he/she is going. For example, if I think there is a crucial piece of information missing that might lead to some kind of misunderstanding, I don't want to prematurely jump in for fear that that information will be included in the next slide, and I will have just disrupted for no reason (M6/5)

Marshall added, "I think I only feel really comfortable interjecting when I am sure that a key point is going to be missed or if something is being misconstrued or is unclear" (MS6/16).

Suzie, on the other hand, appeared to range between hands-on and hands-off facilitation. The desire for hands-on facilitation is indicated in:

[T]his is exactly where I faced the most challenges this semester in the role of the facilitator. ... in the DE I feel very "held back" from truly expressing myself ... Just like some people have a hard time creating discussion in a classroom full of students, some people have that same problem in the DE classroom, (i.e. me). (SM6/19)

However, Suzie also expressed her desire not to seem too pushy or appear to have an answer for everything (Sfinal)<sup>3</sup> and apologized to the student presenter for commenting a lot although this was appreciated by the presenter—students had not participated because they lacked experience with the presentation topic, assessment and ELLs. Finally, there was an occasion when Suzie stated, "I found myself not wanting to even interrupt [the student's] presentation verbally ... I

used the text box to comment on various points” because the student presenter was doing a stellar job on her own, or as Berge and Muilenburg put it, “If things are going well, do not interfere” (55). Perhaps Suzie’s continuum of participation depended on the students’ quality of presentation, a situation reminiscent of Rovai’s statement that “[t]he role of the instructor in a constructivist learning environment varies from time to time depending upon student needs and circumstances within each class” (85). In the second/foreign language learning environment, part of “student needs and circumstances” (Rovai 85) that influence an instructor’s continuum of participation is students’ proficiency level. For example, accuracy can be heightened by requiring students to turn in their PowerPoint slides for feedback prior to presentation.

### *Research question 2: What was the role of the instructor of record?*

In contrast to Suzie’s and Marshall’s experiences as novice facilitators, Kristine had taught synchronous online graduate courses since 2008. Kristine’s roles can be categorized as (1) multitasking, (2) being adaptable, and (3) teaching adults using Adobe Connect. Prior to a description of the roles, however, an explanation of the context is in order. The course occurred during a summer session where, according to Kristine, “[t]he need to teach a large body of knowledge in a very short time forces me to prioritize” (KMfinal)<sup>4</sup> and this occurred in the largest class to that time which resulted in bandwidth problems (KMfinal).

### **Multitasking**

Kristine explained:

When I’m teaching, I’m often doing so much at the same time, e.g. teaching, troubleshooting technical problems, watching the time, making sure that the housekeeping items I want to disseminate get disseminated, etc., that some things impinge on the periphery of my mind. (KS5/29)

The above occurred when students began setting up assignment groups via text while she was presenting. Kristine also elaborated, “I guess I’m much more comfortable with the multimodality of the online chat environment (voice and text). I multitask and I suspect students will have to learn to do the same” (KSfinal).

### **Being adaptable**

Besides multitasking, Kristine also discussed the importance of being adaptable, as suggested in the following situation:

Good point that I need to have 2 sets of polls if I want to keep the answers of polls for each section—something that I didn't foresee. Part of the nature of learning on the go that's particularly germane in the online environment that I've just taken as par for the course and don't beat myself up on if things don't go as planned. (KM5/29)

### **Teaching adults using Adobe Connect**

Kristine shared her reason for selecting Adobe Connect:

I had to make a decision between: (1) being safe and asynchronous only, or (2) have the potential for technical problems with the greater payback of the advantages of synchronous communication. Having decided on (2), I chose what I believe to be the best synchronous software, Adobe Connect. (KM6/2)

The benefits of synchronous communication are amplified in the language learning environment, where students need avenues for both literacy and oral proficiency practice.

Marshall believed:

[W]hen there are no difficulties, it has the ability to actually surpass the traditional classroom in terms of learning potential, because of the ability to have concurrent communication that does not disrupt the rest of the class, it allows for more structured participation, and it allows students to participate who may otherwise not for fear of being "on stage" (i.e., they can ask a question privately via text rather than risk face by asking a question in front of everyone). (M6/2).

This observation is particularly pertinent in the language learning environment, where the affective filter (Krashen, "*Bilingual*" 62) can be heightened when there is the threat of losing face.

Having chosen Adobe Connect, Kristine continued:

If all students fulfill all the requirements of synchronous communication (e.g. wired connection, microphone headset, etc.), technical problems would be decreased dramatically. However, as an instructor of graduate students, I feel I have to tread very carefully between requiring what I know makes for exemplary communication (and I do require microphone headsets and **STRONGLY** recommend wired connection) and treating my graduate students as adults with the consequences of not fulfilling course requirements being experienced by said students. (KM6/2).

***Research question 3: Were there factors that hindered learning in the synchronous video chat sessions, and if so, what?***

**Initial uncertainty**

Marshall had reflected on the presence of an initial uncertainty with synchronous video chat at the start of the semester: “I noticed a distinct uneasiness/awkwardness at the beginning of the chat. No one wanted to be the first to say something, it seemed, myself included” (M5/29). Examples include:

1. “One student asked if it was OK to just start talking” (M5/29);
2. “There were a few instances of two or more students beginning to talk, but once their speech overlapped, they all backed off and no one spoke until being ‘nudged’ by the instructor” (M5/29); and
3. “One student said he preferred to write than talk because seeing the little boxes with our faces seemed artificial or disembodied somehow” (M5/29).

This initial uncertainty may be even more pronounced in the second/foreign language learning environment, resulting in the increase of students’ affective filter (Krashen, “*Bilingual*” 62). Therefore, it is important that steps are taken to reduce this initial uncertainty, for instance, through a first face-to-face ice-breaker session if possible.

**Bandwidth problems**

Bandwidth problems resulted in the reduction or elimination of webcam and/or microphone use:

All webcams → webcams in small groups → no webcams except for presenters ... only a few students consistently used their microphones to engage in discussion, with most resorting to text ... I believe that in some ways this has been detrimental to participation ... presenters often seemed stressed or unsure, or just moved on during presentations when no one responded to questions immediately. Even though some students were typing, and did contribute to discussions via text, it seemed like presenters were anticipating voice responses (or at least wanted them), and felt uneasy waiting for text responses. (M6/9)

A possible reason for this may be that “silence [is] amplified in the virtual classroom as compared with a traditional setup” (Mihai 10). As a result, there was an increase in response wait time as well as presenter narration of text responses, which in turn resulted in the reduction of student participation:

Recently, it seems as though some of the activities have failed to garner the desired participation for a variety of reasons. One reason I have identified is definitely that of 'wait time' by the presenters (i.e., not allowing enough time for responses, which is inherently longer in DE especially for those who type and don't use VOIP). I think this is a limitation of the format, especially when we don't use our webcams, because body language usually provides a lot of nonverbal communication through facial expressions, etc., and – at least in my experience – you can tell when your classmates are thinking and planning a response to a discussion question you have posed. (M6/19)

In the second/foreign language learning environment, absent bandwidth problems, insisting on synchronous participation could ameliorate the text preference and enhance oral language development, particularly since non-verbal cues obtained visually help with language acquisition, and the use of the microphone enables oral proficiency development. However, if there are bandwidth issues, options such as selective webcam and voice chat use might be beneficial.

### **Underestimation of the importance of bandwidth**

Connected with the bandwidth issues mentioned above is the attendant problem of an underestimation of the importance of bandwidth. Although students were informed in writing in the syllabus and on the course home-page and verbally during synchronous sessions to use wired and high speed internet connections, there were still students who used public Wi-Fi connections:

Due to compromising connectivity issues by certain students who were using public Wi-Fi in public places with a significant amount of background noise we were forced to completely eliminate any webcam use and attempts at communication with certain students suffered ... In the end, I feel that we compromised the quality of communication for the whole class (specifically those who have taken responsible steps to use reliable technology) to cater to the needs of a select few (who have opted to ignore the stated technology requirements). (M6/2)

### **Preference for text over voice and webcam**

Related to the initial uncertainty and bandwidth problems mentioned above was also the preference of students for written rather than spoken/webcam communication:



It was a struggle to have students verbally communicate and I found most would rather sit back and type in the text box. After a few DE class sessions, I found that verbal communication worked better in creating a more vibrant online classroom. Unfortunately, not all students wanted to speak into the microphone so I was subjected to communicating via text box. Many times I would make a comment and a student would answer me via text box. This does not make for a lively discussion because as facilitator you then feel like you are narrating the comments in the text box. (Sfinal)

Another result of this preference for text was the sometimes overwhelming volume of text produced: As Kristine shared:

As a presenter, the volume of text responses has sometimes been overwhelming to me, which is why I've sometimes asked you if there's anything I should respond to in the textchat when I've been presenting information. (KM6/9)

This issue would be detrimental in the language learning environment, where students' reading speed would be decreased as they functioned in their second/foreign language. The volume of text produced would therefore need to be carefully monitored. The text transcript can also be used for focus-on-form purposes, where "students' attention [is drawn] to linguistic elements" (Long 185).

Consequently, productive text comments sometimes went "unrequited" (M6/9).

A possible reason for this preference could have been the uneasiness of watching oneself in synchronous communication, something that does not occur in face-to-face interaction:

There clearly exists an uneasiness with communication via webcam. In my opinion, this might be due to the fact that it forces you to 'watch' yourself (a[n]xiety-inducing, distracting) or may seem artificial, as one student suggested. (M5/29)

In the language learning environment, research does not appear to have demonstrated a preference for written rather than oral communication. Instead, several studies (Longhi and Angelini 143, Satar and Özdener 595, Siltala 229, Wang et al. 25) have demonstrated that synchronous communication can be used to develop proficiency in all four language skills, which suggests that the preference for written communication in the present study may be related to bandwidth problems. Steps to address bandwidth problems are mentioned later in the chapter.

***Research question 4: Were there any factors that helped learning in the synchronous video chat sessions, and if so, which factors?***

**Explicit turn-taking guidelines**

Synchronous video chat sessions were aided with the use of explicit turn-taking or structured participation guidelines, especially the *raise hand* feature. Another example is: “Students had to remind themselves or be reminded to identify who they were when they began talking” (M5/29).

**Use of different software**

Participation also increased when (1) Adobe Connect capabilities were maximized, for example Breakout rooms (S6/2) and thumbs up/down and agree/disagree features (S6/26), and (2) interaction-enhancing software like Google-Docs were used (S6/16).

**Proper hardware**

Because most students are familiar with Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) options such as Skype or Google Hangout, and they have been successful with them using existing laptop software, they may not realize the difference that proper hardware makes in a 25-student virtual classroom environment, as demonstrated by Marshall:

Today was the first day I used a USB headset for our chats, and I was absolutely amazed at how connected I felt during the session. It was by far the closest thing I have felt to spontaneous communication in a face-to-face environment, due to the fact that I didn’t have to mute my microphone to type or prevent feedback. I didn’t have to lean in to my microphone on my laptop to talk. I felt untethered to the technology and the experience became much more immersive. This was an immediately eye-opening experience for me, and I severely underestimated the effect of using a headset. (M6/12)

This issue becomes particularly pertinent in the language learning environment, suggesting that the use of microphone headsets should be made mandatory.

***Research question 5: What are the suggested best practices?***

Although the following best practices were informed by the graduate environment and working with teachers of ELLs, many of these practices are also

applicable and important for language teachers and learners. The suggested best practices can be categorized (1) pedagogically and (2) technologically.

### Pedagogical best practices

*Passion.* Because the course was one required by all teacher candidates regardless of their majors, students might have been more or less intrinsically motivated by the content. As such, passion for the content was crucial:

Now I just want to get them fired up about the content! Passion is contagious ... There are very different student populations who take this course. Some are already intrinsically motivated because they have ELLs or will have ELLs. Others won't have ELLs and it is for this latter group that I really emphasize having their classmates share their experiences. (KS5/29)

In the language learning classroom, students' intrinsic motivation can be cultivated by using topics or content of interest to them, and if they are also of interest to the instructor, the passion will be apparent.

*Student-centered presentations.* Because the student-led *Activity on Topics* were central to the synchronous sessions, high quality presentations were critical, which Marshall believed this course attempted:

I believe our class excels in [the use of presentations], making it a focus of the course. While synchronous online presentations do present a host of challenges, I think this course utilizes them to their fullest current potential. (Mfinal)

As espoused by constructivism, the criteria for quality presentations include the following:

1. Explicitly teaching how to conduct an exemplary *Activity on Topic* and why it's exemplary (KM6/19);
2. Having "each student send the professor (or teaching assistants) his or her presentation beforehand so that we can review it and interject when appropriate" (SM6/5);
3. Bringing in real world data - e.g. "interviewing a teacher ... and student" (S6/2);
4. Incorporating personal teaching experiences (S6/19);
5. Asking questions that prompt rich discussions (S6/2), that are not too broad, for example "[H]ave you used informal assessment before? What is it like?" or too limiting as in "for those of you with experience with ELLs..." (M6/19) or asking questions for which students lack experience (S6/19);

6. Providing “prompts or backup material if the presenter suspects that students would not have much experience in the topic” (KS6/19);
7. Implementing activities with practical applications (S6/9, S6/16); and
8. Using interaction-enhancing software like GoogleDocs (S6/16).

### **Technological best practices**

*Netiquette.* Because of students’ uneasiness with webcam communication, “[i]t might help to force some kind of ice-breaker activity that targets breaking the ice with the communication medium” (M5/29). In addition, using the “raise hand” feature to prevent turn-taking issues (M5/29) and reduce students’ ability to “hide” behind the screen (SM6/9) is appropriate, as is having a facilitator monitor situations where there are voluminous text responses (KM6/9). In the language classroom, the facilitator could be a more proficient student.

*Optimal length of synchronous chat sessions.* Both Suzie and Marshall opined that an hour was too short for a synchronous chat session (M6/2), suggesting that 1½ hour chat sessions that incorporate discussion posts for synchronous discussions (SM6/2) would be beneficial:

Being able not only to link the discussion and content in both platforms (synchronous and asynchronous) seemed to be something that was missing a bit. ... I would love to see some of the richness of the discussion on the discussion forum translate into the live chat format. (M6/26)

*Enforcement of technology requirements.* Because of the effect of inappropriate technology use on the experiences of other students, strict enforcement of technology requirements, especially those of USB headsets and high speed internet connection, was suggested: “I also think the professor should penalize the student in their class participation grade if they do not have this equipment” (SM6/12).

*Mandatory tech training as a prerequisite.* Marshall reflected:

I am starting to feel as though education on the technology being employed in the class is just as important as the content itself, since a lack of in-depth knowledge of the former can severely preclude acquiring the latter. (M6/16)

In view of this, he continued, “I believe explicit instruction on the technology used in the class would be extremely helpful as a prerequisite to taking the course itself” (M6/26), which could include instruction on how to use D2L (the learning management system), plug in a USB headset, and knowledge about bandwidth, hardware, and software (M6/16).

*Learning and unlearning in distance education.* In the final analysis, because synchronous video chat sessions are different from asynchronous online education and from face-to-face education, there is some learning and unlearning that must occur, or as Wang and Hannafin put it, “educators have to re-engineer their thinking” (312):

[N]egotiation of conventions of communication was constantly occurring and re-occurring. It seems as though students were never quite able to reach a consistent level of comfort with issues like turn-taking, choosing a medium of output (microphone v. text), and an uneasiness of participation without a visual connection to the rest of the class (think how many times someone said “can you hear me? Hello? Oh, this is (name).” Many social norms, it seems, must be ‘un-learned’ and re-learned in a new way in order to have efficient communication. (Mfinal)

Perhaps part of distance education, particularly synchronous distance education, requires us to “put technical issues in the same class as pedagogical issues like presentation of materials or class structure in terms of how important they are on the overall experience or learning outcomes” (MS6/26). In other words, rather than considering technology training to be a *prerequisite* for taking online courses -or a means to an end- perhaps online educators, including online language educators, should consider technology education to be part of the *learning goals* of an online course.

## Conclusion

After reflecting on the discussions of the study in aggregate, two implications can be drawn. Firstly, there appears to be an unlearning and relearning of social norms that must occur. Both instructors and students are familiar with the norms found in the face-to-face classroom. There is a tendency to transfer these norms into the online environment, particularly the synchronous video environment, which appears to share more similarities with the face-to-face context than does the asynchronous online environment. In view of this, it is important to explicitly inform students and novice online instructors that an initial uncertainty about how to function in this new environment is to be expected, as is a learning curve pertaining to the technology tools used. Instructors also need to emphasize the expectation that technology requirements like USB headsets and high speed wired connections will be strictly enforced.

The second implication pertains to a set of related issues. Constructivism as practiced in synchronous distance education allows for a continuum of hands-on to hands-off facilitation, which depends in part on the bandwidth available and the instructor’s practice of andragogy. Because bandwidth depends on the existing speed of internet connection available to instructors and students, this

constraint has to be taken into consideration to ensure the optimal use of Adobe Connect or other similar synchronous video conferencing software. Depending on the number of students available and their practice of synchronous chat, optimization may involve the use, reduction, or elimination of webcam use and/or voice chat, bearing in mind the adverse effect this would have on second language acquisition. While increasing the use of Adobe Connect capabilities can be implemented by increasing bandwidth, for example, through shutting down non-essential Wi-Fi use by other mobile devices, the fact remains that graduate students as adults have the right to ignore such suggestions. Thus, there is a necessity to educate these online learners on the consequences of the technological decisions they make not only on their own online experiences but those of their classmates as well. As such, for all online courses including the one focused on in this chapter, it appears that it would be appropriate to include technology education as a learning goal in the course.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> M5/29 refers to Marshall's blog entry of 5/29/2014.
- <sup>2</sup> KM5/29 refers to Kristine responding to Marshall's blog entry of 5/29/2014.
- <sup>3</sup> Sfinal refers to Suzie's final blog entry.
- <sup>4</sup> KMfinal refers to Kristine responding to Marshall's final blog entry.

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# In Search of the Perfect Blend: An ESL Hybrid Course for Prospective Primary Teachers

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## Abstract

This article reports on a blended learning (BL) experience designed for use in on-site English as a Second Language (ESL) courses for Primary student teachers at the *Universidad Autónoma de Madrid*. The online part of this BL experience consists of six online teaching units that integrate ESL and authentic samples of narrative and poetry related to the student teachers' interests. The typology of online activities presented was designed to improve student teachers' strategic competence in ESL. To assess the pedagogical impact of this BL course, a mixed assessment system was applied, involving both measurement through written tasks and pre- and post-questionnaires, and interpretation of discussion group participation. Results show that online integrated work in an on-site ESL program endows students with a set of linguistic competences needed at a user level and improves their capacity for autonomous learning. Findings are discussed in relation to the use of e-learning material to improve autonomous learning in the teacher education context.

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## Keywords

blended learning, hybrid course, ESL, teacher training, cognitive language learning strategies, e-lessons.

## Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to present and evaluate a Web-based blended learning (BL) experience mainly aimed at improving the strategic competence of second language students as part of their teacher education program at the *Universidad Autónoma de Madrid* (UAM) during the 2011–2012 academic year. In recent years, BL initiatives, that is, the combination of online (usually Web-based) learning and classroom face-to-face learning (Graham 4), have become ever more common in Spanish universities, which have realized the value of incorporating e-learning, thus helping bridge the gap between the academic and the professional world, and offering higher quality learning experiences. At the same time, pressure from students, who regularly utilize online resources in their everyday life, and employers, who want future professionals to be skilled information technology users, have also promoted e-learning. There is research evidence that BL is motivating (Dzakiria, Mustafa and Bakar 16), generates a strong sense of community (Rovai and Jordan) and reduces attrition rates (Jones 188; Dziuban Hartman and Moskal 5). However, evidence on the effects of hybrid models on achievement is not conclusive (see for instance; Reasons, Valadares and Slavkin 92; Utts *et al.* vs. Yilmaz and Orhan 340, Blake 23; Bañados 544). We intend to contribute to this ongoing debate by assessing the impact of BL on learners' strategic capacity in English as a Second Language (ESL) as opposed to traditional face-to-face delivery formats.

Inspired by seminal publications on hybrid course syllabus-design (i.e. Dudeney and Hockly; Sharma and Barrett; Tomlison and Whittaker), we have designed and created an asynchronous “enhancing” BL proposal, that is, a hybrid program which allows incremental changes to the on-line pedagogy but does not radically alter it (Graham 13). This proposal is based on hyper-text and consists of a set of original interactive online teaching units incorporated into an ESL on-campus program for prospective primary teachers at the *Universidad Autónoma de Madrid* (Spain) through the open-access learning Moodle platform. These teaching units, or e-lessons, offer students the possibility to improve their linguistic competence in ESL through the intensive reading of authentic literary texts related to the experiences of children and pre-adolescents, thus providing them with a greater understanding of the world of children (Alonso Belmonte and Fernández Agüero 320). In addition, they include free-choice, self-explanatory comprehension and expression exercises which encourage the students' independent self-directed learning. There is a general consensus among educators and researchers that self-regulation

and the usage of language learning strategies (LLSs) are related to successful language learning (see Cohen and Ishihara 4; Macaro 320) and that proficient language learners more frequently use a wider variety of LLSs than poor-performing learners (e.g.: Anderson 762; Bruen 221; Wharton 217). In the context of BL, recent research shows that explicit training in LLSs helps students of English improve their language skills, plan ahead, and monitor and evaluate their learning (Ferreira, García-Salinas, and Morales 58; García-Salinas, Ferreira, and Morales 40). As shown in a previous survey (Alonso Belmonte 76), there is a clear need to help promote UAM pre-service teachers' usage of LLSs. In this paper we hypothesize that our student teachers' use of a certain type of LLS, namely cognitive learning strategies (CLSs), could be strengthened by undertaking the online ESL tasks presented here.

To measure the impact of our Web-based blended learning (BL) experience on the students' strategic competence and to gauge their language improvement, we conducted a quasi-experimental study with a group of prospective primary school teachers based on a mixed assessment system mainly involving pre- and post-questionnaires, and formal testing. Results show that online integrated work on ESL literacy skills helped learners achieve the linguistic competences required at intermediate level (level B1 according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* or CEFRL; Council of Europe 24<sup>1</sup>), and boosted learner autonomy, with a moderate impact on strategic behaviors such as inferencing and elaborating. As an additional benefit, learners' motivation increased, possibly because the topics presented were linked to their future profession. In terms of the e-learning product design, this BL proposal has been positively welcomed by the e-learning community. One of the teaching units –*In Trouble*– was evaluated as highly recommended material in the 2012 edition of the MEDEA Awards aimed at encouraging innovation and good practice in the use of media in education and supported by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the General Directorate for Education and Culture of the European Union.

This paper is organized as follows: the next section reviews the current literature on BL and teacher training; next we will describe the academic profile of the target student teachers, as reported in a previous survey (Alonso Belmonte 66); the Section entitled “our teaching proposal” includes a typology of the different online activities involved in the proposal in relation to specific language learning strategies; Then we present the evaluation of this proposal through an assessment scheme combining the measurement of the students' usage of CLSs together with data on their language competence and motivation, followed by results and discussion.

### Blended learning in teacher training

In Spain, teacher training colleges and departments of education have been strategically planning for e-learning, offering hybrid or online courses with

different degrees of online work for a number of years. In fact, BL is a frequent response in Spanish teacher training institutions to the implementation of the European Higher Education Area guidelines. In accordance with these guidelines, physical in-class time has been significantly reduced in most subjects. For example, with respect to the English language modules taught in the Bachelor's Degree programs in Pre-school Education and Primary School Education at UAM –ESL I and ESL II–, only 35% of the class time is meant to be devoted to on-campus ESL teaching and learning. This implies that students completing these modules must be given tasks and activities that account for the remaining 65% of off-campus class time, and instructors need to provide students with corresponding assessment and feedback that guarantee high-quality learning outcomes.

Initially, the development of BL was practice-led rather than research-based (Neumeier 164). Fortunately, however, current research regarding the affordances of BL and other forms of computer-mediated learning in the field of teacher education has provided teacher educators with an increasingly solid framework in which to ground their pedagogical assumptions and practices (e.g. Dell, Hobbs and Miller; Geer; Olson and Werhan; Voogt *et al.*; Yeh; among others). In this field, many scholars and curriculum designers advocate for hybrid formulas, since these aid in “the integration of declarative and procedural knowledge, thus supporting the learner when constructing professional knowledge and skills” (Kupetz and Ziegenmeyer, “Blended learning” 194). Not surprisingly, a strong connection between theoretical coursework and field experience is one of the characteristics of good teacher education programs (Darling-Hammond *et al.* 392) and it seems that BL can provide both.

The advantages of online methods and techniques specific to the field of education are many. In general, research shows that student teachers react positively to BL (Motteram 24; Young and Lewis 608). They perceive that their preparation for important teaching responsibilities is enhanced, and that they are better prepared for their initial year of teaching when they receive online rather than face-to-face instruction (Chiero and Beare 785). Furthermore they claim to benefit from peers in online discussions (Khine and Lourdasamy 674) and online learning communities help these students solve problems and reach consensus (Yeh 1639). Teacher educators, on the other hand, are willing to embrace computer-mediated teaching, although they feel a significant tension caused by the technical and pedagogical changes imposed by online training, particularly in relation to their beliefs and understanding of good practice: the educators' engagement in this type of training is constrained, for example, by their beliefs on its effectiveness (Downing and Dymont 101). These findings are in line with the literature showing that there seems to be a certain reluctance to the incorporation of e-learning in higher education (Blin and Munro 476), possibly related to deficiencies in computer literacy (Georgina and Hosford 695).

There also exist reports of successful experiences and scholars satisfied with e-learning, and experienced in it (Christianson, Luann, and Luft; Fish and Gill; Guasch, Álvarez, and Espasa; Ulmer, Watson, and Derby; among others).

Online-only delivery formats may not suit teacher training, however, because this discipline has an important face-to-face component. When it comes to practice, i.e. student-teacher placements in schools or internships, microteaching<sup>2</sup>, field experiences, etc., real teaching *needs to take place*, and to date, this seems more feasibly undertaken by actually *being there*, in a traditional brick-and-mortar class, with student-teachers engaging in direct interaction with the educational context and teacher educators supervising their work. What is more, “there seems to be a common belief among teacher educators that pre-service teachers preparing for a face to face environment must have appropriate teaching behaviors modeled in a face to face environment” (Dyment, Downing, and Budd 138). This may be one of the reasons why, in teacher training, blended formats could be preferred to other, more radical, full-distance models. E-learning has been described as “taking community out of education” (Chen, Liu, and Wong; Tayebnik and Puteh; Zemsky and Massy; in Fogal, Graham III, and Lavigne 355). BL can remedy this shortcoming (Fogal, Graham III, and Lavigne 355) and still allow for flexibility, especially in the case of “enhancing BL”, as stated above (Graham 13)<sup>3</sup>.

There seems to be a dearth of literature on BL in language teacher education. Harker and Koutsantoni discuss the effectiveness of Web-based BL for teaching English for Academic Purposes to native English speakers, and conclude that BL is better in terms of student retention, although achievement levels under this mode of instruction are similar to those registered in distance learning. Similarly, studies on second language teacher training report no difference in content knowledge acquisition between BL and classroom-based instruction (Kocoglu, Ozek, and Kesli 1129). In other words, in terms of learning outcomes, results shown by the most recent literature are not conclusive. Our study intends to cast a light on this matter in the context of UAM teacher training, by evaluating the impact of our BL proposal on learners’ strategic capacity in ESL.

### The UAM student teacher’s learning profile

At present, BL still raises issues for teacher education in general and second-language teacher training in particular. For example, which combination of modes renders the optimal balance between theory and practice? How can educators broaden students’ perspectives on learning and teaching and enable students to take responsibility and make informed choices without *always being there*? How is it possible for educators to serve as a model at a distance? As claimed by Osguthorpe and Graham (229), “if balance and harmony are the qualities that are sought for in blended environments, one must first identify precisely what is

to be mixed together". To identify this perfect blend, curriculum designers ought to take into account the contents of the course and the characteristics of the student body, as well as other aspects such as their needs and individual differences in order to offer adequate scaffolding. In this vein, several frameworks and models based on needs and context analysis and scaffolding have been developed in an attempt to define the parameters of successful BL (Geer 45; Kerres and de Witt 101; and for language learning, Neumeier 166; and Dudeney and Hockly 136; Sharma and Barrett).

The pedagogical objectives of our BL proposal are essentially determined by the needs of the target recipients. An earlier pilot survey of a group of 41 student teachers in their second year of Primary Teacher Training at UAM (Alonso Belmonte 66) identified them as young females (from 19 to 22 years old) who could be described as digital-savvy Information and Communication Technology (ICT) users and who have a clearly extrinsic motivation to English language learning, as they acknowledge that ESL is important for their future career. In Willing's terminology (159), they were "authority oriented learners"; that is, they felt comfortable with –and needed– structure and sequential progression. They liked to get clear instructions and know exactly what they were doing in the classroom. Regarding their learning styles, most of the student teachers interviewed claimed to learn best through visual and auditory activities. This means that their preferred methods of instruction involve multimedia materials such as DVDs, podcasts, audio and video files, etc.

To learn more about these students' capacities for autonomous learning, a questionnaire was designed and administered at the end of the ESL instruction period. This test was made up of 16 items which explored the frequency with which learners carry out specific tasks associated with the development of cognitive learning strategies (CLSs), which are LLSs that "entail direct manipulation or transformation of the learning materials" (O'Malley and Chamot 8). Results showed that in ESL this group of UAM student teachers made an uneven and thus limited use of CLSs, drawn from a commonly used list (O'Malley and Chamot 45), including repetition, resourcing, translation, grouping, note taking, deduction, recombination, imagery, auditory representation, key word, contextualization, elaboration, transfer and inferencing. For example, they frequently used strategies such as contextualization, resourcing and note taking, basic to carrying out learning in any academic context. However, on a more dismaying note, 59.5% of primary student teachers admitted that they translated directly from Spanish when they needed to speak or write. In addition, half of the students stated that their comprehension process was compromised when faced with a new word, since they did not usually resort to relevant learning strategies such as deduction or inferencing. Finally, they hardly used other CLSs such as imaginery or grouping. There is no doubt that these findings constitute a valuable starting point to tailor our BL proposal and evaluate its success.

## Our teaching proposal

The proposal that follows is an example of enhancing BL with the following objectives:

1. To develop the student's communicative competence within level B1 of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe 24);
2. To improve the future teacher's ESL skills, particularly in relation to the teaching environment;
3. To promote learner autonomy and strategic learning, more specifically in relation to the development of CLSs.

More specifically, our model consists of a combination of work through a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE; 30%) and on-campus sessions (70%). Online work is centered mainly –but not exclusively– on written language activities and on developing autonomy, whereas in on-site work more emphasis is placed on speaking and listening skills and on student interaction. Both online and on-site work share the same linguistic goals and deal with parallel linguistic content.

In accordance with our objectives, the methodology is based on communicative and participative approaches to language learning. Learners are encouraged to play an active, autonomous role and to be responsible for their own progress. The tutor, on the other hand, is expected to facilitate their learning process, favoring communicative and meaningful learning situations. Training in CLSs is meant to be performed in the natural setting of the classroom and by working through the VLE.

As for evaluation, students are assessed during the course through a series of objective tests, the different sections of which should be completed successfully in order to pass the module. Final evaluation covers both in-class (up to 70%) and autonomous work (up to 30%). The evaluation of autonomous work is based on the written products of the e-lessons.

### *Characteristics of the online component*

These teaching units are organized around the intensive reading of extracts from renowned 20<sup>th</sup>-century literary works mainly aimed at or dealing with children and pre-adolescents. In order to come up with a coherent set of texts, at the initial stages of the program's design we agreed on four topics around which the majority of children's and pre-adolescents' experiences revolve. Texts were selected and arranged depending on whether their subject matter could be classified into one of these four general topics: (a) School; (b) Family; (c) Love and friendship; (d) Adventure and play. Table 1 shows the details of each e-lesson:



**Table 1:** Description of the six online teaching units.

	Title	Based on an excerpt from...	Topic
Unit 1	What's wrong with Mr Right?	R. Dahl (1982). <i>Cinderella (Revoltig Rhymes)</i> . London: Puffin.	Love and friendship
Unit 2	Going on a Mystery Tour	P. Pullman (1997). <i>The Subtle Knife</i> . London: Scholastic Children's Books.	Adventure and Play
Unit 3	Heart Bits	S. Townsend (1998). <i>The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 ¾</i> . London: Arrow Books (First edition: 1982).	Family
Unit 4	Magic Teaching	J. K. Rowling, (1997). <i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone</i> . London: Bloomsbury.	School
Unit 5	Family Matters	A. Fine (1989). <i>My war with Goggle-eyes</i> . London: Puffin.	Family
Unit 6	In Trouble	R. Westall (1990). <i>Woman and Home (The Call and other stories)</i> . London: Viking UK.	Adventure and Play

Source: Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Open Course Ware, "Inglés para maestros". Web. May 5, 2016.

The level of English required to successfully complete the tasks proposed is upper-intermediate (B1, according to the CEFRL). The estimated amount of time to be spent on the text –or set of texts within one title– and corresponding activities ranges from 2 to 4 hours, so that the program is meant to cover an 18-hour course.

### *Online activity types and CLS development*

In order to meet our goals, we developed an array of activities covering the usual stages in a standard communicative lesson plan revolving around intensive reading comprehension, namely (1) pre-reading and contextualizing, (2) the reading comprehension phase itself and (3) moving away from the text into work on other skills and follow-up tasks.

Most online activities were planned and designed to engage the reader in the use of CLSs in various ways. Table 2 displays the list of the main language skills and activity types proposed in the different e-lessons in relation to the CLSs they work on:

Concerning pre-reading, we devised "drag-and-match", "true-or-false" and other similar activities that allow for a quick matching of information, with the aim of activating previous lexical and socio-cultural knowledge necessary to understand the texts. At this stage the reader is expected to (1) develop

**Table 2:** Presence of the CLSs in the online activities.

CLSs	Language skills & content	E-lesson No.
Repetition	Use of English	5, 2
	Listening and written expression	3
	Reading comprehension	4
Elaboration	Pre-reading	3–5
Transfer	Written expression	1–6
	Reading comprehension	3, 4
Inference	Pre-reading	1–6
	Reading comprehension	1–6
	Listening	4
Deduction	Written expression	4, 5
	Use of English	5, 2
Imagery	Use of English	5
	Listening	5
Resourcing	Reading comprehension	3
	Pre-reading	1–6
	Written expression	4
	Use of English	5
Grouping	Use of English	1
	Reading comprehension	3, 4
	Use of English	5
Note taking	Reading comprehension	3
	Written expression	5
	Listening	5
Recombination	Reading comprehension	3
	Written expression	3, 4
Contextualisation	Reading comprehension	3
	Listening and written expression	3
	Use of English	5

inferences and implicit relations, both inter- and intra-textual, and generate hypotheses that she will have the chance to verify or refute afterwards, (2) look up reference materials on the text and its author to support autonomous reading comprehension, and (3) prepare for reading by trying to get the gist of the story. Consequently, the most common CLSs in these activities are elaboration,

**5.- Family matters** MENU EXIT

a) Pre-reading activities 01 de 02 →

Are you familiar with any book written for older children or pre-teenagers? Say which of the following titles addresses early adolescents:

<input type="checkbox"/> The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The Hobbit.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The Call of the Wild.	<input type="checkbox"/> The Pearl.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alice's adventures in Wonderland.	

**That's right!**

YES:

- ☐ The Hobbit, or There and Back Again, is a fantasy novel by J. R. R. Tolkien published in 1937.
- ☐ Published in 1903, The Call of the Wild is Jack London's most-read book. Because the protagonist is a dog, it is sometimes classified as a juvenile novel.
- ☐ Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, written by Lewis Carroll in 1865, tells of a girl named Alice who falls down a rabbit hole into a fantasy world.

NO:

- ☐ Sleeping Beauty, by Charles Perrault, is classic fairytale involving a beautiful princess called Aurora, an enchantment and a handsome prince. It is for children rather than for teenagers.
- ☐ The Pearl is a novel by John Steinbeck, which is not targeted specifically at adolescents.

Fig. 1: Pre-reading activities in e-lesson 5 (page 1).

**5.- Family matters** MENU EXIT

a) Pre-reading activities ← 02 de 02 →

In this e-lesson you are going to read a fragment of a novel by Anne Fine. She is a British author well known for her children's books, of which she has written more than 50. You can read about the author and her work at:

- ☐ Anne Fine's official web site:  
<http://www.annefine.co.uk/index.php>
- ☐ Interview with Anne Fine at:  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/authorinterviews/7992667/World-of-Anne-Fine-author.html>

After reading through these sites, could you tell which of the following books has been written by Anne Fine?

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Madame Doubtfire.
<input type="checkbox"/> The Diary of a Young Girl.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Goggle-eyes.

**Yes!**

Goggle-eyes is the book you will work on in this e-lesson, and Madame Doubtfire was adapted into the film Mrs. Doubtfire, starring Robin Williams, in 1993.

Fig. 2: Pre-reading activities in e-lesson 5 (page 2).

resourcing and inferencing, corresponding to objectives (1), (2) and (3) above, respectively. Examples of this can be seen in figures 1 and 2.

When reading, certain key aspects (in relation to the contents of the text such as the role of the characters, or the order in the chain of events) are often analyzed in order to prepare for the follow-up stage and inferences are drawn

## 2.- Going on a Mystery Tour

MENU
EXIT

**b) Reading & Writing** 01 de 05



If you want to hear the text, click on 

**FRAGMENT 1.** Later that day, towards midnight in fact, Will was walking out of the city of Oxford, forty miles away. He was tired to his very bones. He had hitch-hiked, and ridden on two buses, and walked, and reached Oxford at six in the evening, too late to do what he needed to do; and he'd eaten at a Burger King and gone to a cinema to hide (though what the film was, he forgot even as he was watching it) and now he was walking along an endless road through the suburbs, heading north. No one had noticed him so far. But he was aware that he'd better find somewhere to sleep before long, because the later it got, the more noticeable he'd be. The trouble was that there was nowhere to hide in the gardens of the comfortable houses along this road, and there was still no sign of open country.

He came to a large roundabout where the road going north crossed the Oxford ring road going east and west. At this time of night there was very little traffic, and the road where he stood was quiet, with comfortable houses set back behind a wide expanse of grass on either side. Planted along the grass at the road's edge were two lines of hornbeam trees, odd-looking things with perfectly symmetrical close-leaved crowns, more like children's drawings than like real trees, and the street lights made the scene look artificial, like a stage set. Will was stupefied with exhaustion, and he might have gone on to the north, or he might have laid his head on the grass under one of those trees and slept; but as he stood trying to clear his head, he saw a cat.

Circular road in big cities.

Now, try to predict what is going happen next. Choose among the following hypotheses:

<input type="checkbox"/> He will look at the cat for some seconds, then he will go on walking. These seconds will prevent a police car passing by from seeing him.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The cat will approach him and he will stroke it.
<input type="checkbox"/> The cat will walk into an alley and he will follow it.	<input type="checkbox"/> The owner of the cat will appear, see him and raise the alarm.

Next page

**Fig. 3:** Reading comprehension in e-lesson 2 (page 1).

from those key aspects through a series of tasks. Work on the CLS of inferencing is thus important at this stage too. Additionally, a selection of words and expressions that we expect our students to have problems with is highlighted and explained when running the mouse pointer over them, to help readers avoid translation and encourage them to guess the meaning of unknown vocabulary from the context. An example of this can be seen in figure 3.

For selective comprehension of the linguistic input in the text, we present readers with skill- and language-based activities, namely on use of English and reading comprehension, such as true-or-false, classifying, spot-the-odd-one-out, and error-correction exercises that help broaden their vocabulary and expand their grammatical knowledge. Figures 4 and 5 are samples of activities that we consider suitable to practice the CLSs of grouping, which comes up regularly at this stage.

Finally, we put forward different written expression activities –i.e. writing a poem, instructions, an opinion essay, a description, a summary, a New Year's resolution list, a dialogue, etc.– where the information obtained from reading is applied to other communicative purposes. The student is furnished with precise indications on how to undertake the writing tasks, and can send them straight away to the instructor when finished in order to be evaluated.

These tasks frequently take into account the development of critical thinking and personal opinion and are meant to boost a sense of engagement by explicitly connecting the text with the reader's experience. The contents learned are transferred and recycled into a language product other than the original text,

**1. What's wrong with Mr Right?** MENU EXIT

d) Vocabulary activities 03 de 03

And now, find words that can go under the following headings:

Speaking verbs (example: cried)

Connotations of disgust (adverbs and adjectives ending in -y, such as 'dirty')

Exclamations (example: Whoopee!)

Check

[Click here](#) to read the poem.

Fig. 4: Language work on Use of English in e-lesson 1 (page 3).

**4.- Magic teaching** MENU EXIT

c) Comprehension activities 03 de 06

You must have noticed that the professors that Harry meets at Hogwarts generally have an extravagant personality. Match these teachers with their main characteristics (you can only use the characteristics once):

Boring Small and fat Strict

Short Scary

Well Done!  
That's it! He smells of garlic.

Prof. Binns

Prof. Flitwick

Smelly Prof. Quirrell

Prof. McGonagall

Prof. Snape

Prof. Sprout

Fig. 5: Reading comprehension in e-lesson 4 (page 3).

and the linguistic models proposed when reading are expected to be imitated and repeated through practice. Engaging in these processes contributes to the development of the CLSs of transfer and repetition respectively. Depending on the e-lesson, other strategies such as note taking, recombination, grouping, deducting and resourcing come into play. Figure 6 is an example of a writing follow-up activity.

### Evaluation of the enhancing BL proposal

To assess the impact of these e-lessons on the students' linguistic competence in ESL, we evaluated the written tasks produced by the 291 primary student

**6.- In trouble**

MENU EXIT

e) Follow up: Writing 01 de 02

Imagine that you are the writer of the letter, that is, Miss Mariner. Give precise instructions to the next owner of the house about what he will have to do with it (write around 150 words):

Write

Send

**Remember:**

- Tell the next owner of the house to do one of these things:
  - 1) Tell him what is necessary and what is not: *you should / you need to...*
  - 2) what would be wrong to do: *you should not... / it would not be advisable/appropriate...*
- Use sequencers such as: *First(!y)... Then... Next... After that... Finally...*

**Fig. 6:** Follow-up written expression activity in e-lesson 6.

teachers enrolled in the ESL I module. We also considered the results obtained by these students at the formal summative tests taking place at the end of the module. To gauge their satisfaction with the online material, we used discussion groups drawn from a smaller sample of 84 primary student teachers. Finally, as for the use of CLSs, we carried out a quasi-experimental study with the same 84 primary student teachers. Unfortunately, the assignment of subjects to a treatment group versus a control group was not possible since the e-lessons are part of the obligatory contents that all student teachers are required to learn. However, as a valuable source of comparison, the outcomes of this study were compared with the already reported results of the questionnaire (Alonso Belmonte 66) produced by the UAM primary student teachers doing the ESL I module the previous academic year (2010–2011) (see section on Blended learning in teacher training). These participants, who did not receive any web-based instruction, will constitute our Control Group to give our study a wider scope.

For the purpose of analyzing the students' usage of CLSs before and after the BL experience, two tests –a pre- and a post-intervention test– were designed and administered to the student teachers in a printed version. We did not specifically draw on existing instruments such as Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (or SILL, Oxford 293) because we did not find them easily transferable to the specific context of BL in teacher training. Instead, we decided to follow the model designed by Alonso Belmonte. Thus, both questionnaires are made up of 16 items, which explored the frequency with which learners carry out specific tasks associated with the development of the following CLSs: repetition, elaboration, transfer, inferencing, deduction, imaginery, resourcing, translation, grouping, note taking, recombination and contextualization. The answers to these items are classified on a four-point Likert scale with the following choices: (1) I never do it; (2) I sometimes do it; (3) I normally do it; and

**Table 3:** Relationship between CLSs and items in pre- and post-tests.

CLSs	Items in questionnaire
Repetition	1
Elaboration	2
Transfer	3
Inferencing	4, 5
Deduction	6, 7
Imagery	8
Imagery	9
Resourcing	10
Translation	11, 12
Grouping	13
Note taking	14A to 14D
Recombination	15
Contextualization	16

(4) I always do it (see a version of the questionnaire in English in Appendix I). The initial test was intended to gather data on their use of CLSs prior to any research intervention, and to test whether the results obtained were in line with the findings presented by Alonso Belmonte (66). As for the post test, it was administered to the UAM student teachers six months later, at the end of the ESL module.

As can be observed in table 3, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the items in the questionnaires and the CLSs. On the contrary, sometimes two items explore different features of a given CLS. This is the case of the strategies of inferencing (items 4 and 5) and deduction (items 6 and 7).

In addition, part of the strategic work proposed in the e-lessons has to do with *avoiding* translation into Spanish, so we expected the test to reflect a decrease in the use of the strategy of “translation” (items 11 and 12). Pedagogical constraints and space limitations made it impossible to include work on the CLSs of *auditory representation* and *key word*.

### Results

We collected and analyzed 78 questionnaires (42 pre-tests and 36 post-tests). Unfortunately, the day in which the post tests were administered, 6 students were absent. This explains the difference between numbers. An overview of the results obtained allows us to claim that our student teachers’ extrinsic

**Table 4:** Final marks in the ESL I module (first semester 2012–2013).

Marks	N= 291 students enrolled
A+	7
A	14
B	78
C	113

motivation improved after this experience. To start with, data obtained in discussion groups during the ESL module yielded very positive feedback on the implementation of the project, especially in terms of boosting the motivation of the students in relation to reading authentic material primarily intended for an audience of native English speakers. They repeatedly stated their satisfaction with having been able to read an important amount of authentic literature autonomously.

As for the final evaluation results, which included the assessment of five different written tasks and a final written test, 72.85% of the students enrolled in ESL I passed the subject, with different degrees of success. The final results can be seen in table 4.

Regarding the e-lessons' impact on our students' strategic competence in ESL, the analysis of the data reveals that there is a small improvement in the use of most CLSs, although unfortunately, the results obtained are not statistically significant. In the pre-tests, subjects claimed to apply CLSs on a scale rate of 2.56. In the post-tests, however, this rate increased up to 2.75. In other words, the majority of the students' answers move slightly in a continuum which ranges from the response category "I sometimes do it" (no. 2) towards "I usually do it" (no. 3). The Pearson correlation value obtained ( $r = 0.95$ ) is in line with this improvement and confirms that there is a trend suggesting a positive linear relationship between the hybrid instruction received and the students' use of the CLSs under study.

Table 5 shows the weighted means obtained before and after the BL experience, according to the rating scale employed in the questionnaire, and the standard deviation values.

As we can see, results on the pre-test are similar to the ones obtained in the control group (Alonso Belmonte 76), especially concerning the more frequently used CLSs: contextualization, resourcing and note taking. In the post-test, findings show that these CLSs and some others, such as transfer or deduction, do not greatly improve, while others seem to have become slightly more frequent. The main increments are observed in the CLSs of inferencing (from 2.58 to 3.01), repetition (from 2.14 to 2.55), elaboration (from 2.16 to 2.41) and grouping (from 2.14 to 2.44). To highlight the improvement observed



**Table 5:** Compared weighted means (WMs) and standard deviation (SD) values in the pre- and post-tests.

CLSs N=12	Pre-test	Post-test
	WMs	WMs
Repetition	2.14	2.55
Elaboration	2.16	2.41
Transfer	2.78	2.91
Inferencing	2.58	3.01
Deduction	2.86	2.94
Imagery	2.3	2.55
Resourcing	3.42	3.44
Translation	2.38	2.33
Grouping	2.14	2.44
Note taking	2.68	2.87
Recombination	2	2.22
Contextualization	3.28	3.38
AVERAGE WM VALUE	2.56	2.75
AVERAGE SD VALUE	0.46σ	0.40σ

**Table 6:** Rating scale 3 ‘I normally do it’. Percentage point increment (PPI).

Item no. When I learn something new in English...	LLSs	PPI
Item no. 6: (...) I make predictions by using the information available.	Inferencing	13 PPI (from 31% to 44%)
Item no. 1: (...) When I do a writing task in English, I try to imitate a model.	Repetition	19 PPI (from 17% to 36%)
Item no. 3: (...) I try to relate it to what I already know.	Elaboration	10 PPI (from 29% to 39%)
Item no. 14: (...) I group [the new words or structures] with others I already know.	Grouping	14 PPI (from 33% to 47%)

in the use of these four CLSs, Table 6 portrays the percentage point increment in response category no. 3 once the BL experience was completed.

Finally, the presence of some CLSs has lessened. This is the case of “translation”: the data show a small but very encouraging decrease, from 2.38 to 2.33, which points to a tendency to stop translating word for word to promote a more global understanding.

## Discussion

The findings presented here are in line with previous research on the effectiveness of BL in different contexts (such as that of Blake and Yilmaz and Orhan) and specifically, in teacher training (for instance Farooq, Al Asmari and Javid; Ferreira, García-Salinas and Morales; Khine and Lourdasamy; Kupetz and Ziegenmeyer, “Flexible learning activities”; Yeh). In addition, we observed an increase in motivation, and an easily noticeable interest and sense of engagement on the part of the students. As for the occurrence of CLSs, results derived from the study indicate that there may be a possible relation between the approach to strategy training put forward in this proposal and the slight but consistent improvement detected in the usage of CLSs. The cases of inferencing and elaboration are noteworthy. These strategies are recurrent at the stages of pre-reading and reading comprehension, as the reader is repeatedly invited to make predictions and generate hypotheses before and as she reads in all the e-lessons. The improvement of “grouping” is also to be expected to some extent, as it is also one of the most frequently promoted strategies in the e-lessons, especially at the reading comprehension and post-reading stages, where a more in-depth understanding and analysis is usually required. And of course, the strategy of repetition is at the heart of all written tasks proposed. In sum, we claim, as other researchers have before us (García-Salinas, Ferreira and Morales 46), that there are possible grounds for a relationship between this BL environment designed to address the needs of this group of students and the development of certain CLSs.

Nevertheless, the results suggest a positive relationship between BL and the enhancement of CLSs, but they are not conclusive. There may be different explanations for this. One of them might be the short time of exposure to the hybrid course (only six months). Another is related to the limitations of the study itself. For example, the pedagogical constraints imposed by our teaching context hindered the possibility of carrying out a strictly experimental study. Therefore, a longer term experimental intervention would be required to claim causality between the BL environment, the development of certain CLSs in contrast with others and the relationship between certain CLSs and the specific task and techniques involved in BL. A more strictly experimental design would also allow us to establish the students’ linguistic competence *before* completing the module, to distinguish clearly what they already knew from what they learned as a result of the module.

Another caveat of this study regards the method for eliciting strategic behavior. Both pre-and post-tests measured the use of CLSs through self-reporting, rather than through an analysis of their external acts. We acknowledge the difficulty of distinguishing between engaging in an ordinary learning activity and in a learning activity involving strategic work (Dörnyei 164), and the conflicting relationship between external acts and the mental constructs to which they may be attributed. This would explain, for example, the results concerning the

strategy of repetition. Although it involves imitating a language model, including overt practice and silent rehearsal, and it is basic in any learning process, students do not seem to be conscious of the fact that they are using it all the time. Thus, we are aware that verbalizations may prove insufficient and suggest that a combination of questionnaires and discussions with a careful analysis of external acts may be required in future experiments. We also plan to consider data collection through open-ended questions that elicit from the learners the strategies that they can identify as using, rather than by naming the strategies themselves. In addition, the impact on strategic behavior could be looked into by focusing, for instance, on different strategies intensively and separately. Future actions point also to developing more e-lessons for student teachers during their specialist course in ESL in the final year of their degree.

### Concluding remarks

The present study shows that in the context of UAM and probably in similar higher-education institutions, BL is a feasible alternative to traditional on-campus face-to-face teaching in that it helps to occupy individual's working time while allowing the instructor to monitor the process with ease. In addition, by introducing technology in the teacher education context, we must surely be enhancing its future use in student teachers' classrooms.

No doubt, BL and other forms of online learning are becoming ever more ubiquitous. And this educational milieu is rapidly changing: already "traditional" computer-assisted language learning environments are coexisting with and giving way to other innovative education tools related to, for example, mobile applications, cloud computing and social media platforms. In this process, it is important to identify in what ways BL might be at least as effective as on-site instruction. The potential intersection of e-learning with good practices in teacher training will yield valuable insights into the research body on whether hybrid models are effective as opposed to more traditional paths. As for the results presented and discussed in this chapter concerning the positive development of some LLSs (more specifically CLSs) in a BL context, it remains to be researched whether the key to successful language learning comes from the range and frequency of strategy use, the nature of strategies, or even the possible combinations of strategies. We believe that decisions on this matter should be research-based rather than depend on the teacher trainer's intuition, and that more empirical studies are needed that relate LLSs and online teaching environments.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Level B1 in the CEFRL is equivalent to Intermediate - High in ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. An outline of the competences involved in CEFRL's B1

is: the student “[c]an understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans” (Council of Europe 24).

<sup>2</sup> Microteaching is a training technique that involves students teaching short lessons –typically recorded– in front of each other and discussing them.

<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, distance practicum has also been put forward as a possible alternative to traditional placements (for example in Hall and Knox and Dymond *et al.*), provided quality interaction among university supervisors, student teachers and mentor teachers is granted. Other very interesting initiatives advocate for training teachers-to-be in distance teaching, even for primary and secondary education contexts (Archambault 84; Kennedy and Archambault 196).

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## Appendix 1: Questionnaire

### Section I: Personal Information

<b>Studies</b>		Pre-school	Primary
<b>Subject</b>		English I	English II
<b>Sex</b>	Male      Female	<b>Age</b>	..... years old

### SECTION II: HOW YOU LEARN ENGLISH

1. When I do a writing task in English, I try to imitate a model.  
 ..... 1      2      3      4
  
2. When I learn something new in English, I try to relate it to what I already know (for example, if I read a poem, I think of other poems I have read)  
 ..... 1      2      3      4
  
3. When I learn a new word or structure, I try to put it in practice in class.  
 ..... 1      2      3      4
  
4. When I am reading, I stop at every unknown word  
 ..... 1      2      3      4
  
5. When I am reading or listening, I make predictions by using the information available.  
 ..... 1      2      3      4
  
6. Before I write, I think of what I am going to say using the rules of English that I know  
 ..... 1      2      3      4
  
7. When I read in English, I try to apply the rules I know to understand better.  
 ..... 1      2      3      4
  
8. When I learn a new word, I put it in relation with an image.  
 ..... 1      2      3      4

9. When I think of a word or structure that I know, I think of a sentence where that word/structure is used.  
..... 1    2    3    4
10. When I do a task in English, I use materials such as dictionaries, grammars, the Internet, etc.  
..... 1    2    3    4
11. When I am going to speak or write, I translate from Spanish.  
..... 1    2    3    4
12. I translate word by word what I hear or read.  
..... 1    2    3    4
13. To remember a new word or structure, I group it with others I already know (for example, with its opposite, with words belonging to the same family...)  
..... 1    2    3    4
14. When I study English...
  - a. I take notes..... 1    2    3    4
  - b. I make diagrams or schematic representations..... 1    2    3    4
  - c. I make summaries..... 1    2    3    4
  - d. I underline..... 1    2    3    4
15. When I do a writing task in English, I try to combine words or structures that I have never used together yet. .... 1    2    3    4
16. I find it easier to learn a word or structure when I find it in a real context (for example, in a conversation). .... 1    2    3    4



# Elements of Good Design: Applying The Quality Matters Rubric to Develop Online Language Courses

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## Abstract

Evaluating the variety of options with regard to the materials and technologies for teaching languages online can be daunting. The Quality Matters (QM) organization's Rubric (QMR) offers a set of guidelines for teachers to design online courses around a set of standards based on established principles of quality teaching practices. By focusing on three main concepts (course beginnings, course alignment, and course technology), the QMR provides a set of guidelines that are flexible enough to adapt to a variety of course levels and needs. The present paper offers suggestions on how the QMR can be applied to develop and evaluate the structure, materials, technologies and activities employed to deliver language courses in an online format.

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## Keywords

Quality Matters Rubric, online course design, best teaching practices, technological tools

## Introduction

Each generation of teachers has been faced with the pressure of incorporating technological innovations into their teaching. Online delivery of courses is currently one of the most popular and growing trends as increases in enrollment of online courses currently exceed overall enrollment increases in higher education (Allen and Seaman 8). A recent survey of over 2,800 institutions of higher education in the U.S. found that online course offerings have grown rapidly for several years increasing from 1.6 million students taking at least one online course in 2002 to more than 7.1 million (Allen and Seaman 19). The same report indicates that one-third of all college students are currently enrolled in at least one online course and that, before graduating, a majority will have taken at least one online course.

While the demand for online courses continues to grow, professional development of faculty for delivering courses in a wholly online format trails far behind (Newlin and Wang 325; Pankowski; Lackey). The lack of training is further complicated by the constant flow of new technological devices, applications, and media, often leading technologies to be adopted in a bandwagon effect, disregarding conventional wisdom and without careful consideration or plan as to how to reasonably implement them (Ehrmann 54).

The rapid appearance of new technologies and the external demands to employ them may lead instructors to mistake these new tools for praxis. Later, if the innovations fail to live up to their promise, rather than evaluate why they were unsuccessful, instructors will likely abandon them in favor of the latest technological trend, hoping for better results (Ehrmann 54). Moreover, the push to integrate more technology in education is often initiated at administrative levels rather than faculty levels with little forethought given to faculty concerns such as course quality, training, and class size (Noble 9; Puzziferro and Shelton; Taft, Perkowski, and Martin 181). In the end, educators should bear in mind that neither the available technologies that support teaching nor the wholly online format in which courses are increasingly delivered in and of themselves represent a pedagogical approach or methodology (Blake 9).

In order to keep new technologies including the delivery of courses in a wholly online format from blurring the boundaries of pedagogical practice and objectives, educators need a set of principles for creating and evaluating their online course design (McLoughlin 7; Hampel 107). These principles should be grounded in a structure that allows teachers to reflect on their teaching

practices while still allowing the flexibility to adapt activities and strategies to meet student needs (Hauck and Stickler 465; Puzziferro and Shelton).

While concerns regarding what and how much technology is necessary and how to successfully deliver a course are experienced across disciplines, they are even more keenly felt by many language teachers. Language educators face a unique set of challenges in an online environment given the nature of language and second language (L2) learning. Current student-centered practices in L2 classrooms encourage exposing learners to authentic language and providing opportunities to engage in purposeful conversation (e.g. Lee and VanPatten 8; Omaggio Hadley 116). Contrary to previous grammar-based approaches that emphasized the mastery of rules and paradigms, modern language teaching methods seek to provide meaningful input to feed learners' developing language systems and foster a contextualized awareness both of form and meaning in the target language (Nassaji and Fotos 126).

Many educators question whether an online environment can promote language learning as efficiently or as effectively as face-to-face classrooms. Although the research is beginning to edge toward positive results, the studies conducted to date do not allow for conclusive answers (Felix 142). Chief among these challenges in teaching languages in an online environment is that of overcoming the distance between the human beings involved in the process:

Language learning goes beyond the mere acquisition of linguistic knowledge; it involves an understanding of cultural context and the communicative processes that allow the learner to negotiate meaning in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. This learning process requires a high level of human contact, one that is traditionally facilitated by face-to-face interaction in the language classroom. Distance education must demonstrate its ability to enable those interactions, especially in multicultural contexts. (Modern Language Association)

Despite this caveat, it is erroneous to view the online delivery of language courses and face-to-face courses in the form of a strict dichotomy. Today's language courses range from face-to-face classrooms that are supplemented by web-based materials, to hybrid or blended courses that balance varied amounts of computer-based independent work with face-to-face meetings, to courses that are delivered wholly online. Successfully teaching in a partially or wholly virtual environment requires language educators to thoughtfully select from a range of ever-changing technological innovations and employ these technologies appropriately to the skill level of their learners, all while keeping sight of their overriding pedagogical objectives. Judiciously effecting this selection of tools means recognizing that technology has the potential of enhancing and facilitating learning in many ways, but that the implementation of the technology must necessarily be guided by theoretically based methods. These methods

are simply enhanced by the opportunities that are facilitated or uniquely available through the use of technology.

Since the background on research-based teaching methodologies and national content standards are addressed elsewhere (e.g. Waltz 103; Gonglewski 348; Omaggio Hadley 34; Long 156; Glisan 515) they will not be belabored here. Instead, the focus of the present paper will be the examination of one approach to how teachers can design and evaluate the delivery of their courses in an online format using the Quality Matters Rubric (QMR). The emphasis here is on providing initial strategies language instructors can incorporate into the design of online courses to maximize students' learning opportunities and on giving teachers the means to evaluate their efforts through the standards of the QMR.

To accomplish this goal, the paper is organized as follows. I begin with a review of the best teaching practices as evidenced by previous research and how they informed the development of the QMR. Next I explain the standards in the QMR and how they can be used as a guide to support teachers in meeting the needs of their learners. The discussion for each standard includes some practical suggestions that can be used to fulfill them using examples from a 300-level grammar review course and integrating concepts from the national standards where applicable.

### Best teaching practices

In their landmark work, *Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education*, Chickering and Gamson (3) synthesized five decades of research on teaching and learning and extracted seven themes which were broadly applicable to a wide variety of academic settings, cutting across disciplinary boundaries, and the diverse backgrounds of students, and their skill levels. The authors emphasized that the principles were not a series of mandates, rather they represented a variety of evidence-based approaches that faculty could employ in their classrooms to enhance the performance of both students and teachers. While each of the principles could be implemented individually, the authors maintained that employing multiple principles would render cumulative effects. The seven key characteristics identified in Chickering and Gamson's (3) research as reflecting good teaching were those that displayed or encouraged the following:

1. Contact between students and faculty
2. Cooperation between students
3. Active learning
4. Prompt feedback
5. Time on task
6. Communication of high expectations
7. Respect for diverse talents and ways of learning

These principles were updated in response to the burgeoning presence of web-supported and online courses. In the revision the authors reiterated that while technology added new tools that teachers could use in their pursuit of quality teaching, they did not change the tenets of teaching practices (Chickering and Ehrmann 3).

To ensure that quality practices were being applied consistently across disciplines and universities in online courses across their state, nineteen institutions in Maryland, eventually becoming the organization called Quality Matters (QM), collaborated over the course of four years to develop the QMR (Shattuck). Taking into consideration Chickering and Gamson's (3) and Chickering and Ehrmann's (3) guidelines as well as other recommendations, the Maryland Distance Learning Initiative Committee, now known as MarylandOnline, brought together faculty and administrators from diverse institutions to create a rubric that outlined good teaching practices supported by research that could be used to guide the development and review of online courses (Shattuck).

The Fifth Edition of the QMR, updated in 2014 (Quality Matters), espouses eight standards that integrate and reinterpret many of Chickering and Gamson's (3) principles. The revisions made in the Fifth Edition of the QMR provide greater clarity of the intention of some of the standards and reflect new pedagogical orientations such as Competency Based Learning. The eight standards of the QMR are as follows:

- General Standard 1 – Course Overview and Introduction: The overall design of the course is made clear to the learner at the beginning of the course.
- General Standard 2 – Learning Objectives (Competencies): Learning objectives or competencies describe what learners will be able to do upon completion of the course.
- General Standard 3 – Assessment and Measurement: Assessments are integral to the learning process and are designed to evaluate learner progress in achieving the stated learning objectives or mastering the competencies.
- General Standard 4 – Instructional Materials: Instructional materials enable learners to achieve stated learning objectives or competencies
- General Standard 5 – Course Activities and Learner Interaction: Course activities facilitate and support learner interaction and engagement.
- General Standard 6 – Course Technology: Course technologies support learners' achievement of course objectives or competencies.
- General Standard 7 – Learner Support: The course facilitates learner access to institutional support services essential to learner success.
- General Standard 8 – Accessibility and Usability: The course design reflects a commitment to accessibility and usability for all learners.

As implied by its rubric format, the QMR differs from Chickering and Gamson's (3) principles in that it assumes that benefits will only be achieved through the inclusion of all of the standards. As such, the rubric places a value, ranging



from 1–3 points, on the series of targets subsumed under each standard. The current version of the QMR has a total of 99 possible points of which a minimum of 84 points must be achieved in a course review in order to receive a passing mark. To meet the guidelines for approval, courses under review must meet all 21 of the *essential* targets of each standard, weighted at 3 points, as well as several of the 14 *very important* (2 point) and eight *important* (1 point) targets. Even if instructors do not intend to engage in a formal course review process, applying the weighted standards to review course design is a valuable exercise to perform informally. The abbreviated form of the QMR with the list of criteria and point values assigned to each target for each of the standards can be accessed by registering for a free account at the organization's site ([www.qualitymatters.org](http://www.qualitymatters.org)). The fully annotated version of the QMR is only available to members of institutions that subscribe to Quality Matters.

### Meeting the standards

Although there are eight standards that comprise the rubric, they address three broad areas: Course Beginnings (Standard 1), Course Alignment (Standards 2–5), and Course Technology (Standards 6–8). Since fully half of the standards are dedicated to alignment, it is evident that at its core the QMR seeks to ensure that the activities, materials, and learners' participation directly reflect specific goals of student learning. Thus, the clarity and consistency between these objectives, the way in which they are communicated to the students and how those objectives are revealed in the course activities is critical to satisfying many of the rubric requirements. The remaining standards center on facilitating students' entry into the course, and providing continual support for their access to the materials and resources.

While not dictating specifically what goals and activities need to be included, the standards in the QMR do provide guidance as to how instructors can design a course to provide a productive online learning environment. The standards are meant to be consistent in terms of their purpose but are highly customizable to meet the needs of learners of diverse subjects and levels. Strategies that language teachers can adopt to help them satisfy the standards in each of these areas are discussed below.

#### *Course beginnings*

The first standard on the QMR may seem somewhat mundane at first glance. However, how learners initiate their first experiences in the course sets the tone for future interactions and motivation. A good course overview goes beyond the routine tour of the syllabus and instead, establishes valuable early contact between faculty and students, communicates the instructor's level of

expectations for success, reflecting elements of Chickering and Gamson's (3) principles. Moreover, providing this essential road map for students to follow in your course establishes a good first impression of you as an instructor and of your course and inspires students' initial impetus to complete their assigned activities.

Just as face-to-face students experience a course introduction on their first day, online language learners need to feel welcomed into the virtual course space, introduced to their virtual surroundings, and given the opportunity to introduce themselves to others. They also need to know what general activities they will be undertaking over the course of the semester, what the general timeline is for the activities, how to locate assignment instructions, what resources they can use to enhance their learning of the material and where to submit their work when they are ready for it to be graded.

Although face-to-face introductions to a course are done collectively and are provided in a format that is familiar to students, online learners experience those initial steps individually and in a structure that may confuse or intimidate them. The organization of the course may appear intuitive to you as an instructor, however the students' perception of how to easily locate necessary information is likely different. Without specific guidance from the instructor, they are likely to attempt to find things via trial and error and/or send repeated messages requesting assistance on where to locate materials and activities, resulting in higher frustration on the part of both learners and instructor and diminished opportunities for learning.

Several strategies can be readily adopted to satisfy this standard. First, providing a simple, clean design for a course can reduce students' anxiety in completing course requirements and can reduce an instructor's time in responding to student inquiries about where to find materials, instructions and links. Additionally, building in a consistent sequencing of assignments and a redundancy of the placement of information aids students in developing not only a sense of the rhythm of the course, but also allows them to schedule their time to study the material and complete assignments in a timely manner. Lastly, giving a text or audiovisual overview of the course layout as the first activity of the course (or even prior to it beginning) is not only a required QMR element, but one that saves instructors and learners a great deal of frustration.

Access to the course material and activities should guide learners down a defined and somewhat narrow path. Since students access all instructions, resources and activities online, they need a welcome page which provides an entry into the course and directs them to their next steps in order for them to access course materials in the sequence in which they will be needed, as seen in figure 1.

Student access is facilitated if course material is organized in a series of thematic units and if the multiple links to access different aspects of the course provided by your institution's Learning Management System (LMS) are turned off. All assignments, discussions, quizzes, materials and resources are more

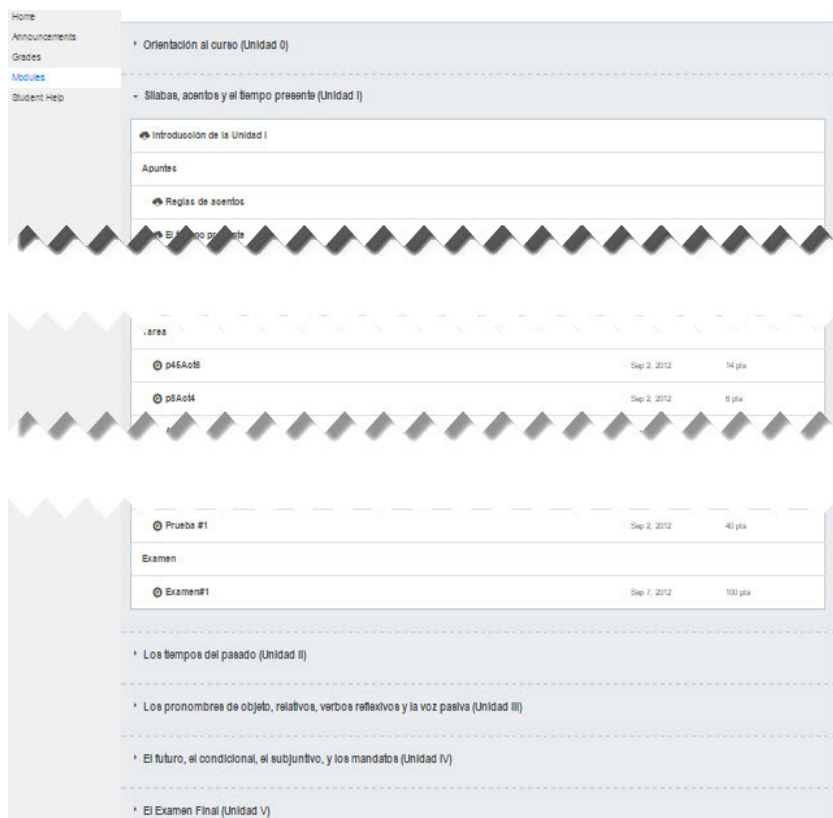


**Fig. 1:** Sample welcome page for online 300-level Spanish grammar review course.

easily and logically accessed within the appropriate thematic unit as links on the modules page listed in order and by category (Notes, Assignments, Discussions, etc.), as seen in figure 2. Creating such a structure makes the course more predictable, and thus more efficient for both students and instructors and avoids students' accessing assignments out of sequence or without consulting the necessary accompanying resources (MacGregor-Mendoza).

Secondly, to further emphasize the organizational format of the course and provide an element of necessary redundancy, a good strategy is to have each thematic unit organized in the same manner. As the first element of each unit, instructors can provide a text-based document or video containing an overview of the unit. The overview should describe the thematic focus of the unit and include the unit level Student Learning Objectives (SLOs). It should also list the text and online resources made available for students to consult, detail the activities that the student will need to complete and include other useful information such as assignment instructions and an estimate of how much time students should allot for completing the assignments, as seen in figure 3.

One of the advantages of technology is the ability to provide information in a variety of formats. Thus, while a text-based format will satisfy this standard, an audiovisual overview recorded using screen capture software (Jing, Camtasia Studio) is an effective alternative. The video format shows the learners how to navigate the site to locate materials and provides a valuable resource, which students can review more than once if necessary. Moreover, hearing an instructor's



**Fig. 2:** Illustration of partial layout of thematic units for 300-level Spanish grammar review and of limited LMS navigational options.

voice reminds students that there is a human behind the material they see on their computer screen. If the materials are provided in the target language, they represent further valuable, authentic, contextualized resources from which learners can learn.

A further recommendation is to have the first unit learners complete a mandatory introduction to the course (MacGregor-Mendoza). In addition to a text or video course overview, the introductory unit should contain samples of all of the activities students will need to fulfill throughout the course (quizzes, contributing to discussions, sending submissions to an electronic dropbox, etc.) A quiz based on the syllabus, an introductory post and replies on a discussion board, and a submission of a brief observational essay will provide learners with the knowledge of the technical skills they need to apply in the course and establish a connection between students. Moreover, the feedback that students receive from the instructor on these items bridges the divide between learner

### Back to Basics (Unit 1)

#### Introduction to the Unit

Through the various activities in this unit we'll review the following topics: syllabification and accent marks, *Ser* and *Estar*, regular and irregular conjugations of verbs in the present tense.

#### Student Learning Objectives for this unit

All of the materials, resources and activities provide opportunities for you to fulfill the following learning objectives:

- Demonstrate an active, critical and meaningful participation in an online course
- Apply the rules for syllabification and placement of accent marks to determine whether or not a word requires a written accent
- Analyze the patterns associated with verbs that follow a regular conjugation in the present tense
- Analyze the patterns of exceptions to the regular conjugation of verbs in the present tense
- Apply your knowledge of the present tense to communicate effectively with others

#### My reflections (45 minutes)

Each of us learns information differently. In this reflection activity, comment on how you have learned the material for this unit. To complete this activity **prepare either a written or recorded multimedia response to the prompt below in Spanish**. Regardless of the format in which you choose to submit your response, it should be original (that is, expressed in your own words), complete, concise and coherent for each point mentioned below.

*Taking into account each of the following areas, explain how they are similar to and how they are different from another language that you speak, and how you use your knowledge of another language to help you understand how the Spanish language is organized.*

- Syllabification
- The placement of accent marks
- The irregularities in the conjugation of verbs in the present tense
- The uses of *ser* and *estar*

**Fig. 3:** Excerpt of sample unit introduction for 300-level Spanish grammar review course including unit-level SLOs and a sample activity.

and instructor and reinforces the level of expectations in the course. If the LMS system allows it, instructors may configure the course so that students need to successfully complete the unit in order for the others to unlock, similar to “leveling up” in gaming software.

Setting the initial parameters of the course touches on several aspects of Chickering and Gamson’s (3) principles. First, it lays the foundation for the contact amongst students and faculty which, while necessary in a face-to-face classroom, is essential in an online environment to bridge the distance between instructor and learners and create a sense of community in the virtual classroom. Second, having a good course introduction communicates course expectations and supports student engagement at the earliest possible stage. Letting students know what is expected of them from the beginning and providing the steps for their success empowers students to be more proactive, independent

scholars who are directing their own language learning, and opens them to success on the course objectives.

### *Course alignment*

The heart of the QMR centers on developing SLOs and aligning several elements of the course to those SLOs. General Standard 2 focuses specifically on the development of SLOs. General Standard 3 addresses how students' progress on the SLOs can be effectively measured. The evaluation of the materials instructors include in the course for learners is dealt with in General Standard 4 and the manner in which students interact with each other and with the materials is examined in General Standard 5. So critical are the SLOs to the QM review process that courses that do not have SLOs in place at the course and unit levels are generally not allowed to proceed.

Some educators view course planning as more “content management”. They choose the topics that will be discussed, decide how intensely to treat the topics, select relevant examples and sequence their presentation in a logical fashion (DeLong, Winter and Yackel 230). While instructors may have a series of course level goals in mind (that is, what will be covered or accomplished in the course), they have not necessarily transformed their thoughts into clear SLOs, defining the skills or knowledge students should be capable of displaying as a result of their time spent in the course. When students are not provided with information that clearly indicates the knowledge that they will be expected to display in the course, they will assume that they'll need to develop the simpler, declarative knowledge that requires superficial memorization of isolated facts, rather than the deeper, more enduring procedural knowledge, that requires that they understand the similarities, differences and relationships of facts and know how, when, and under what circumstances to apply them (Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence)

Here, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL) World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (ACTFL “World Readiness”) and the Performance Descriptors (ACTFL “Performance Descriptors”) can be a good source of inspiration for developing level appropriate SLOs geared toward specific observable linguistic skills in each of the three modes of communication (interpersonal, interpretive, presentational) and five themes (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities). An example of how instructors can integrate the World Readiness Standards to meet the QM requirements of both the Course Beginnings and Course Alignment standards of the QMR is provided in table 1. Using both standards as a foundation for design provides opportunities for meaningful language learning experiences through the use of technology; however, it does not take the place of the participation or learning on the part of the teacher or learner.

Ample evidence exists to support the notion that when students are given clearly articulated learning objectives and are provided appropriate guidance

**Table 1:** Sample resources, activities and SLOs in a 300-level Spanish grammar review course integrating applicable QM General Standards ([www.qualitymatters.org](http://www.qualitymatters.org)) with World Readiness Standards for Learning Language ([www.actfl.org](http://www.actfl.org)).

Quality Matters General Standards	Examples of application to World Readiness Standards for Learning Language
General Standard 1 – Course Overview and Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpret information from syllabus and orientation video and take quiz</li> <li>• Write a personal biography following prompt given</li> <li>• Prepare comments on peers' biographies</li> </ul>
General Standard 2 – Learning Objectives (Competencies)	<p>Course level SLOs</p> <p>At the end of the semester students will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpret information in Spanish from a variety of textual and audiovisual resources</li> <li>• Identify lexical and syntactic variation in different Spanish speaking communities</li> <li>• Differentiate changes in meaning based on tense, word order, morphological features in texts from diverse disciplines</li> <li>• Compare patterns of word orders in Spanish and other languages they speak</li> <li>• Apply general grammatical knowledge of Spanish in service as translators or interpreters in service to community organizations</li> </ul>
General Standard 3 – Assessment and Measurement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using specific key grammatical concepts (GC) studied:</li> <li>• Explain GC in students' own words</li> <li>• Identify examples of GC in authentic texts</li> <li>• Retell a story or event applying GC</li> <li>• Outline or prepare a rough draft of a written assignment incorporating GC</li> <li>• Prepare a script for a multimedia assignment applying GC</li> <li>• Record/edit a multimedia assignment using GC</li> <li>• Review peers' rough drafts of an assignment focusing on GC</li> </ul>
General Standard 4 – Instructional Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Textbook</li> <li>• Teacher-prepared notes and videos</li> <li>• Links to external text and video resources</li> <li>• Writing assignments</li> <li>• Quizzes and Exams</li> <li>• Discussion boards</li> </ul>
General Standard 5 – Course Activities and Learner Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer review activities</li> <li>• Discussion posts</li> <li>• Instructor feedback</li> <li>• Teacher-prepared notes and videos</li> <li>• Links to external text and video resources</li> <li>• Writing assignments</li> <li>• Quizzes and Exams</li> </ul>

and support in following through on these objectives, their success in reaching these goals is improved (e.g. Hattie 148). This approach is not without its critics, however. Some educators fear that such a tactic promotes instrumentalism, and detracts from the challenge of learning (Torrance 290). A balance must be struck between the stated SLOs and the activities and resources provided for the learners to achieve them. Educators need to remember that while SLOs provide a guidepost to students' learning, not all learners will achieve all objectives or achieve them to the same degree. Nonetheless, providing explicit objectives and allowing students to grow through intellectual challenges will benefit all learners.

The development of appropriate SLOs generally centers on specific learning models such as Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom 1) or SOLO taxonomy (Biggs and Collis 1). These models propose specific stages in the development of cognitive, affective or psychomotor skills. According to Esbensen (9), "A well-written instructional objective should say three things: (1) what it is that a student who has mastered the objective will be able to *do*, (2) under what *conditions* he will be able to do it, and (3) to what *extent* he will be able to it." The creation of the SLOs will depend upon the teacher's teaching philosophy, the purpose of the course as well as its placement within the curriculum.

Myriad resources provide guidance and examples for writing SLOs, emphasizing the use of action verbs appropriate to each level of development that suggest a behavior that can be readily observed or evaluated (e.g. arrange, assess, critique, describe) and to avoid verbs that suggest concepts that are less amenable to direct observation or measurement (e.g. know, learn, become aware of, understand). Krathwohl (213) provides a brief but thorough grounding of how Bloom's Taxonomy can be used to develop SLOs and measure students' progress on them, while Anderson et al. (12) go much more in depth. In a revised version of Bloom's taxonomy for the digital world, author Andrew Churches outlines a number of specific technology-related activities that illustrate different levels of learning. While verbs for Creating in Bloom's taxonomy include designing, constructing and planning, Churches offers verbs such as blogging, podcasting and remixing.

Although creating SLOs is a critical first step, it is by itself insufficient to simply state one's intentions. Instructors must embed multiple manners by which they can evaluate language learners' progress toward these goals in order to fulfill General Standard 3. Learners themselves often have little foundation by which to accurately judge their level of skills and often base their expectations of outcomes on their investment of time rather than growth in knowledge or skill (Chew). As such, learners often develop an unrealistic sense of their progress in fulfilling the course's SLOs and underestimate the type and amount of efforts they must put forth to achieve their desired results. By incorporating a number of formative assessments, that is, multiple low-stakes measures of student progress reflective of the course's SLOs, a learner gains a more realistic sense of his/her acquisition of the skills. Moreover, learners become aware



of the knowledge required in the course and are more likely to modify their behaviors in more productive manners. For their part, educators can use formative assessments to more readily identify areas of strength and weakness in the learners' progress, both individually and collectively, and opt to redirect learners' attention accordingly.

In language courses formative measures come in many varieties ranging from ungraded optional self-checks to computer-graded homework, quizzes, and pre-tests, as well as a host of other measures (Angelo and Cross 25). To aid learners in developing their skills, many LMSs have settings that allow learners to improve on their performance by repeating the activity a specified number of times. This repetition lets learners identify skills in which they are less proficient, motivates a more thorough examination of those concepts and thus promotes deeper learning. Moreover, the benefit afforded to language educators through technology is the ability to direct students' attention to specific, and perhaps more mechanized tasks, such as developing skill in the production of verbal paradigms, and allowing the computer to provide learners with automatic feedback on their performance. Teachers can prepare their own question banks or can use those supplied by publishers, however it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that the items used meet the requirements of the SLOs.

Learners' progress toward achieving the SLOs is advanced by the careful selection of appropriate materials included in the course. The materials should be of sufficient quantity and quality to support learners in their acquisition of the expected skills and knowledge without being overwhelming. General Standard 4 of the QMR encourages the instructor's conscientious decision of what to include in the course. Reflecting on the World Readiness Standards and the course's SLOs, the instructor should be able to justify the selection of items.

Overall, the materials and resources included should promote a learner's confidence and resourcefulness in language learning. They should reinforce each other and should overlap without appearing to be excessively repetitive. Moreover, they should reflect sound pedagogical research and practices, providing learners with authentic, contextualized examples of language in order to aid learners in developing a more comprehensive view of language as a tool for negotiating meaning rather than just a series of isolated rules and words. Finally, as discovery is an important part of the learning process, the materials provided by the instructor should be in sufficient quantity to inspire inquiry without leaving the learner feeling overwhelmed. Instructors should not feel obligated to fill in all of the gaps for learners, rather the materials should provide an initial foundation of knowledge on which learners will expand through the activities the instructor includes in the course.

Beyond the selection of the course materials that support learning, General Standard 5 of the QMR recognizes the inclusion of appropriate activities is one of the greatest challenges faced in online courses. The activities an instructor includes must ensure that learners have the opportunity to interact with each other in ways that promote their learning and must promote learners' active

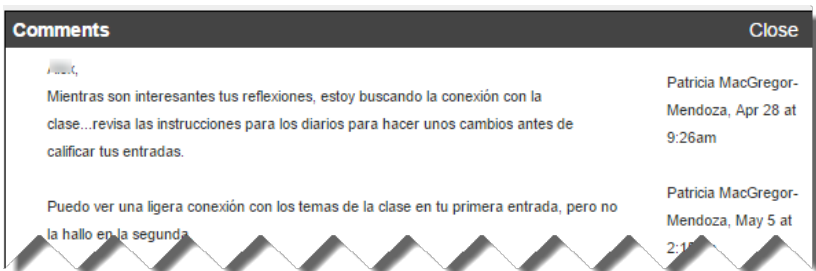
engagement with the materials. Meeting this standard requires educators to have a clear understanding of how the activities promote learners' progress on the SLOs, how they facilitate collaboration between learners who are often distant from one another and connecting asynchronously, and how the activities foster active, rather than passive or rote learning.

While teacher-supplied materials and resources provide a necessary foundation of knowledge for students, the activities or tasks that students need to engage in to acquire detailed knowledge about the concepts and their applications should spark their curiosity and interest. Active learning strategies, ones that require students to actively consider, transform, apply or manipulate information promote deeper learning of the material. Gilly Salmon (58–59) offers a number of general design options for online activities that can be adapted to a variety of purposes and geared to a variety of levels that can be easily integrated into a language learning environment and are particularly well-suited for the increasing mobile nature of online learning.

Salmon acknowledges that downloadable materials and resources that learners can archive and access on a multitude of devices is a good first step, however she also suggests that teachers embed critical reflection activities at specific junctions in the learning process. The reflective activities require learners to individually collect their thoughts on a topic and often share them with others in an interactive dialogue. An alternative type of activity to foster engagement offered by Salmon is one that juxtaposes reality with virtual reality. In such an activity students would need to compare aspects of their current reality with either the past or the future or an imagined world. Additional suggestions include examining applications developed for mobile devices (gaming, learning, business) and taking advantage of audiovisual programs, including GPS programs that can augment the learners' outlook on reality.

While students need the opportunity to thoughtfully consider the course material and interact with one another, they also need feedback to aid them in monitoring their progress. Feedback can come in many forms. Thanks to technology which can quickly and efficiently grade answers to assignments addressing lower order skills more at the word level (e.g. spelling, conjugation, agreement) through multiple choice or short answer items, learners can get immediate feedback on their mastery, can direct their attention independently to areas needing improvement, and can often repeat their attempt in hopes of improving their performance. For higher order skills at the discursive level, feedback from peers and the instructor are more relevant and important for improving performance. From both peers and the instructor, feedback can come in the form of responses to discussions posts, or to drafts and final versions of written or video essays or projects, as shown in figure 4.

Two important elements are critical in providing feedback: form and timeliness. Regarding form, feedback needs to be relevant to the task at hand, needs to reflect specific criteria of the learner's performance, needs to be sufficiently detailed to provide guidance and needs to be expressed in a manner which



**Fig. 4:** Example of feedback provided to student on reflective journal entries in 300-level Spanish course.

encourages motivates future engagement (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 201; Hattie and Timperley 84). Feedback that is largely evaluative in nature (e.g. “You need to work on this more”, “great job”) is of limited value to learners since it is vague and presumes that the learner’s understanding of the task and criteria are in sync with that of the teachers (Chappius and Stiggins 42). Moreover, feedback that primarily offers either praise or criticism without regard to the task has been known to adversely affect future performance since it centers on an evaluation of the individual and not their performance on a task (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 209).

Regarding the time in which feedback is given, it will vary (and increase) in relation to the complexity of the task. With tasks that are relatively simple quick feedback is most effective, and as mentioned before, can often be provided automatically via computer. With more complex tasks learners can benefit from delayed feedback, as they need more time to reflect on their own performance on the task (Hattie and Timperley 98). In either case the feedback needs to be provided to learners in time to aid them in developing their sense of skill level to direct their attention to making improvements where necessary and to spur their enthusiasm for the course material. Overall, feedback that is primarily evaluative or offered too late can demotivate learners

In sum, the four standards of the QMR that comprise this area represent the rubric’s core. This central element also addresses several of the principles outlined by Chickering and Gamson (3). For instance, development of SLOs that are explicit, measurable and challenging allows for more clarity of the criteria expected and the standards by which achievement in language learning will be measured. This alignment further fosters better articulation of courses within a curriculum, allowing teachers to scale their expectations and corresponding activities from beginning to advanced courses according to the expectations of learners as outlined in the ACTFL Performance Descriptors (ACTFL “Performance Descriptors”). Within individual courses, aligning the course activities and materials with the SLOs provides a means for learners to engage actively in the learning process and make the time they spend on those activities more

effective. The variety of activities instructors design around the SLOs will likely include opportunities for students to collaborate with each other and grow their skills through interaction with one another. Whether students work on activities individually or in collaboration with others, if feedback is provided in a timely manner, it will motivate their continued engagement and provide a better awareness of their growing skills.

### *Course technology*

The remaining three standards of the QMR address various aspects of the technological support that is provided within the online course to facilitate learners' access and application. Many of the elements of the standards may technically be under the aegis of the institution, included in 3<sup>rd</sup> party applications or supplied by a publishing company, and out of the direct control of the instructor. Nonetheless, instructors should make every effort to be aware of and keep abreast of the options provided by these sources and decide how to best use them to the benefit of the learners. Again, it is important to remember that although the technological options change and expand frequently, the instructor's pedagogical philosophy and the SLOs should guide decisions about the options used.

General Standard 6 seeks to ensure that the technology choices that an instructor makes are supportive of the SLOs and promote the learners' collaboration and engagement with the learning material. Before including any technological innovation instructors should minimally ask: "How does this specific technology option help my students advance in their progress on the SLOs?", "What are the advantages to this technological option over another?" and "How easy is the technology to learn and/or navigate?" To aid in the selection of appropriate resources for language learning, Godwin-Jones ("Messaging, Gaming" 17) identifies a host of technologies that allow L2 teachers to provide their students with opportunities for chatting, blogging, networking, gaming, and sharing of music and other audio resources amongst each other and with native speakers around the world. He adds mobile applications to the mix in a more recent review (Godwin-Jones, "Mobile Apps" 2). A more in-depth analysis of technologies for language learning is provided by Levy (770), who categorizes resources in terms of the skills that are useful in reinforcing (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, reading, speaking, etc.)

Nonetheless, while these and other resources can guide instructors in evaluating the value of technological resources, instructors should also road test technological additions prior to providing them to students in a live course. Instructors need to know how the technology is expected to perform its functions and how to guide learners in case of a misinterpretation or malfunction. Inasmuch as is possible, instructors should also warn students up front about any issues of compatibility that might arise across platforms and devices.

Moreover, teachers should not assume that they should lead as the sole source of technological resources. Students, as digital natives, can also introduce meaningful technological innovations and resources in the course. Allowing students to provide feedback and to participate in building the course's technology can spark greater measures of engagement, and inform instructors about the technologies that are of interest to the students and how they can be applied in the language classroom.

In addition to carefully selecting technologies that support language learning, instructors need to take into consideration learners' different needs. The final two standards in the QMR address different aspects of learner needs. General Standard 7 speaks to providing learner support in case there are issues with the technology, while General Standard 8 stresses the importance of integrating technological accommodations to support learners of diverse needs.

In the first instance, students should be made aware of all of the academic and co-curricular resources offered by the institution in support of their scholarly endeavors. Links to and/or contact information for the bookstore, library, writing centers, technology support centers, language laboratories, language tutoring, health services, ADA offices, etc. can not only make the student cognizant of the organizational support that is available, but also allow learners who are connecting from a distance to feel more connected to the institution, the instructor, and peers and communicate to them that the instructor cares about them as a whole person. Additionally, providing students with links to web-based guides for the LMS or general technological support can aid students in independently troubleshooting any problems that arise.

Just as technological resources for online learners are diverse, so too do the learners themselves present a diversity of needs that the last standard addresses. Currently, an estimated seven percent of students enrolled in online courses is classified as having some form of disability (Hashey and Stahl 71). However, many instructors hesitate to assess the accessibility of their sites, afraid that doing so will require them to invest heavily either in time to become tech experts or financially to purchase equipment or software to create accessible materials (Coombs xii).

Integrated into the challenge of preparing online courses, selecting materials, and preparing appropriate activities is making sure that these resources and tasks are available to the broadest swath of the student population. However, as technological resources continue to expand, they lower barriers of access to course materials for learners with different challenges. Audio or audiovisual recordings of lectures allow students the ability to review material multiple times; however, students with hearing impairments will need to have this information either captioned or accompanied by a transcript to not miss out on the lecture's verbal content. For students with visual or specific cognitive impairments, screen readers transform written material into spoken words, allowing them to independently interpret lecture slides, documents, textbooks, e-mails and discussion posts. Screen readers such as JAWS, NVDA are programmed to

handle several Western European languages, but not all languages are represented equally. Apple VoiceOver offers a more extensive repertoire. To facilitate the screen readers' recognition of text in non-English languages, instructors can electronically set the language of documents within the word processing software to provide a language tag to trigger the correct pronunciation of words.

Software to support screen capture or lecture capture may already be available at many institutions, however, free or relatively low-cost options also exist (e.g., Jing, Screencast-o-matic, etc.) For providing transcripts of audiovisual material, some prepare their audiovisual lectures from a printed script. For those who prefer a more spontaneous approach, a speech recognition app such as Dragon Dictation can be used to transform the speech into written text relatively accurately. The program supports several languages and the text can be copied and transferred to other applications or sent via e-mail.

Instructors need to not only be aware of the technologies and configurations that can help learners who need assistance access the material, they also need to select and design materials that minimize obstacles to learner access. Fortunately, the Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities ([www.centerononlinelearning.org](http://www.centerononlinelearning.org)) maintains a database of software commonly used to make course materials more accessible for students and provides easy-to-use evaluations and ratings of the usability of each. Hashey and Stahl (73) further recommend WAVE ([Wave.WebAIM.org](http://Wave.WebAIM.org)), an online evaluative tool that instructors can use to evaluate their website for accessibility. WAVE analyzes the site and produces a report that points to issues of access that need attention. In addressing accessibility, instructors should always be mindful that the goal is to design the course as broadly accessible to all students, rather than simply adapt toward the specific needs of students with disabilities.

## Conclusion

The QMR is grounded in principles that have been identified with quality teaching practices. While it is meant to apply to many disciplines, language educators can effectively use the QMR as a framework around which to build their online courses. The QMR does not dictate the content or specific format of online courses, but instead allows for the scaled adaptation of materials, activities and resources for language learners at a variety of levels. Thus, the QMR can aid language teachers in making appropriate choices with regard to activities, resources and technological tools to transform their successful face-to-face courses into effective online ones. In doing so the QMR can be used to address the concerns expressed by the MLA regarding language courses delivered online and bridge the distance between instructors and students to provide an effective, student-centered language learning experience.

Technology is a tool to facilitate learning in online language courses; however, it should not be viewed either as a panacea or an obstacle. Instructors

should not feel the need to be experts in technology in order to teach online courses. Instead, they should focus on providing the best language learning environment within their current capabilities accessible to the broadest population of learners. Instructors should also not consider themselves as the only technological resource for the course; attending to the feedback received from students about the course elements and allowing students to participate in building the courses technological resources can enhance both the instructor's repertoire and the students' engagement and enjoyment.

Language teachers continually improve their courses in face-to-face and online settings by being informed by current research on how learners acquire language. These innovations inform their teaching methods and oblige teachers to continually monitor, reflect on, and adapt the materials, resources and activities they use to challenge each new group of learners. Similarly technological advances necessitate similar scrutiny to examine their benefits and appropriateness for language classes. Integrating the QMR into a language teacher's set of pedagogical tools provides a practical instrument to effectively organize and appraise the materials, resources and technological applications instructors include in their courses to optimize the language learning objectives for all students.

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# Building and Sustaining Language Degrees Online: The Case of German and Spanish

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## Abstract

This essay chronicles the planning and development of two online bachelor degree programs in German and Spanish at Oregon State University (OSU). It covers the history of online language teaching at OSU and provides detailed insight into curriculum planning, course setup, course development, and teaching experience. The article shows obstacles faced in the process of developing and teaching the online degrees and presents strategies used to overcome them. The authors conclude with a set of best practices for the development of language curricula in an asynchronous environment. They suggest that the successful implementation was possible due to the synergy of four factors: first, an institutional pledge to provide financial support for course development and program marketing; second, motivated faculty dedicated to teaching languages online and interested in a long-term commitment to development and revision of the curriculum; third, the separation of technical expertise from content development; and fourth, the training and further professional development of faculty.

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## Keywords

Spanish online, German online, online degrees, online language teaching, curriculum development

## Introduction

Computers have supported classroom instruction for a long time. New technologies, fast and ubiquitous wireless Internet access, smart devices, and other developments have become essential components of language classrooms. It is almost unthinkable to teach a language class without at least a blended or hybrid approach; Learning Management Systems (LMS) to organize assignments and exercises, authentic audiovisual media employed to simulate an immersive experience in the classroom, flipped classrooms for learners to study the material at home before practicing with the help of an instructor in the classroom, and, of course, the advent of the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) are but a few changes that have impacted the way we think about language instruction.

Teaching languages entirely online instead of in a face-to-face environment is a child of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Scholarship has observed this shift from computer-assisted learning (CALL) as a classroom tool towards the notion of teaching language in solely virtual environments by way of shifting research questions. Discussions about CALL moved from general deliberations about the gradual increase of computers in support of language instruction in the face-to-face environment (Warschauer and Healey 57–71; Egbert and Hanson-Smith; Liu et al. 250–273; Warschauer 15–25) towards research about practices of language teaching and learning in completely virtual environments (Brandl 85–107; Dooly and O'Dowd; Colpaert 477–497; Zhao and Chen 5–9; Sevilla-Pavón, Martínez-Sáez, and Rocha 69–87; Blake; Hampel and Stickler). Most research is concerned with aspects of course design; learning and assessment strategies at the course level; or with general, theoretical approaches evaluating strengths and deficiencies of teaching languages online. Missing at this point are studies, both qualitative and quantitative, that examine language degree programs taught online. One potential reason for this current lack may be the fact that, to our knowledge, few complete online language degree programs exist. We know of three U.S. universities currently offering a BA in Spanish and one university offering a BA in German.<sup>1</sup> This essay aims to take a first step towards filling this lacuna with our study of planning, development, and implementation of the two BA degrees in German and Spanish at Oregon's land-grant university in Corvallis.

As Oregon's land-grant university, Oregon State University (OSU) has had a comprehensive extension program to reach out to near and remote locations in

Oregon; a part of the university's educational mission since the 1930s has been to venture beyond the physical campus location in order to reach out to the people of Oregon.<sup>2</sup> The first of those programs was delivered in Portland and on the Oregon Coast. In the 1980s, OSU added true distance education options, in which students could enroll in a complete online degree in liberal studies via the use of mail correspondence and video lessons delivered to their homes.

German started its distance education program about forty years ago. In the late 1970s, students were able to complete the first-year German language sequence, by viewing instructional videos that were initially broadcast on public access television (Johnson and Van Iten) and later with videocassettes and DVDs by mail (Plant and Stehr 40–50). Over time, the German program at OSU gradually added correspondence courses in second- and third-year German, German culture, and German literature for a German minor curriculum online. This program lacked the development of oral competence and did not allow for a real comparison of student proficiency with the face-to-face program in Corvallis.

In 2002, OSU Ecampus began to deliver courses and degree programs online, using the World Wide Web as means of transmission. As one of three components of OSU's Extended Campus (the other two being OSU Summer Session and Open Oregon State), Ecampus is a unit in the Division of University Outreach and Engagement. The division was established in 2007 in order to ensure and promote OSU's mission as a land-grant university.<sup>3</sup> It is funded through a variety of sources and has become a key component in the university's strategic plan.<sup>4</sup> Ecampus is an additional method of program delivery, not an independent academic unit. Ecampus partners with academic units to support the development and actual teaching, whereas faculty in their home departments retain ownership of the curriculum and decide on content, structure, and teaching schedule.

It took until 2010 before languages other than German followed suit with the development of language courses, such as first- and second-year French and third-year Spanish; later Arabic, American Sign Language, Chinese, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latin, Russian, and Portuguese were added. Despite the engagement of individual faculty members in the OSU World Languages Program<sup>5</sup>, the majority of faculty was skeptical towards an expansion online. German and Spanish remained the only programs offering distance education classes beyond the second year. Declining enrollment in language classes and a drop in language majors in the middle of a budget crisis at OSU motivated a university task force to recommend a reduction in the number of major degrees from three to two, which would have resulted in the elimination of either the French or the German degree. At this point, neither language had a significant online presence; based on enrollment in face-to-face courses, German would have likely been the degree in danger. Developing an online degree in German was therefore a potential way for survival of the German degree.

German faculty proposed an Ecampus version of the BA German as a pilot project to explore additional means of attracting students. Foreign Languages and Literatures (FLL) faculty accepted the proposal unanimously. After the university approved online German as an additional method of delivery for the BA, German faculty articulated a four-year curriculum modeled after the face-to-face degree. During the academic year 2011/12, faculty completely refreshed (the OSU term for an extensive update) the existing courses by updating content and pedagogical approaches to adapt courses for delivery via Blackboard, the LMS used by OSU at that time. In the following three years, the remaining courses were newly developed, with the final courses to be finished during summer term 2015. The complete German degree successfully launched in 2012/13 with surprising results: within only weeks of its start, a dozen new majors had enrolled. By the end of the academic year, the actual number of students admitted to the Ecampus major had reached forty, far surpassing the initial target of 25 students. After the end of the second year, German had admitted eighty new majors, and faculty articulated a total of 120 majors as enrollment goal for the third year of the online degree. In fact, the Ecampus degree in German took the exact opposite direction of enrollment on campus, where student interest in majoring in languages was declining across all three major languages.

A number of factors likely contributed to this surprising immediate success of German. The most obvious was the fact that this program was the first of its kind in the US. Anyone searching for a completely online program leading to a BA had to enroll with OSU. Most of the students who signed up for the program were non-traditional students from Oregon, Texas, and California, and military personnel or their families. All students taking classes or pursuing an Ecampus degree have to be admitted to OSU before being able to enroll in classes. They are treated as in-state students regardless of their physical location, making Ecampus an attractive option for out-of-state and international students despite an additional technology fee that is added to online classes on top of the regular tuition. Students from Oregon who are able to attend courses in Corvallis prefer those to the online option. A large portion of the new students admitted were older than the on-campus student, already working full-time, and interested in obtaining a second degree, not for professional reasons, but out of interest in German. Their busy schedule made it difficult if not impossible to attend face-to-face classes.

The success of the German degree coupled with a research study conducted in Spanish language classes at OSU that compared the proficiency outcomes of online language learners with face-to-face students (Rivera-Mills) motivated the Spanish faculty to work on the Ecampus BA in Spanish. The first courses in the program were developed during fall 2014, and the entire degree launched in January 2015. Although official statistics are not yet available, enrollment in online Spanish courses has increased, suggesting a successful launch.

## **Curriculum planning and building of two online language degrees**

Curriculum planning and course development for the two online language degree programs was determined by OSU's institutional structure. Program approval at the institutional level, course development, course delivery, course structure, and even compensation for course development and instruction are largely standardized. Face-to-face and online degrees are treated as a single degree program using different delivery methods. Consequently, on-campus and online degrees are required to have the same learning outcomes and use the same benchmarks for assessment. Ecampus students are admitted to OSU and become students before they can enroll in classes. Face-to-face courses and online courses are interchangeable, start at the same time, and run on the same ten-week schedule as the face-to-face courses. Students are also free to choose the face-to-face or online version of a class, depending on their preference, and they can switch between all three modes of delivery (face-to-face, online, and hybrid) throughout their time at OSU. Online classes are not identifiable as such on a transcript, and online students receive the same diploma as students taking face-to-face classes.

Faculty have similar choices. Depending on their preference and the needs of the program, some teach exclusively online, some only face-to-face, and others may have a mixed assignment. In the case of German, the growth of the online program increased the teaching load for one part-time faculty to full-time; another faculty member split her time between face-to-face and online courses to allow for more flexibility with her schedule, and three additional part-time faculty were hired to teach one or two courses per quarter. As no face-to-face courses were cancelled to allow for the introduction of online courses, faculty benefitted from the new online courses as means to increase their salary. Initially, some faculty members taught an online course as overload; while the practice is technically still allowed by OSU, and some Spanish faculty use online courses as overload to supplement their salaries, German has decided to discontinue this practice when student evaluations indicated less-frequent teacher-student interaction due to time constraints of the instructor. Teaching online courses is considered in-load. For fixed-term and tenure-stream faculty, enrollment floors of at least 18 students per courses are required; term-by-term faculty can teach courses with lower enrollment for a lower pay rate.<sup>6</sup> Overall, instructors have appreciated the new flexibility, and finding personnel interested in online teaching has not been problematic.

Both the German and the Spanish degree programs already existed in face-to-face variations at the time the online degrees were conceptualized. Developing online versions required the faculty program leads<sup>7</sup> to (1) write degree proposal narratives including the budgets required to develop the program, and (2) to propose a development plan that mapped each course and a corresponding



faculty developer to a calendar matrix, indicating during which quarter each course in the curriculum would be newly developed or refreshed and taught for the first time. The program leads collaborated with Ecampus on the degree proposals required to submit them for internal curricular review at OSU.

The OSU requirement of online degrees as equivalents of face-to-face degrees eliminated lengthy faculty decisions on matters of content. In the case of German, the curriculum consists of the study of four years of language instruction, with students being able to skip up to two full years of instruction by way of placement testing. The curriculum also consists of at least one upper-division course each in German culture, German film, and German literature. The remaining course credits can be completed according to a student's individual interests, offering a more in-depth focus on one of the three areas of culture, literature or film and on courses such as translation, phonetics and phonology, and even service-learning activities and language tandems with native speakers. Ecampus students have to complete a study-abroad experience in a German-speaking country.

Spanish students are required to take a selection of courses about the cultures of Spain, Portugal, Latin America, and about the experiences of Mexican immigrants and other Hispanic-heritage students in the USA. Elective courses range from courses on writing, reading, grammar, business and medical Spanish to linguistics, literature, and film from both Europe and Central and South America. All of these courses are taught in Spanish; additional courses focusing on the development of oral or written proficiency in Spanish are also available as electives. A study abroad experience is also required for the completion of the degree.

The planning and development of these two degrees followed the general framework for the design and implementation of online curricula at OSU. Funding for online courses and degrees at OSU comes out of the Ecampus operating budget. An Ecampus board reviews faculty proposals and decides on funding of projects, then drafts a development plan with a budget that includes funds for course development, student advising, and program coordination. The faculty program lead in each department assigns the development of courses to interested faculty who receive pay equivalent to teaching a class for their articulation of the class in the LMS. During the development of a course, each faculty developer is paired with a course designer from Ecampus. Whereas the faculty developer is responsible for content and makes decisions on the progression of material and the type of activity to be designed, the course designer is a specialist in locating software and tools required to realize the theoretical ideas and to format the documents for delivery in the LMS. The faculty developer is responsible for the timely completion of the class by a deadline. Ecampus disburses the money for the developer to the home department upon completion of the development.

Even though course content and student learning outcomes are dictated by the face-to-face curriculum, attempting to mirror face-to-face delivery was

neither possible nor desired due to the asynchronous nature of Ecampus classes. OSU Ecampus follows the quarter schedule of the university, three quarters of ten-week courses followed by a final exam. The course design also had to accommodate learners with various needs. Each language course, regardless of language, proficiency level, or content, was divided into ten “modules” to be completed by a twice-weekly or weekly deadline—generally Wednesdays and Sundays. Assignments incorporated the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Common tools are the utilization of the discussion board, audio and video recording functions, timed quiz options, portfolios, Skype or similar communication tools; and a wide and ever-changing variety of apps and programs to create a stimulating and challenging learning environment. Depending on the type and content of the course, some aspects and skills were emphasized to a larger degree than others—much like the way one would expect in a face-to-face class.

The first iteration of the online German curriculum was modeled after the face-to-face degree with media literacy in German at its core, and the goal to create a learning experience that overlapped in its content with the degree program on campus. Without other online language degree programs to learn from or research on course or curriculum design of online language courses, much of the development was experimental and similar to the working process of start-up companies. The faculty involved in the initial round of designing the courses discussed the learning outcomes of each course and brainstormed potential obstacles in the transformation to an online version of the course and ways to overcome those problems. For instance, the issue of speaking in an asynchronous environment was solved by deciding to implement mandatory synchronous small group meetings or one-on-one discussions in German every other week that would last between 20 and 30 minutes. Helpful during the design phase was the close collaboration with a course designer provided by Ecampus who suggested tools to the faculty member developing the course. The faculty course developer would then run the tool briefly by the other German faculty for approval to ensure a process that kept everyone informed about the progress of each course and of the entire curriculum. In the case of the conversation, the course designer suggested Skype for individual meetings and Google Hangouts for group meetings as tools that were freely available. In other cases, such as the development of grammar lectures for a flipped classroom, German faculty approved the idea and gave the faculty developer freedom to decide on the best tool for screen capture and those elements deemed most important by the individual faculty member for development. In the case of those grammar lectures the instructional designer suggested Camtasia. All videos were recorded without further input by other faculty.

Developing the complete curriculum in German, which was comprised of 26 courses, took three years. In summer 2015, the curriculum was re-evaluated by the German faculty based on teaching experiences, student feedback, and the advent of new technologies, to determine curricular revisions. The development

of the Spanish curriculum of 32 courses started in fall 2014 and is expected to be complete in 2017. Upon completion, all courses will undergo regular refreshing on a two-to-three-year cycle to ensure that the material remains relevant and the technologies are still suitable.

### Sample matrix of an online language class

With most of the Spanish curriculum still in the planning or development stage, we turn to the composition of a German language class to provide a sample of the class design and the ideas informing our language pedagogy and teaching methodology in the online language courses. The design of other classes may vary depending on the preference of the faculty developer and the needs of the language section.

OSU used Blackboard as its LMS, but began the gradual transition to Canvas in early 2015.<sup>8</sup> At that time, the majority of German online courses had already been developed and taught at least once via Blackboard. Hence the general course model used in German described below still follows the structure of the old LMS. It is anticipated that the move to the new LMS will also require a thorough rebuilding of each course.

As mentioned earlier, each German online course follows the ten-week class structure of the OSU quarter system. In its online version, each course is divided into ten folders containing weekly assignments. Often, learning modules span more than one week and require students to review previous assignments. As student assignments in most German classes have two due dates each week, structuring the assignments in weekly folders has proven to have advantages over more open forms. For instance, a German online instructor who experimented in a first-year German course with a more flexible, modular structure and irregular due dates reported a higher percentage of students failing to complete assignments in time. The instructor noted confusion on the side of the students about due dates and often about the hour assignments were due, as deadlines follow the Pacific Time zone of Oregon State University. Further, for the instructors, following the weekly structure allowed better time management. Without the synchronous meeting times known from face-to-face classes, instructors often felt to be teaching “around the clock.” The weekly structure helped them to budget time around grading the assignments. Based on this experience, German courses returned to the weekly structure for ease of planning.

At the beginning of each week, a folder containing the assignments for the current week is made visible to students. In most online German courses, students are able to see up to three weeks of future assignments at any given time to allow for better planning. In the first week, courses emphasize the “learning community” and encourage constant interaction between instructors and students and among the students themselves. Each course generally starts with a

personal video message from the instructor to the students.<sup>9</sup> In this message, students not only receive essential information about textbooks and ancillary material and how these materials will be used in class, they also get to know their instructor more fully by seeing and hearing the instructor as they would in a face-to-face classroom. The video message serves several functions: first, to inform, and second, to set up a rapport via visual interaction. By addressing the students, the instructor breaks down the virtual barrier set by the asynchronous nature of the course. At the same time, the instructor scaffolds one of the ways students will communicate with each other when they are asked to introduce themselves to their classmates making a similar video. The ratio of German to English spoken by the instructor in this and other videos varies based on the proficiency level students are expected to have accomplished in the curriculum prior to this course. Finally, the video message sets an expectation for the course. It implies that German is a language used for communication and that, despite a perceived shortage of synchronous communication, technology will assist students in practicing oral skills. As these instructor videos are not edited for grammatical accuracy or pronunciation, they evoke the impression of an impromptu message similar to what an instructor would give in a face-to-face classroom. While most students may not catch grammatical variations or dialectal inflections, it is still important to retain these moments that identify the instructor as a human person with imperfections. Instructors may even use these “mistakes” later in the course to encourage risk-taking and to point out the importance of making mistakes and learning from them.

Throughout the course, students are required to sign up for bi-monthly conversation group meetings with the instructor and a group of up to four other students. The instructor initiates the 30-minute group conversation via Skype, Google Hangout, or other group video chat software. Students talk with the instructor and each other during the conversation time. During the off-weeks, students are encouraged to engage in voluntary asynchronous oral practice; examples of such practice are two students exchanging video recordings with each other to simulate a conversation, students seeking opportunities to speak German with native speakers in their home communities, using Skype tutoring, and by scheduling additional conversations with fellow students. These conversation sessions replicate the oral practice of the face-to-face classroom. In fact, given the intense setting of these sessions that require each student to participate at a level not necessarily guaranteed in often crowded face-to-face classrooms, students receive at least adequate, if not more oral practice time.<sup>10</sup>

German online classes use a flipped classroom model to introduce grammatical concepts to students. The “Hammer Grammar” video series, an open access resource designed by OSU German faculty, consists of a series of videos covering the basic concepts of German grammar in the style of the Khan academy.<sup>11</sup> Captured with the screen-recording tool Camtasia, an instructor explains the most pertinent ideas about German grammar in English to ensure comprehension. Students are expected to view the videos hosted on the Ecampus YouTube

channel at home, then practice the content by completing homework assignments consisting of a combination of exercises taken from their German textbook or workbook.<sup>12</sup> They explore grammatical concepts and test their learning by completing the exercises by themselves or with peers in virtual study groups facilitated by the LMS before turning in their responses to the instructor via the LMS. Some exercises, such as writing assignments and other open-ended responses, may be completed on the discussion board; others, like fill-in-the-blank exercises or matching exercises, are often done in the workbook, scanned as a pdf, and then graded by the instructor using free or open source software such as Crocodoc to mark up the scanned versions directly in the LMS.

Assessment is done with the help of timed quizzes and tests posted on the LMS. Most assessments are not proctored, although more elaborate writing assignments can be submitted through a plagiarism detector for an initial check. Instructors may also request exams to be proctored by using an online proctoring service such as ProctorU. Because all students are required to have access to a camera and a microphone, the proctor may ask a student to point the camera around a room or at a desk to ensure the integrity of the exam. At the end of each course, students are also required to create a final project in lieu of a written exam. Most of the time, these projects are in the form of skits recorded on video, shared with the class, and then evaluated by both students and the instructor via the discussion board function of the LMS. Students are also required to participate in and report about cultural events related to the German-speaking world. Even students in remote places are often able to seek out Germans in their communities for interviews, watch films via streaming video, start German conversation groups, or organize a German event. Students report their endeavors in a final portfolio accessible to their peers for comment and study.

This sample description has focused on practices of a German language class. Other languages may have varying tasks to address different foci of the language programs. They may also not (yet) have implemented some of the elements of the German curriculum that are time-intensive, relying instead on material and practices adapted from face-to-face courses that may not be the most effective pedagogy for online instruction. Online language learning is still in its infancy, even at OSU, but increasing numbers of the OSU faculty now embrace the new opportunities online language learning provides despite their initial reservations.

### **Challenges, obstacles, and solutions**

There are, of course, general obstacles to overcome before an online language course or program can launch, but there are also challenges specific to each institution. The authors had to grapple with problems connected to the quickly evolving and ever-changing nature of online learning in three distinct yet inter-related areas of instructors, students, and institutional requirements that did

not always take into account the peculiarities of online learning and a student population different from that of Corvallis. What complicated our curricular work further was the lack of models to follow. For one, the language degrees at OSU are among the first completely online language degrees in the USA. Thus, we had to pursue by following the method of trial-and-error. Further, there was little expertise and virtually no best practices available regarding online language learning, teaching, or curricular design. As previously mentioned, up to this day, there is a dearth of research on online language learning compared to a large and ever-growing body of literature overall on online instruction and learning. Only a few studies, such as Compton's (73–99) article on preparing language teachers to teach language online, have addressed the particular needs and challenges pertaining to language learning other than in the face-to-face classroom.

By far the biggest obstacle to a successful implementation of online language courses were faculty members convinced that learning another language via online instruction was not possible. Myths revolving around online learning still linger, despite a plethora of research indicating otherwise (Allen and Seaman; DeNeen; Schulze and Smith). We assured our colleagues that online language instruction would be voluntary, would not replace face-to-face classes, would be treated as a pilot project and would be assessed thoroughly in-house. We engaged only faculty willing to participate in the paid development and teaching of online courses as part of their teaching load, we agreed to run pilot courses and we conducted proper assessment. For example, one of our colleagues launched a study that compared the oral proficiency of first-year Spanish students in face-to-face and online courses (Rivera-Mills). These strategies helped us develop the curricula with little resistance and aided us in maintaining a constructive dialog when making curricular discussions. It nevertheless required the vision, and the dedication of the faculty developers, in addition to being compensated for our work and obtaining compensation for the faculty who agreed to develop courses, to make these degree programs happen.

During the development, faculty struggled with a number of issues related to technology, similar to what Hampel and Stickler report (311–326). They voiced concern about the reliability of the LMS, based on their experience with frequent outages that caused problems in their face-to-face classrooms, and they worried about the rapid changes in technology that would make assignments outdated and eventually obsolete. Some colleagues were anxious about losing curricular oversight and ownership to Ecampus; others were afraid of being turned into “troubleshooters” and “graders” and no longer being language instructors. Faculty who had developed and taught classes for Ecampus before some changes were made were confused about new and improved compensation practices for development and teaching that now allowed for in-load compensation.

In response to some of those worries, we engaged in conversations to identify the issue a faculty member would voice, followed up with Ecampus to find

solutions to a problem or answers to a question, and reported back to the faculty member. In other cases, faculty needed positive affirmation, and still others were helped with information or training sessions with instructors. Keeping communication channels open and checking frequently with faculty about their concerns has proven to be perhaps the most valuable component.

As program coordinators, we often encountered quality issues with faculty members and their online courses. At the beginning of our programs, especially, faculty members were insufficiently trained to teach or develop language courses online. Some of their courses were attempts to transfer face-to-face courses into online versions with little or no change to assignments. Abras and Sunshine (189) report that in the online environment, instructors need to provide a different “opportunity for conversation, practice, input, and negotiation of meaning among learners”. We handed this information about sufficient speaking opportunities to our faculty developers to address the peculiarities of online language learning, and we now require instructors to take a six-week-long online class about course design that is organized and taught by Ecampus staff. At the request of language faculty, we arranged for a one-day workshop with instructional designers to discuss the peculiar problems of language-teaching online. In addition, an annual Ecampus faculty forum also showcases faculty and their courses, and in recent years, language faculty has shared their experience and best practices with colleagues. The debriefings after these training opportunities indicate success. Other training opportunities, such as monthly luncheons, and further professional development via the Quality Matters program, an external peer-review model for online courses that incorporate best practices of online course design, (and discussed in more detail in the MacGregor-Mendoza chapter of this volume) offer a wide variety of opportunities for faculty to have their courses vetted by colleagues from inside and outside the university.

Most of the trainings address issues of rigor, learning outcomes and benchmarks, and questions that we have received (and still receive regularly) from instructors. The combination of the general six-week course with the tailored workshops for online language instructors—that work as refreshers and team-building measures—have proven to address many problems. Future workshops will address differences in workload for online versus face-to-face courses, ensuring that instructors learn to set realistic expectations for themselves and allot the same amount of time for grading and following up with their students in a timely manner (within 24–48 hours of the original email). Other workshops might discuss budgeting sufficient time for course development; and providing ongoing research about differences between face-to-face and online learning.

We encountered quickly the issue that course development was constantly delayed, requiring us to monitor the faculty developers and follow up with them on a weekly basis. Most faculty members underestimated the time needed to develop a well-flowing course with activities, assessment, feedback, and continuous opportunities for language practice. Trained in face-to-face



course development, one of the biggest obstacles for instructors was their lack of experience doing things online. Instructors also struggled with the lack of immediate feedback and on-the-spot correction from their students that in the classroom allows them to gauge success of their lessons and make adjustments as necessary. In the online classroom, our faculty developers realized, the entire course had to be planned meticulously and required more preparation time than the face-to-face version, since all explanations and activities had not only to be prepared, but also structured, explained, paced, and evaluated. As deadlines approached, the stress levels of faculty developers, course designers, Ecampus support personnel, and Ecampus degree coordinators rose, resulting in sloppy, uninspired work, and poor content. We addressed this by implementing a two-term rule: faculty developers are now expected to finish the development no later than the end of two terms before the course is scheduled to be taught. For example, a course scheduled for spring quarter has to be finalized before fall quarter has concluded; this allows for sufficient time to have the program lead review the course content and request potential modifications during the following term.

With this new model, instructors work for at least 200 hours on the development of a course to prepare all course material, assignments, and assessments before they submit the course. Additional time is required for the production of videos in which instructors introduce themselves and explain assignments and for the creation of screen captures and tutorials for students. These audio-visual tools simulate experiences of a face-to-face classroom, where students see and hear the instructors provide instructions for assignments to be worked on. For developing new courses and refreshing previous ones, faculty developers are highly encouraged to utilize video as a means to personalize courses, reduce student anxiety, address various learning styles, and scaffold the use of video for future course assignments. The production of these videos is done with a videographer provided by Ecampus, thus faculty are not required to have filming or editing expertise. From the first day of the developmental process, most faculty collaborate closely with their instructional designer to avoid a last-minute rush when faced with the deadline. This approach has greatly improved quality, as evidenced in the decreasing number of student complaints about confusing assignments.

As program leads for the German and the Spanish degrees, we had to find solutions for problems arising with students. These issues ranged from questions about curriculum, course content, course rotation, degree requirements—including the required study abroad component—to problems with technology, signing up for courses, and issues with the instructor regarding teaching and/or grading. In these circumstances, we forwarded the case to Ecampus staff to not only address questions about admission, tuition, class enrollment, but also to work on tech support and troubleshooting. Other students were referred to our central language adviser for follow-up regarding degree requirements and annual advising regarding course selection, course scheduling, clearing of



special cases, and vetting study abroad coursework. For issues arising for students enrolled in courses, looking at all students and their problems on a case-by-case basis was crucial to the success of the program.

What distinguished the authors in our approaches were our different ranks. With one of us being tenured at the professorial level, mediating between fixed-term instructors and their students was much easier, as problems caused by an instructor could also be resolved more easily by immediate intervention due to the higher rank. For the other, doing so was more complicated due to his rank as instructor. As we have shown, being program leads also means to often engage in difficult conversations not only with peers of the same rank, but also of higher rank in the case of tenured faculty. We solved this problem by deferring difficult conversations to our chairperson, providing pertinent information and recommendations for further procedure visible only to her. The chair would then communicate with the students and inform them of the process and eventually the outcome of the deliberations.

When scheduling classes, we learned that we initially overestimated the potential student demand for upper division courses. With many of our Ecampus students being full-time or at least part-time employees, running a household, or having a disability, they often only have the time and energy to take one course a quarter; in fact, based on enrollment data, two-thirds of the admitted students only take one course during an academic year. This means that, despite a high number of students admitted to the degree programs, the number of students actively taking classes varies widely. Instead of overscheduling and canceling courses, we have implemented a system in which we base our course scheduling on the numbers of students enrolled in the previous year and increase as needed on short notice. These additional sections are generally taught as paid overloads by instructors who have indicated interest in an overload course. All in all, most students are able to enroll in the online courses during the quarter of their choice.

A question that to our knowledge has not yet been resolved is that of the six-year graduation rates. As most of the online students in our programs will not finish within six years, it is unclear to the authors if and how they will be counted in the university's statistics and to what extent they will remain eligible to receive access to financial aid and other services. We assume students are being made aware of these issues when they obtain information about the program. The advising students receive in-house clarifies the requirements for financial aid. Most of the students may not be eligible for financial aid due to their enrollment as post-baccalaureate students, and may therefore not be counted in the statistics of graduation rates. However, these and other issues regarding online students are still being discussed at OSU.

In our day-to-day practice, we found that we were required to adapt our programs much more to the particular type of learner enrolled in our degree programs. The non-traditional student is the norm, meaning that our programs need to work for a wide range of learner types. Not only are students on average

older than the face-to-face students<sup>13</sup>, we also noticed a much wider range in age in our online programs. In some classes we see a gap of sixty years, with the youngest students high-school age (15) and the oldest the age of those high school students' grandparents (75). This sometimes poses problems with content: students at the age of our on-campus population expressed their desire for more visual material and content relating to contemporary Germany, while older students requested more exposure to canonical content, in particular literature by the German "classics" Goethe, Schiller, and even philosophers like Kant and Nietzsche.<sup>14</sup> Overall, students pursuing the online degrees seem to prefer a curriculum that is more traditional than what we currently offer in our face-to-face courses. Yet our institution requires online programs to deliver the same learning experience as the face-to-face program, thus we are currently exploring offering different tracks to comply with institutional requirements while still adapting to the varying needs of our online students.

Considerations of course structure and of technology come into play, too, as activities need to be designed in a way that both the digital natives and generations that encountered computer technology later in their lives can understand and master without feeling over- or underwhelmed. Regardless of age, all students struggled with the technology needed to learn effectively; even the generation of digital natives require instructions on how to use the apps and software. Most of our courses currently being developed and refreshed introduce students to technology and incorporate low-stakes assessment modules before expecting students to apply the technology for working with class content.

A question we did not ask was that of rigor; online courses, by our understanding, cannot and should not be less rigorous than their face-to-face versions to allow students a seamless transition between online and face-to-face classes if wanted. We made online students aware that their learning outcomes were the same as those of their on-campus peers and that their online education would yield the same level or proficiency as an on-campus degree. Accomplishing this goal requires a high motivational level on the side of online students. With classes conducted in a largely asynchronous environment, students need to be highly motivated and take responsibility for their learning by seeking out additional opportunities to practice. In response to this need, the language degrees now offer a plethora of such opportunities, ranging from regular conversational practice with a partner to additional opportunities to communicate synchronously with a language tutor via Skype or Google Hangout. Maintaining a high standard for our online courses has helped us establish quality products that are well received by motivated students.

### Final words

In lieu of a conclusion, we would like to offer a series of best practices for the development of online language programs. Based on our experiences we believe

that the successful implementation of entire curricula for language BA degrees requires the synergy of four factors: First, a strong financial commitment of an institution to online learning; second, motivated faculty convinced that online language learning and teaching is possible; third, a combination of content and technology experts partnering with faculty while faculty maintain control over the curriculum; and fourth, training and continuous professional development of faculty who are teaching online.

1. Institutional financial commitment

- a. Compensate faculty for the development of a class by paying the amount it would take to teach a class. It takes time and effort to envision the transfer of courses or an entire curriculum for online delivery; a one-to-one transfer of face-to-face activities is not possible. Faculty need to be trained in theories and methods of online teaching, learn about best practices in course design, and receive assistance in finding creative ways to put their course content online. This is a time-intensive process that cannot be done by work that is not compensated.
- b. Offer the development and teaching of online courses as part of the regular teaching load. The curricular development is time-intensive and requires creativity in the design of oral components and other activities that need to be designed specifically for the online learning environment. Teaching online language courses requires close interaction during the synchronous language practice in small, time-intensive settings. Neither of these activities can be done properly on top of other duties. Furthermore, developing and teaching in online settings ought to be included in position descriptions to make this delivery mode one that is considered of the same rank and importance as face-to-face teaching.
- c. Budget for more than one iteration of a course development. Designing a language curriculum will not be flawless the first time around. It is essential for administrators and faculty to embrace “failure” of a course as a useful learning experience, to assess the flaws and the reasons for failure, and to commit new funds for a redevelopment.
- d. Make an online language curriculum a financially rewarding experience. The coordination of an entire online language degree requires dedicated faculty who will spend numerous hours working on this new degree. In addition to course development, the coordination and assessment of the new degree also requires substantial financial support. After the roll-out, the department offering the degree needs to benefit from the revenue generated by the online courses.

2. Faculty commitment to online language teaching and learning

- a. Embrace technology, adjust and take advantage of the online environment. Much of online language curriculum design requires the careful planning of activities. An online language course ought to be

completely set up and have all activities, assignments, and assessments fully developed and ready for delivery before classes begin. Some activities need to be creatively adjusted to fit the online asynchronous classroom. Helpful is a “can-do” attitude. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an abundance of programs and apps help accomplish learning outcomes similar to the face-to-face classroom. Skype, Google hangouts, Voice-thread, video blogs and many other tools help students work on their oral proficiency.

- b. Work with pilot programs and continuously assess student learning. Test learning modules and tools to decide their suitability for the online language classroom, and collect student input during these pilot programs. In some instances, starting with online modules or using a hybrid approach might be a useful option to evaluate. Assemble data on student learning and compare it to the outcomes in face-to-face instruction. When a new iteration of an online course becomes necessary, data that identifies shortcomings and a plan for how a revised version of the course is going to improve student learning will come in handy.
  - c. Keep up-to-date with research on student learning and the growing significance of online education in general. Often, other disciplines have found ways to overcome obstacles that can be easily adopted for online language courses. On the other hand, even digital natives require proper scaffolding before they are able to use new technology properly and efficiently. It is thus necessary to include instruction and low-stakes assessment of technology faculty want to use in their online language classes.
3. Provide the infrastructure and technical expertise.
    - a. The design and assembly of an online language class should be done by a team of language faculty and instructional designers. Language faculty are experts in language pedagogy and trained to teach in the synchronous environment of face-to-face classrooms. As subject experts they provide both the content and the structure of the class. Instructional designers use the ideas of the faculty developer and translate them into the environment of the online LMS. Designing an online class requires knowledge of the possibilities offered by the LMS, as well as the ever-changing pool of tools and apps available, and familiarity with best practices in online course design that requires constant training.
    - b. Online language courses work best within an LMS maintained by technology faculty. Aside from quick troubleshooting, language faculty should not need to tend to the technology required to run an online language course, but should be able to focus on working with the students. Teaching languages is time intensive by nature, and time used to work on technology is time that cannot be used for helping students developing their language proficiency.

- c. The LMS should be adaptable to the needs of language courses and allow for a high degree of audiovisual interactivity. A variety of different activities to practice oral conversation both synchronously and asynchronously is the most important element in online language courses. The ability to integrate such activities easily and seamlessly is paramount to a successful online language curriculum.
- 4. Provide continuing professional development for faculty teaching online language courses.
  - a. Faculty are often not trained in developing and teaching online language courses. As graduate programs are just now beginning to teach about online learning, it will take years until a new generation of faculty are familiar and comfortable with instruction and design of online courses and entire curricula. Until then, universities need to offer free lectures, seminars, and workshops for faculty interested in learning more about online instruction.
  - b. Faculty should receive incentives for participating in longer seminars and have travel support to attend professional conferences about online language education. Faculty need to be well-prepared to embark upon curriculum development. Ensuring proper training before starting development and receiving continuing support throughout the process facilitates faculty buy-in. In the big picture of money required to launch an online language program, these incentives are only a small portion of the large investment necessary.

Developing an online language degree is a process that cannot be implemented using a top-down approach without the support of language faculty. Proper training, financial incentives and fair compensation for faculty, as well as continuing professional development and technology support provided by experts in instructional design are indispensable for a successful project. Important are further realistic expectations about the results that can be accomplished by launching an online language curriculum. In most cases, the design and development will require a substantial financial commitment before and during the process, and some courses will need to be redesigned. Most promising in our eyes, however, is the opportunity to put faculty in charge, encourage them to take risks and experiment in curriculum development despite the chance of “failure.” Doing so could provide the impetus language programs need to embark on a substantial curriculum revision.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In March 2015, the three universities offering the BA in Spanish were Oregon State University, Arizona State University, and National University. The BA in German is currently only offered at Oregon State University. The BA

in French is currently at the proposal stage, and is expected to launch by Fall 2016.

- <sup>2</sup> <http://ecampus.oregonstate.edu/about/our-story.htm> Web, 7 April 2016. For an explanation of the term land-grant university see <http://oregonprogress.oregonstate.edu/summer-2010/legacy-land-grant>. Web, 7 April 2016.
- <sup>3</sup> For an organizational chart of the division see <http://outreach.oregonstate.edu/about/who-we-are>.
- <sup>4</sup> Annual reports as well as other recent data can be found at “Plans and Reports”.
- <sup>5</sup> This program used to be the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures (FLL) before merging with three other departments to form the School of Language, Culture, and Society at Oregon State University.
- <sup>6</sup> Language courses require at least 5 students to be offered. Generally, language courses are capped at 21 students and are paid as a 0.25 FTE (25% of a full instructor salary) if at least 18 students are enrolled. Between 5 and 10 students, instructors receive a 0.1 FTE, and between 11 and 17 students, they get a 0.2 FTE to allow offering smaller classes without jeopardizing the budget, as revenue from these courses has to cover the instructor salary completely.
- <sup>7</sup> The program leads are faculty members in the two languages. The current leads are the authors of this article. Sebastian Heiduschke is a tenured associate professor of German, and David Prats is an instructor of Spanish.
- <sup>8</sup> A few courses transitioned in late 2014 as early adopters. No German or Spanish courses were among them.
- <sup>9</sup> For an example of such a video introduction see <https://youtu.be/4s9eNN1zGt4>. Web, 7 April 2016.
- <sup>10</sup> This also has to do with practical reasons. A student in a face-to-face class of 30 students—the cap of language classes at OSU—may be able to speak for about a minute each day four times a week, often only seconds at a time. A student in an online class will be required to speak for long durations in a real conversational setting. While OSU faculty have not yet conducted official studies to compare the proficiency of face-to-face with online students, instructors who have taught both the face-to-face and the online sections simultaneously reported better proficiency levels of their online students by comparing their final grades in the oral components of the respective courses.
- <sup>11</sup> See <https://youtu.be/n1VYgbungcA?list=PL2fcGQa2PY7CDJkKsRiYNC-7XxiU4I10f> for the entire playlist of the Hammer Grammar.
- <sup>12</sup> German at OSU currently uses the series *Berliner Platz NEU* (Lemcke et al.), a textbook series following the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for languages). These books are also used by Goethe Institutes and other institutions teaching German as a Foreign Language (DaF) across the globe.
- <sup>13</sup> We have not conducted a detailed demographic survey of students enrolled in language programs at OSU. This observation is based on the information we receive from Ecampus and from our instructors.

- <sup>14</sup> As courses in Spanish are still in development, we do not have any student feedback regarding their suggestions for improvement.

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# Conclusion: The Future of Online Language Teaching Research

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As the reader will recall, Robert Blake's introduction to this volume stated that "online teaching has come into its own." Both his panoramic analysis of the status of the field and the papers included in the present collection on online language teaching research prove that these words are far from a hyperbolic assessment of the significance of distance-based pedagogies in the present-day reality of language teaching in many parts of the world. Much to the contrary, language teaching now occurs in a wide variety of formats beyond the traditional classroom setting, and often in the absence of it. As a consequence, distance-based pedagogy has ceased to be "alternative" pedagogy and can justly be regarded as the new normal for many language teaching practitioners. Likewise, for learners living in a world where these technologies are increasingly a part of everyday life, their use in the language learning experience is a natural expectation.

At the same time, there continues to be a need for additional empirically-based research rather than anecdotal evidence after which to model course design and pedagogical practice. In 2009 Blake reported that the few extant evaluation

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studies of fully implemented distance learning language courses did not assess the effects of the distance learning format itself on fostering oral proficiency. Despite the very large increase over the last decade of online language courses, this situation has not changed much, as Tarone and others point out in the 2015 *Perspectives* section of the *Modern Language Journal* (395–415). Many more studies are needed to examine if and how learner proficiency is assessed, the levels of proficiency targeted and attained, and whether online courses are held to the same standards of language proficiency outcomes as face-to-face classes.

Nonetheless, the development and spread of new technologies over the past few years have ushered in a radical alteration of both the desired learning outcomes and the methodological approaches to language teaching. Consequently, the focus of research on online language teaching has also changed. In 2004, Kern, Ware and Warschauer identified a shift between what they considered a first approach to distance-based language teaching, characterized by “the most quantifiable and easily measured aspects of online communication” (“Crossing Frontiers” 243), such as language features, language functions, or proportions of distance-based vs. non-distance-based interaction; and a newer, *second-wave* approach, concerned with the more social, interpersonal sphere of language learning in the new distance environments. The authors identified the following areas as the focus of this new wave of studies:

First, it expands the focus beyond language learning to an emphasis on culture (i.e., intercultural competence, cultural learning, cultural literacy). Second, it expands the notion of context beyond the local (often institutional) setting to include broad social discourses. Third, it problematizes the notions of its own inquiry, namely, communication and intercultural competence (244).

In other words, the focus of research on distance education had started to shift from linguistic proficiency and the (still) traditional language classroom to the development of other related skills and competencies, the interface between pedagogical and other social views on learning and language use, and the critique of its own assumptions.

Separated by over a decade from Kern, Ware and Warschauer, the papers in this volume address a number of these concerns from both a theoretical and a practical point of view. As shown by several of these authors, research has not begun to provide the answer to every challenge faced by language instructors in the new environments – now more than ever, language practitioners must play catch up with a constantly changing environment. These changes come from a variety of sources: a different student population, with growing degrees of access to technology and new patterns of social interaction that are markedly different from those of their peers in earlier generations; changes in the actual technology, which in a short period of time has come to encompass hardware, software and connectivity possibilities unimaginable only a few

years ago; changes in the social expectations about language learning, which is increasingly seen as more than just a professional tool or a skill used in specialized contexts; institutional pressures to develop online language programs as a way to compete in an ever more crowded market of educational options for students; and changes within the actual profession, such as a marked emphasis on the assessment of teaching and learning.

Although the recent expansion of distance-based technologies suitable for pedagogical purposes, including language teaching, is undeniable, it is important to keep in mind that access to these technologies is by no means universal. The existence of a “digital gap” or a *digital divide* (Compaine) between more and less affluent societies internationally is well known, and the meteoric spread of Internet access and digital networks in many developing countries has still not eliminated this gap (Norris). But we would be wrong to consider reduced accessibility to remote-access technologies an issue affecting only developing or non-Western countries. Even within countries with high levels of computer or mobile use or access to the Internet among the general population, social differences result in an unequal distribution of these access capabilities. For instance, in the case of the United States, some of the regional and social inequalities described in research at the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Katz and Rice) are still present today (Council of Economic Advisers). Similar patterns have been described in European societies (Van Dijk; Cruz-Jesus et al.). The constant updating of technologies makes Internet accessibility a moving target: for instance, while dial-up, narrowband connections once constituted the standard for Internet access, today high speed, high capacity, broadband connections are necessary to adequately access much of the information available on the Internet. Similarly, access occurs not just from fixed locations (i.e., desktop computers), but also mobile and portable devices such as smartphones and tablets. These unequal levels of access have obvious implications for the design of distance-based language courses, as well as for the incorporation of distance-based components in face-to-face courses. Some research in this area is available (for instance, see Eamer), but many questions remain regarding the ability and willingness of educational institutions to ensure that their online and digital resources will be accessible and available to learners of all socioeconomic backgrounds, thus providing equal chances for success in an online learning environment. The flip side, as Smidt, McAndrew and McDyre so aptly point out, is that access to the new technology does not necessarily imply its successful implementation, and that, in addition to ensuring access, it would be appropriate to include technology education as a learning goal in online foreign language courses.

### **Areas for future research**

In addition to the questions explored by the chapters included in this volume, we would like to suggest, among the countless possibilities, several other areas

that require exploration in the near future as distance-based instructional options for language teaching continue to develop.

### *Integration of different modes of distance-based language teaching*

As clearly argued by Blake in his introductory chapter, and as demonstrated by Fernández Agüero and Alonso Belmonte and by Guillén and Blake in their chapters, the application of distance-based options in language teaching goes far beyond a simple choice between face-to-face or online teaching, and encompasses a holistic, ongoing reassessment of language teaching methodology in order to attain the linguistic and cultural proficiency goals of language courses. The recent emphasis on *flipped* modes of curricular development bears witness to the interest in combining aspects of more than one type of content delivery in order to maximize student contact with the target language and to diversify their experiences in the language (Milman; Bergmann and Sams). Regardless of which proportion of face-to-face vs. distance-based work is applied, the growing pervasiveness of digital technologies and Internet connectivity has made it clear that learner networks can extend far beyond the limits of the traditional curriculum with set activities and the occasional group project, to the creation of true online-based learning communities, including both students and speakers who may not be sitting in a course as students (Kern, Ware, and Warschauer “Network-Based Language Teaching”; Thorne, Black, and Sykes). Gonzales’ paper in this volume is an excellent example of this line of research.

Another development that harbors great potential in the development of language curricula is the growing availability of online open resources, which calls into question the traditional textbook-based model, and offers both instructors and learners many modes of interaction with the language. A related tool includes language exchange platforms, which offer learners the opportunity to connect to other language learners in situations that simulate (or, from a connective, network-based perspective, constitute an example of) authentic interactions in the target language. Many institutions have already started to include some of these platforms as part of their regular world language curriculum (*The Mixxer*, *LiveMocha*, *TalkAbroad*, or their own in-house platforms).

Related issues include quantifying the advantages and disadvantages of these new delivery modes and resources for the development of linguistic and cultural proficiency, and the design of online courseware that can be modified or updated according to the changing needs of instructors and learners.

### *Effectiveness of new technologies and language assessment*

As indicated above, the long unresolved debate regarding the effectiveness of these non-traditional online modes of teaching bears on the question of

whether they are ultimately *better* at developing linguistic and cultural proficiency among students. As shown by MacGregor-Mendoza's paper in this volume, assessment in online education is far from an elusive concept, and can proceed according to tangible, clearly articulated objectives and instruments. Recent research indicates that when distance-based curricula are well designed and standard-based, students receive the necessary technical training and support, and resourcefulness and independence are fostered, online or hybrid approaches to language teaching can be just as effective, if not more effective than face-to-face approaches (Burnett; Consolo and Furtoso). In this respect, the papers by Anderson-Mejías and by Smidt, McAndrew and McDyre offer a clear outlining of pedagogical practices for distance-based language teaching that are conducive to a high-quality language learning experience.

In addition, it is important to keep in mind that distance-based forms of interaction are increasingly important in society as a whole – therefore, these interactions as support for language teaching are fundamentally analogous to the real-life, spontaneous interactions that students have in their everyday lives. As such, these distance-based forms of interaction can aid learners in the development of purely linguistic competence, as well as social and cultural competence in the target language.

### *Institutional trends and practices*

As shown by Heiduschke and Pratt's chapter on the launching of an online language curriculum, the institutional framework that hosts a language program is of paramount importance to its development and chances of success. Even if we start by assuming that pedagogical practices are within the control of the instructor, the decisions, priorities, guidelines and restrictions stemming from institutional administration have the potential to enhance, thwart, or altogether abort any given attempt to develop distance-based components of language learning. Ultimately, the decisions on several key elements affecting the conditions in which language teaching happens are decided outside of the classroom: these elements include (1) the mission, values and priorities of any given program; (2) the procedures and budget to hire, train, support and assess teaching staff; (3) the scheduling of courses; (4) the assessment of learning (at least in connection to program and institutional assessment goals); (5) the availability of support mechanisms beyond individual courses, such as libraries, language learning centers, study abroad programming; (6) technical support mechanisms for both students and instructors; (7) and the interface between the institutional context and regional or national educational and accreditation policies (Moore and Kearsley). In the end, however, language teaching practitioners are the professionals who have the background and the experience to know what is best for language learners. Their advocacy and their effort to remind institution administrators and other stakeholders of the need for adequate resources and

sensible expectations to support world language programs in an increasingly digital world will continue to play a key role in the foreseeable future.

But the development of new technologies and open access resources also has the potential to move language education away from the control of official institutions (school systems, universities, etc.) and to create opportunities for learners to interact with instructors and other learners in extra-institutional environments. Heralded decades ago by mail-based language courses, and later by broadcasted courses (e.g. *Destinos*), the *open university* model and teleconferencing approaches (Moore and Kearsley 23–40), this move has materialized more recently in several for-pay software packages (*Rosetta Stone*, *Pimsleur*, Auralog's *TELL ME MORE*, etc.) that seek to appeal to a wide audience of learners, especially those whose lifestyle or economic constraints do not allow them to participate in more traditional academic learner cohorts. Academic programs, however, still hold a number of advantages over 100% software-based, non-academic options. First, they are able to offer learners curricula that undergo periodic cycles of assessment. Second, academic programs also offer learners personal contact with an actual, not virtual, community of instructors, language lab staff, tutors, peer mentors, and other students. Academic programs are also accompanied by resources and opportunities such as on-campus cultural activities, internships, opportunities for community engaged learning that makes use of the target language, and study abroad and exchange programs. Private, 100% software-based learning options still do not make any of these advantages available to their users. In addition, Nielson in 2011 found severe attrition among adult learners using Rosetta Stone and Auralog's TELL ME MORE in the workplace due to a variety of technological problems as well as the lack of sufficient support for autonomous learning. The programs yielded very limited proficiency gains in only a handful of learners, and no generalizable assessment results. According to Nielson "this was the first empirical study intended to establish what happens when independent learners use commercial self-study materials in the workplace, and the lack of use suggests that this approach is not likely to be an effective approach for improving overall language proficiency in this context, especially for 0-beginners." (125) In 2015 Lord reported on her interviews with students using Rosetta Stone (RS), particularly on one who had learned much vocabulary but told her that she didn't know how to use it. Lord concludes that "until RS and other stand-alone programs are able to effectively promote proficiency as measured not just by lexical and grammatical assessments, but through true communicative competence, they will never come close to replacing classroom-based instructor-led learning." (404) How these programs might foster true communicative competence is, of course, a further area of inquiry to be explored, especially since the decentralization of the language learning experience in an increasingly digital world continues to pose questions as well as opportunities for both language practitioners and language learners.

In sum, this volume adds to the small but growing body of research on online foreign language teaching and learning. At the same time, it leaves the door wide open for larger scale studies and additional research on any number of related areas of inquiry, for example, evaluative studies of fully implemented online foreign language courses to assess their impact on fostering linguistic and cultural proficiency, and empirical studies of socioeconomic issues that impact on accessibility, and on how students of limited resources may navigate and respond to the online language learning challenge.

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With the growth of Internet technologies, online-based foreign language curricula are being introduced at large numbers of institutions internationally. This peer-reviewed volume, geared towards a broad audience, presents innovative research on online language teaching, with chapters by highly engaged scholars and practitioners from the U.S. and Europe, with a strong background in applied linguistics and language pedagogy. Questions addressed include: the (dis)advantages of non-traditional delivery modes; the coexistence of online-based approaches with other modes of instruction; promoting student motivation and involvement; 'quality' and assessment of online-based curriculum and teaching; student and instructor expectations; and design and administration of online language curricula.

