HYBRID FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES: THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS?

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Background

Many universities are now offering online classes in many subjects including foreign languages. The success of such courses is debatable in the area of foreign language (FL) learning. The field of foreign language education continues to look for the best way to take advantage of all a virtual environment can offer. In order to meet the needs of a growing student population and to alleviate classroom space issues, hybrid courses are growing in popularity. This paper examines the experiences of a teacher and her students in an Advanced Conversational Spanish class that was offered in the hybrid format.

Rice (2004) explains that much of the traditional classroom model is based on schools created during the Industrial Age. Schools closely resembled factories in that the teacher (like a supervisor) directed student activity and shared his or her knowledge. The students (like factory workers) would listen and do as they were told. While this model may have been effective when students were being trained for positions that often involved repetitive tasks, this structure is no longer sufficient for students who need to learn to interact with a variety of people, to creatively solve problems, utilize an array of modern technology, and to think critically.

While Rice's explanation is referring to classrooms in any field, this dilemma is one that educators have been investigating for the past several decades in the field of FL teaching and learning. The teacher-centered model is no longer considered a viable means to help students achieve proficiency. Researchers (Lee and VanPatten 2003, Omaggio Hadley 1993) have demonstrated the

success of a student-centered classroom where the student and the teachers co-construct meaning in the target language. Students work in small groups and pairs on real-life tasks in order to practice and experiment with the language.

Along with these changes in the traditional classroom model there has been an onslaught of technological advances. These advances have created great strides in the area of Distance Education. With the right equipment students can interact with a teacher on the other side of the world in real time from the comfort of their dorm rooms. Since the advent of the internet, colleges have attempted to develop online classes and programs. Online courses free up valuable classroom space, allow students and teachers a more flexible schedule, and can expose students to new technology and authentic cultural material. Also, according to Wang (2005), a virtual environment inspires interest in modern learners because it can combine graphics, video, pictures, podcasts, online chat, and other such dynamic means of communication.

Classes with virtual elements may also inspire more autonomous learning among students according to Dias (2000) and Meyer (2002). Online elements require students to become more actively engaged in order to complete tasks and participate in online discussions. They are not directed by their teacher in a classroom setting, but must take the responsibility upon themselves to turn on the computer and participate. Young (2002) notes that this might benefit students with higher levels of anxiety, "some students who rarely take part in classroom discussions are more likely to participate online, where they get time to think before they type and they aren't put on the spot" (1).

Online instruction has received criticism of late. Some fully online programs have failed (Young (2002) cites NYU online as an example). Others have experienced a high rate of withdrawals and drop-outs. Another drawback is cost for both the institution and the students. Software that allows for oral interaction can be problematic and expensive. Not all students have their own computers,

and so, in order to participate, they must have access to computer labs. And according to Benson and Wright (1999), "If some students have the necessary equipment and others must walk across campus at night or stand in line to get the same, then online courses act like cars and clothes – further measures of income differences" (4).

A completely virtual class may not be ideal, particularly for FL instruction. FL education poses a particular dilemma because student-to-student and teacher-to-student live interactions have become an integral part of instruction for most educators. The hybrid course may be what the field is seeking, because it may be able to provide the best of both worlds. Hybrid courses combine on-campus meetings with virtual communications. This type of course is growing in popularity, because it holds many of the same advantages of an online course. At the same time it allows the students and teacher to meet face to face on a regular basis. Many educators are finding success with this model. Brown (2004) cites research from the University of Central Florida where hybrid courses have been compared with both traditional classes and online-only classes. Students in the hybrid course were reported as having the most success.

The Present Study

The current study is a result of one teacher's journey through the virtual world of FL teaching. Two years ago the teacher/researcher created an online Beginning Spanish course and compared it to an on-campus counterpart. Student reactions were lukewarm and there was a high rate of withdrawals from the class. Although the experience provided a great opportunity to learn about the options available through Blackboard and MediaSite Live, two options of support for virtual classes on the campus, the researcher also had only a lukewarm reaction. The multiple steps required to perform the simplest of grading and communication tasks quickly became tiring. MediaSite Live is a program that

allows teachers to record their lectures, combining visual of the instructor talking with written notes that can appear on the side. The technology group at the school was also kind enough to videotape on-campus classes and post them online so that the students in the online section could at least watch live interactions in Spanish. Students in the online section created oral portfolios with a program called AudioPortfolios.com.

However, none of these options could replace live interactions between the students and between the teacher and students. The researcher also discovered that she really missed meeting the students, interacting with them on a face to face basis, and generally getting to know them. For many teachers this is one of one of the greatest pleasures of FL teaching. The teacher/researcher decided to try a different approach, one that could possibly combine the best of online and on-campus courses, a hybrid FL class.

This study took place at a small private college where the faculty was challenged to create courses that were either completely online or hybrid. This challenge was issued to meet student demand for online classes and also to alleviate classroom space problems at the small, urban institution. The FL department received a grant to invest in software that would facilitate online, oral communications. This research piloted that software, Wimba Voice Tools, and the hybrid format.

Hybrid formats can contain differing levels of face to face time. Brown (2004) explains that they can go from 90% online and 10% on campus meetings to 10% online and 90% face to face time. This investigation involved a class that was 50% online and 50% on campus. This format allows for the reduction of the need for classroom space by 50%. Another class using the same format could use the same classroom in the corresponding time slot.

Wimba Voice Tools is a software program that can be housed in web-based educational support systems such as Blackboard. It allows instructors and students to send voice emails, create voice presentations, engage in oral chat sessions, have oral office hours, and utilize oral

discussion boards. In order to truly put this software to the test, to see if this was truly a viable supplement for the department's FL classes, the hybrid class was a section of Advanced Conversational Spanish. This class requires the perhaps the most oral interaction of the department's offerings.

Research Questions

This study attempted to explore the effectiveness of a hybrid set-up for a FL class by examining the opinions of the students and teacher participating in the course. Research questions included:

Do the students feel they are able to express themselves via online assignments?

What is the students' level of anxiety in completing online and on-campus assignments?

What is the students' level of motivation in completing online and on-campus assignments?

What are students' opinions of a hybrid FL class? What do they like about the class and what do they dislike?

What are the teacher's opinions of a hybrid FL class?

What are students' opinions regarding the Wimba Voice Tools software?

Data Collection

Students in the hybrid section of Advanced Conversational Spanish participated in activities that involved both formal and informal language use. During on-campus meetings students engaged in more informal language activities such as conversations with fellow classmates and the teacher, games, skits, role-plays, information-gap tasks, and interviews. Online sessions involved more formal language activities such as debates, cultural presentations, storytelling, and the creation of a radio program. Throughout the semester the researcher/instructor kept a journal with informal

notes of her experiences, opinions, and impressions. The students completed a survey consisting of a combination of Likert type scale questions and several open-ended questions at the end of the semester. Fourteen students (3 men and 11 women ages eighteen to twenty-five) participated in the class. Ten students chose to complete the anonymous survey at the end of the semester.

Results and Implications

One of the survey questions asked students to rate how well the online assignments allowed them to express themselves on a scale of 1-5 (1=not well at all and 5=very well). The mean response was positive, 3.6, indicating that the students felt that they could express themselves through the target language in the online assignments. In response to the open-ended questions, several of the students noted that they appreciated being able to work on their own and develop their personal ideas online. They enjoyed working on their own projects and creating at their own pace.

Questions 3 and 4 of the survey asked students to rate their level of anxiety on a scale of 1-5 (1= Low anxiety and 5=High anxiety) when completing online and on-campus assignments. A mean response of 1.4 indicated that students felt a low level of anxiety completing the online assignments. The mean for in-class assignments was slightly higher (2.4) but was still on the lower end of the scale. Several of the students mentioned that the hybrid format made them feel less anxious. One student wrote, "I got to practice my speaking and pronunciation without getting nervous about speaking in front of a whole class. I would like to see more (hybrid classes) because I feel they reduce some of the stress of campus classes." This suggests that the hybrid format can help alleviate the anxiety that students feel when speaking the target language, lowering the affective filter, and allowing them to create more with the language and gain confidence in their skills.

Another question asked the students to rate how well the online assignments allowed them to express themselves in Spanish. A mean of 3.9 appears to indicate that the students felt the online assignments allowed them to express themselves fairly well. Students were also asked to rate how effective they found the Wimba Voice Tools software program (1=not effective at all to 5=Highly effective). A mean of 4.0 suggests that students were happy with the program.

In the open-ended questions several students explained that they appreciated the opportunity to listen to their recorded assignments and correct any errors. One student wrote, "I found it helpful….a means to self-assess to have the capability to record myself for the online assignments. I could listen to myself, which isn't something I do when presenting in front of the class. I found this as a means to improve." Students also appreciated the chance to listen to other students' recordings several times in order to ensure comprehension.

Students also enjoyed the opportunity to work at their own pace. One student wrote, "I think they (hybrid courses) were very effective and is something you could work on at your own pace and make any corrections needed after listening to the work."

Another student appreciated this aspect of the hybrid course and also appreciated being able to meet on-campus with the teacher, "I liked that we could complete the assignments at the most convenient time for us. I also liked that the class met on campus so we could get help in person with online assignments or have them explained."

Nine of the ten students supported the idea of more hybrid FL classes in the department. Nearly all of them mentioned that the course was convenient for them and they liked that they could work in the comfort to their own home or dorm room. Related to this issue of convenience, the only negative comment that occurred in more than one survey was that they students felt it was inconvenient working in groups for online assignments. Students have many different schedules and jobs and it

was difficult for them to work in groups outside of class.

The researcher's experiences with the course reflected much of what the students described in the survey. Throughout the semester students mentioned that they felt less anxious preparing assignments online. The teacher/researcher's experience with students at this level, Advanced Conversation, (typically Intermediate Mid to High on the OPI rating scale) is that they are highly anxious about their speaking abilities. Many are becoming aware of just how much they do not know and become very self-conscious. This can translate into "playing it safe" when speaking in formal and informal situations. Perhaps working in a virtual environment can help students feel more comfortable and can encourage them to take risks when creating with the language. At the same time, the on-campus part of the class can push them to think on their feet and work on their live communication skills.

One unanticipated result was that the online assignments encouraged self-assessment. Several students had noted that they appreciated the opportunity to review their work and make corrections and this is always valuable in a FL classroom. It is also important to note that the students created much longer assignments online. Their comments to each other were also quite detailed as opposed to the simple questions that they might offer at the end of in-class presentations. They really listened to and reflected upon each other's work. This concept of online assignments inspiring self-reflection merits further research.

Like the students the researcher also enjoyed the convenience and freedom created by the hybrid course. Hybrid courses allow teachers the opportunity to work at all hours of the day or night from home or at the office. The on-campus meetings allowed for interactions with the students on a regular basis.

However, these experiences were overall positive for the teacher and the students. The concepts that emerged from this study such as lower anxiety levels, self-reflection, and the advantages of allowing students to work at their own pace in a hybrid setting are encour-

aging and demonstrate the need for more research in this area.

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