ANALYZING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF A BLENDED SPANISH GRAMMAR COURSE

Christopher J. Jochum
University of Nebraska at Kearney, USA

Abstract. Background. There is currently a need to assess the effectiveness of and student comfort with content-based, online Spanish instruction at the university level. Purpose. The purpose of this study was to analyze students' perceptions of the effectiveness of a blended (face-to-face and online) university course in comparative Spanish grammar and the extent to which, if any, it had an impact on their perceived levels of instructional and linguistic comfort with online learning. Methods and Results. Nineteen students (N=19) completed the pre and post-course surveys which assessed their overall comfort levels associated with reading, writing and speaking Spanish within the context of the blended course design. In addition, students were asked to give their impressions and feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment at the conclusion of the course. Results indicate significant improvements in students' comfort levels related to (a) the course and the online design, (b) speaking Spanish and (c) using Blackboard to study Spanish. Students also concluded that their Spanish grammar improved and that they learned the course material, felt challenged, and enjoyed a sense of community. Conclusions. Given the prevalence of online classes and degree programs, this study supports the notion that online content in Spanish can be effectively designed in a manner that allows students to learn the material, which supports their overall language development.

Keywords: Blended Instruction, Distance Education, Foreign Language Education, Online Instruction, Spanish Grammar Instruction.

The number of college students enrolled in online courses and degree programs has significantly increased over the past decade and...
continues to rise. During the 2006-2007 academic year, 66 percent of postsecondary institutions offered some form of online or distance education courses (Parsad & Lewis, 2008) and by the fall semester of 2010, over 6.1 million students were enrolled in at least one online class (Allen & Seaman, 2011). In addition to taking online courses, students are also enrolling in online degree programs in a number of fields. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that during the 2007–2008 academic year, four percent of all undergraduates were enrolled in an online degree program (Radford, 2011). Given these numbers, it is clear that students have the opportunity to study almost any subject in an online format as either stand-alone courses that are part of an on-ground program or an exclusive online degree.

Although the effective tenets of online instruction can be applied to most areas of study, foreign language instruction presents unique challenges due to the amount of authentic interaction that is required for language acquisition and learning to occur (Omaggio-Hadley, A., 2001; Shrun & Glisan, 2010). The literature does present research supporting the effectiveness of online and/or blended (online and face-to-face) foreign language instruction in areas such as oral proficiency (Blake, R., Cetto, M., Pardo-Ballester, C., & Wilson, N. L., 2008), online interaction and discourse (Meskill, C., & Anthony, N., 2005), and even the role of students’ attitudes and language anxiety in online courses (Coryell, J. E., & Clark, M., 2009; Roed, J, 2003; Ushida, E., 2005). More specifically, studies related to hybrid or blended courses have advanced the knowledge and pedagogical implications for online foreign language instruction and have shown that students’ progress and development in the target language were similar to students enrolled in face-to-face (F2F) classes (Chenoweth, Ushida, & Murday, 2006).

While these studies have revealed important components to online foreign language instruction, they focused on the global aspect of foreign languages and failed to address the effectiveness of content-specific online instruction within foreign language study. As a result, there is a lack of research related to teaching foreign language content courses online – such as Spanish culture, literature or advanced grammar - at the university level. One of the few studies to do this analyzed the effectiveness of teaching a college-level Latin American
civilization course in Spanish utilizing a blended model (Jochum, 2011) in which students indicated that the online component significantly increased their comfort levels not only with the language but also when interacting with their peers in Spanish. However, due to the dearth of studies related to teaching online content courses in foreign languages, additional research is warranted. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to analyze students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of a blended (F2F and online) university course in comparative Spanish grammar and the extent to which, if any, it had an impact on their perceived levels of instructional and linguistic comfort with online learning.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

A total of 19 students (N=19) completed both pre and post-course surveys. Of these students, 16% (n = 3) were male; 84% (n = 16) were female. Sixty-eight percent (n = 13) reported being native English speakers; 32% (n = 6) were heritage Spanish speakers. Lacorte and Canabal (2003) define heritage speakers as “students from homes where languages other than English are spoken, or who have had in-depth exposure to another language” (p. 107).

Students’ self-assessed Spanish proficiency levels were as follows: Speaking (63% intermediate; 37% advanced), Reading (32% intermediate; 68% advanced), Writing (74% intermediate; 26% advanced).

At the beginning of the semester, students enrolled in the course received information related to the study and were given the option to anonymously participate by responding to pre and post-course surveys, which asked them to provide demographic information (gender, native language, college major and minor, semesters of college Spanish and semesters of high school Spanish) along with indicating their perceived comfort levels related to the subject and taking online courses. All participants (N = 19) submitted signed consent forms and were aware that their participation had no effect on their course grade and that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time, for which there would be no negative consequences.
Instrumentation

The study employed a mixed-design approach in which participants responded to both quantitative and qualitative inquiries on the survey instrument. On both the pre and post-course surveys, students reported demographic information and self-rated their abilities to read, write and speak Spanish along with their level of motivation to be in the course. The students reported their comfort levels related to various aspects of using and learning Spanish in both an online and F2F format, using a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very uncomfortable) to 4 (very comfortable). Finally, students were given the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions designed to assess their feelings of accomplishment and language development at the end of the semester.

Procedure

This study reports the results of a comparative Spanish grammar course offered at a mid-sized, Midwestern public university using a blended (or hybrid) design. A blended design is one in which 30% to 79% of the course must be offered online (Allen & Seaman, 2011). The class was offered in this format to enable students the opportunity to learn advanced Spanish grammar using both face-to-face (F2F) and online strategies. In addition, the department offering the course was interested in the possibility of offering the course exclusively online for future students who would be participating in a semester-long study abroad program. The class typically attracts native English and Spanish-speaking students pursuing majors or minors in various Spanish-related fields such as education or translation and interpretation and is only offered once per academic year.

Comparative Spanish Grammar is an upper-level course designed to strengthen students’ understanding and command of Spanish grammar while also showing parallels to English. The majority of the class is conducted in Spanish with English being used when it’s relevant to the course topics. In previous semesters, this three-hour course had been offered face-to-face (F2F), meeting two days per week. To accommodate the blended design, F2F meetings were scheduled for
75 minutes one day per week (Tuesdays) with the rest of the classroom instruction taking place online, using Blackboard, the university’s course management system. This format enabled the students to receive direct, F2F instruction (in Spanish) over the week’s essential objectives while interacting with other classmates as well as the instructor.

Class assessments were submitted online and consisted of both individual and group-based activities. For each of the chapters in the course textbook, students would individually complete assignments that enabled them to both explain and apply the various grammatical objectives. In addition, students also created online presentations over each chapter in which they would summarize the main points using a variety of formats such as Power Point, Prezi or Voice Thread. These presentations were shared with the entire class and students were required to post verbal and written replies to one another, which encouraged online interaction. Finally, students took four exams during the class. Two were taken F2F and two were given online.

Participants responded to the pre and post-course surveys during the first and last weeks of the semester. To ensure anonymity, a research assistant who was not associated with the class administered the surveys by assigning all students a number which was used on both their pre and post-course surveys. The numbers were assigned to facilitate data collection and subsequent analysis as it was necessary to pair students’ pre and post-course responses. The research assistant was the only person who could match the participants’ identities with their respective survey responses. Upon completion of both surveys, the primary researcher collected, coded and analyzed the data in order to determine students’ perceptions of the blended format and its relation to their language development and proficiency.

RESULTS

Quantitative Analysis

Table 1 shows the results of paired-sampled t-tests which compared the pre and post-course survey mean scores on selected survey items related to students’ comfort levels associated with taking online courses
and learning Spanish using a blended model. As the overall, aggregate mean score for all items related to students’ comfort indicates, there was a significant improvement in how comfortable students felt with the course and the online components ($t(18) = -2.72, p < .05$). Furthermore, as Table 1 indicates, students also reported a significant perceived improvement in how comfortable they were speaking Spanish ($t(18) = -2.04, p < .05$) and using Blackboard as a means of foreign language instruction ($t(18) = -2.48, p < .05$). While 58% of the students at the beginning of the course reported having experience taking online (non-Spanish) courses, only 21% indicated that they had experience taking online courses in Spanish.

Other noteworthy mean differences – although not statistically significant - were found in students’ comfort levels related to reading and writing in Spanish along with using the language to give presentations. Finally, post-course analyses showed that the students had become more comfortable taking online courses in Spanish.

Table 1. Paired t-test analysis of students’ pre and post-course mean comfort scores by aggregate on selected survey items.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Pre-course</th>
<th>Post-course</th>
<th>t</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comfort Levels:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggregate Comfort</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>3.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Speaking Spanish</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>3.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Writing Spanish</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Reading Spanish</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>3.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Using Blackboard to study Spanish</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Presenting in Spanish</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>3.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Taking online courses</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>3.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Taking online Spanish courses</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>3.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scale: 1 = very comfortable; 2 = uncomfortable; 3 = comfortable; 4 = very comfortable

*Significant mean difference ($p < .05$)

In addition to their reported comfort levels, students’ post-course responses (Table 2) were positive and showed support for the blended model of Spanish instruction. Binomial Tests (see Siegel, 1956) indicated
that all but one of the responses were significant at .05 level or better (Table 2). An additional finding not presented in the table was that, among heritage Spanish speakers, 100% (N = 6) reported that, as a result of the blended model, they felt more comfortable interacting in Spanish with native English speakers. Likewise, almost 70% of the native English speakers (n = 9) indicated that, as a result of the blended design, there felt more comfortable when interacting in Spanish with heritage Spanish speakers.

Table 2. Students’ post-course responses related to perceptions of accomplishment and task attainment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected Items</th>
<th>Affirmative Responses n (%)</th>
<th>Binomial Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) I learned the material and objectives in this course.</td>
<td>19 (100%)</td>
<td>p &lt; .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) I leaned more in this class than in a F2F (non-blended) only class.</td>
<td>14 (74%)</td>
<td>p &lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) My Spanish grammar improved due to the online interaction.</td>
<td>13 (68%)</td>
<td>p &lt; .05(ns)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) My Spanish grammar improved due to the blended interaction.</td>
<td>18 (95%)</td>
<td>p &lt; .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) My Spanish grammar improved due to the F2F interaction.</td>
<td>19 (100%)</td>
<td>p &lt; .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) I felt challenged in this course.</td>
<td>18 (95%)</td>
<td>p &lt; .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) I felt a sense of community in this course.</td>
<td>17 (89%)</td>
<td>p &lt; .01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were asked to respond to the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the selected items.

Qualitative Analysis

A qualitative analysis of students’ responses to the open-ended questions revealed that, by the end of the course, most of the students enjoyed the blended design because it allowed them to focus more on the content during the face-to-face meetings and work at their own pace while completing the online components. In fact, many students commented that they felt as though they learned more in the blended model because the in-class time was dedicated to expanding upon what they had previously learned online and addressing students’ questions related to the class content. Table 3 shows selected student responses that support these emergent themes.
Table 3. Selected responses to students’ post-course analysis of the blended course design.

“I loved it! It was helpful and seemed to give us more time to learn and understand the material. At the beginning, I was skeptical, although I was looking forward to just coming to class one day each week. I actually think I learned better through the online component because it forced me to work on my own outside of class so that I would know the information.”

“I feel that I have learned more in the mixed class. My thoughts have changed because I wasn’t sure if the mixed instruction was going to work but now I really like it.”

“I liked the combination! The face-to-face portion was great because of the professor’s connection with the students. However, the use of the online component was also great for my full-time class and work schedule.”

“I loved the use of online materials and I also liked coming to class to have the professor explain and interact with the class. It was also nice to always have access to all of the online materials and presentations.”

“I had previously taken other online courses and struggled so I was unsure about this class at first. However, I found that it was completely different and I liked the mixed design.”

“I liked having the lectures and classroom interaction - that clarified that material more than had it just been online. However, I also liked having the homework online and being able to set my own schedule.”

“I enjoyed the mixed interaction. We were able to learn a little more independently yet still have questions answered during the face-to-face meetings.”

DISCUSSION

Due to the increased demanded for online course and program offerings, this study attempts to fill a void in the online foreign language pedagogy literature by assessing the perceived effectiveness of a blended, upper-level Spanish grammar course, based upon students’ pre and post-course responses. Overall, students reported that their comfort levels associated with speaking Spanish and using Blackboard significantly increased, which may indicate that both student and instructor apprehension related to online instruction in any subject may be more of a barrier to its effective implementation than the content or
design of the subject itself. The fact that students felt more comfortable with their Spanish speaking abilities at the end of the course is important because it shows that, in part, the online environment does enable students to continue to develop their speaking skills. This was supported by the use of online presentations in which students were required to use the language (in oral and written forms) to present a synthesis of classroom objectives and respond to their peers. It is very likely that the asynchronous design of these presentations allowed students to lower their inhibitions and produce with the language in more meaningful ways, which has been deemed effective in online foreign language instruction (Coryell, & Clark, 2009; Roed, 2003; Ushida, 2005). Krashen (1982) defines this mixture of inhibitions, stress levels and other environmental variables as the affective filter and asserts that it must be lowered in order for individuals to receive optimal levels of language input which, in turn, can have a positive effect on language acquisition. The ability of the online environment to lower the affective filter was supported through the finding that almost 70% of the native English speakers reported that the blended design made them more comfortable with the heritage Spanish speakers in the class.

Although not statistically significant, students’ overall post-course means did indicate improved comfort levels associated with reading and writing Spanish, presenting in Spanish, and taking online courses in general and specifically related to Spanish. These findings are encouraging as they support the notion that foreign language literacy skills can not only be taught but possibly enhanced through online instruction.

Additionally, all students reported that the blended course designed allowed them to learn the course material and objectives and most (95%) indicated that they felt challenged in the course. While support for the blended model was not unanimous, it was encouraging that many students (74%) felt as though they learned more as a result of the blended model, as opposed to a F2F only class. Furthermore, 68 percent of the students reported that they felt as though their Spanish grammar – which was the focus of the class - improved as a result of the online interaction. Finally, developing a sense of community is an important component of all classes – both F2F and online - and a large portion of students (89%) felt as though this was established through the blended model.
Perhaps one of the greatest perceived benefits to learning Spanish grammar online is the freedom it affords students to work more independently on course assignments while also benefiting from what others have contributed to the online course site. Many of the open-ended responses revealed that students enjoyed the blended model because, in many ways, it presented the “best of both worlds” by allowing them to enjoy the asynchronous environment of the online component while also having the F2F interaction - especially in the Spanish language – with the instructor and their classmates.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the significant and positive findings, this study is not without its own limitations and, as a result, should be interpreted and/or generalized accordingly. The results are based upon a single case with a relatively small sample size (N = 19). In addition, while the results were confidential, participants’ responses could have been influenced by the presence of the author, who also served as the instructor for the blended model presented in this study. Furthermore, the survey instrument used was created by the author and, consequently, might yield different results if administered to more students across different environments (i.e. schools, class design, instructor, etc.). Finally, participants were asked to self-assess their own language abilities and the extent to which, if any, they felt as though their abilities to use the language - especially related to Spanish grammar - were enhance by the blended design. As a result, self-assessments related to course material and achievement, in the absence of an instructor-administered measurement, should also be considered when interpreting and generalizing the findings.

Nonetheless, the results of this study are encouraging and not only support online foreign language instruction but also indicate a need for additional research designed to assess the effectiveness of teaching content-specific subjects within foreign languages using a blended or completely online model. Future research should focus on the effect online instruction has on other, commonly-taught content courses in Spanish, such as literature, culture, composition and communication. The level of student of achievement and experience - such as undergraduate or graduate students - should also be determined as it is becoming
more common to offer graduate degrees online. Finally, future research in this field should focus on using standardized assessments such the Oral Proficiency Interview (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1999) to better determine possible gains in proficiency, pre and post-instruction that might be related to the variable of online foreign language instruction.

References
STUDENTŲ POŽIŪRIS Į MIŠRAUS POBŪDŽIO ISPANŲ KALBOS GRAMATIKOS KURSĄ

Christopher J. Jochum
Nebraskos universitetas (Kearney), JAV


Pagrindiniai žodžiai: mišraus pobūdžio mokymas, nuotolinių studijų, užsienio kalbos studijos, mokymasis internetinėje aplinkoje, ispanų kalbos gramatikos mokymasis.

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