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Going Online: Spanish Composition and Conversation Research-based Course Design

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Abstract

This descriptive study details the design of an online intermediate Spanish composition and conversation (210W) course at Minnesota State University, Mankato and discusses the theory, research, and design strategies utilized in its development. The 210W course design addresses challenges to online language instruction such as limited focus on oral proficiency development and lack of interaction. Evaluation of the implemented design solutions revealed that SPAN 210W maintained pedagogical rigor providing an immersive, interactive, and competency-based learning environment online. A proposed assessment strategy for continuous improvement is discussed, including targeted student feedback questions, regular review of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), e-learning, and second language acquisition research, and assessment of the alignment of course learning activities, assessment tools, and learning outcomes. This study concludes with a discussion of general recommendations for online language instruction and how this design might be applied to flipped or hybrid classrooms.

Introduction

In 2011, growth in the number of college and university students enrolled in at least one online course was almost 20 times that of overall enrollment growth;

expansion of online education is predicted to continue (Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011). The exponential increase of online learning is attributable, in part, to meet the needs of learners in a rapidly evolving globalized world, particularly the call for more flexible and accessible education models (MacKeogh & Fox, 2009). Furthermore, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2007) identified the study of languages as an essential component in preparing students to meet 21st Century challenges. However, the boom in online learning has not necessarily brought about innovative or effective educational practices; in many cases, online course design is little more than a transfer of classroom materials to a digital environment (Pachler & Daly, 2011). Careful investigation and implementation of methodologies, media, and course design principles that enhance learning are necessary to maximize the benefits of e-learning. “Learn Languages, Explore Cultures, Transform Lives,” the theme of the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (CSCTFL) 2015 Conference, highlights essential 21st Century skills that are developed through online language education. Second language educators that “go online” with a course design grounded in theory and research have the potential to offer flexible, effective, and accessible courses that also prepare learners for success in today’s globalized world.

The Course: Composition and Conversation

SPAN 210W: Composition and Conversation is an intermediate composition and conversation course required for all Spanish majors and minors at Minnesota State University, Mankato. The “W” indicates it is a writing intensive course. SPAN 210W serves as the gateway course to higher-level Spanish course offerings aimed at developing the oral and written proficiency necessary for success in advanced courses. At Minnesota State University, Mankato, making progress toward a Spanish minor or major is frequently a challenge for double majors in highly structured programs and for student athletes because of scheduling conflicts. Teaching SPAN 210W online was proposed as a way to increase access and help learners make progress towards Spanish program completion. In the case of 210W, teaching composition online seemed to pose little threat to pedagogical rigor; however, teaching conversation online seemed much more dubious. This echoes the doubts of many second language educators about the effectiveness of teaching a second language in an online environment (Blake, 2007). The challenge of developing an online course that could dispel my personal doubts about the practicality and feasibility of teaching an online Spanish *conversation* course was the impetus leading to the design and assessment of Spanish Composition and Conversation online (SPAN 210W). The course was initially developed for Fall 2013 and was reviewed and modified in 2014.

Why Go Online?

An initial survey of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) research provided evidence that technology tools, such as those that could be used in an online language course can provide language learning benefits such as fostering

negotiation of meaning interactions and reducing anxiety. Furthermore, examination of 21st Century learners' needs and characteristics demonstrated alignment of online language education with 21st Century essential learning outcomes, such as development of global knowledge and healthy risk taking skills.

Online Language Learning

Past research has reported challenges to online language education including low participation, difficulty in design (e.g. creating appropriate scaffolding), a lack of interaction, and an unbalanced focus on reading and writing skills (Andrade & Bunker, 2009; Hampel & Pleines, 2013). In spite of these challenges, there are also many benefits to teaching languages online. Lai and Li (2011) report that classroom-based language instruction presents many space and time-bound limitations that, in part, can be addressed using technology, for example: passive learning style, large class sizes, mixed proficiency levels in the classroom, and learner use of their mother language (L1). Further, Blake (2013) argues that the number of time-on-task hours (600 – 1000+ hours) necessary to gain second language proficiency is rarely achievable within the contact hours feasible in classroom-based instruction. Blake argues that technology use has the potential to create economical and efficient opportunities for contact with the second language that will lead to proficiency gains. For example, behaviors associated with language acquisition, such as negotiation of meaning, recasting based on feedback from an interlocutor, and conversation maintenance strategies have been observed in video conferencing and synchronous text-based chat sessions (Jauregi & Bañados, 2008; Peterson, 2008). Further, learners are able to engage in these effective language-learning activities without a commute to a physical campus, lowering the overall time and resource cost. Lai and Li also assert technology can provide a “natural and authentic venue” for implementing language learning (p. 499). For example, social media promises to be an authentic space for learners to engage as users (rather than learners) in an informal target language community (Sockett & Toffoli, 2012). Research on the use of voice-based computer mediated communication (CMC) has indicated its potential for improving pronunciation and increasing social presence (Bueno-Alastuey, 2010; Yaneske & Oates, 2011) Although the research is conflicting, lowered anxiety, an important factor in language acquisition, has been correlated with the use of synchronous and asynchronous CMC in language learning (Blake, 2013; Jauregi & Bañados, 2008; Ko, 2011; Lai & Li, 2011; Peterson, 2008; Yaneske & Oates, 2011).

Meeting 21st Century Learners Needs

In many ways, what learners need for the twenty-first century world does not align well with the generalized characteristics of the current generation of students (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007; Levine & Dean, 2012). For example, employers desire prospective employees who have global knowledge and intercultural competence, but the learners coming into the university today

usually lack a world knowledge base (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007, Levine & Dean, 2012). Further, businesses seek candidates who are innovative and flexible, but the current generation of college students tend to be rule-followers and to avoid risk-taking (Levine & Dean, 2012). These learners also tend to demand more effective technology use in the classroom (Levine & Dean, 2012). Engaging learners in a quality online language learning experience fulfills learner's demand for effective technology use, allows learners to develop global competence by experiencing cultures other than their own, and holds the potential to develop healthy risk-taking skills, as language learners often have to take risks in target language production.

Theoretical, Pedagogical, and Technological Considerations

Part of the online language educator's challenge, then, is to design curriculum with 21st Century skills, learner characteristics, and effective language learning in mind. When embarking on the design of any online course, it is tempting to first begin by choosing the technology; however, Clark (2012) asserts that content and methodology, rather than media (which alone has not been found to have a significant learning effect), are more important factors in learning. It follows that establishing a theoretical foundation and strong pedagogical approach is an essential first step in any course design. The TPACK model of technology use in education asserts that the complex interactions of pedagogical, content, and technological knowledge guide decisions about curriculum, course design, and delivery (Koehler, Mishra, & Cain, 2013). These three inter-related areas of knowledge are addressed in the design of SPAN 210W. Several theoretical frameworks and pedagogical approaches informed course design including: student-centered teaching, self-regulatory learning, input hypothesis, output hypothesis, and interaction theory. Past CALL research informed the selection of technology, particularly choices regarding the use of synchronous and asynchronous CMC in the design 210W. Decisions regarding the content knowledge included in SPAN 210W are addressed in the sections Course Outcomes and Curriculum and Organization.

Student-Centered Teaching

Traditional, teacher-centered models are not highly effective in responding to 21st Century demands such as problem solving, creativity, and teamwork (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007). In contrast, student-centered approaches have the potential to promote these skills, as they place more responsibility on the learner and promote active learning, aligning well with online language education in which the learners are typically more autonomous (Bown, 2009; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). Doyle (2011) explains learner-centered approaches as simply: "The one that does the work does the learning" (p. 7). Doyle asserts that student-centered teaching is supported by neuroscience in that student-centered tasks promote activity in the pleasure center of the brain, encouraging students to repeat the learning behavior. A central aspect of student-centered teaching is a role shift from teacher-as-lecturer to teacher-as-

facilitator, allowing the student to do the work of learning guided by a facilitator (Doyle, 2011; Simonson, et al., 2012). From the perspective of student-centered teaching, online course design should place the student in this active learning role while the teacher serves as guide, providing feedback and helping learners gauge their own learning. In the case of SPAN 210W, the classroom-based instruction was adapted to the online environment using student-centered approaches. For example, learners were expected to engage in scaffolded learning activities individually and respond to instructor feedback designed to guide improvement. The learners are relied upon to “do” their own learning, which can be an effective education practice, but one that can also pose challenges to students accustomed to a passive learning style.

Self-Regulatory Learning

Self-regulation refers to the processes that allow learners to monitor their thoughts and behaviors and enact strategies to accomplish a goal, and it has been studied across a wide range of disciplines (Zimmerman, 2005). In the context of education, self-regulated learning (SRL) relates to the processes learners use to monitor and direct learning activities to meet academic goals (Rowe & Rafferty, 2013). Because SRL is a multifaceted construct that includes motivational, cognitive, and metacognitive factors, SRL is an effective model for describing the complexity of factors that contribute to distance language learning success (Andrade & Bunker, 2009; Ranalli, 2012). Past research has indicated that students who have higher levels of self-regulation are more academically successful (measured by course grade or performance in a particular academic task) than those who are lower self-regulators and furthermore, SRL interventions (i.e. embedding reflective prompts, skills training) has the potential to improve academic performance (Andrade & Bunker, 2009; Bergamin, Werlen, & Seigenthaler, 2012; Çelik, Arkin, & Sabriler, 2012; Chang, 2007; Ranalli, 2012; Rowe & Rafferty, 2013). Some SRL processes include setting goals, effective time management, seeking help, self-reflection, regulation of feedback, monitoring, and modifying and employing learning strategies (Rowe & Rafferty, 2013). In the case of SPAN 210W, SRL prompts and training helped promote self-regulation, especially important for learners accustomed to passive learning. A highly structured design and frequent interaction (weekly, in the case of 210W) also supported self-regulation and learner autonomy (Andrade & Bunker, 2009). See “Course Design” for a detailed description of implementation.

Input, Output, and Interaction

Language learning theory indicates that both comprehensible input and output are important to second language acquisition (SLA) (Krashen, 2008; Long, 1996; Swain, 2005). The comprehensible input hypothesis, developed from a psycholinguistic perspective (i.e. language learning occurs exclusively within the mind of the learner), states that we acquire language by being able to understand what is read and heard (Krashen, 2008). Output hypothesis, stemming from the

sociocultural perspective (i.e. language learning occurs as an internalization of collective behaviors through interaction with others and the environment), states that the act of second language production under certain conditions is the language learning process itself (Swain, 2005). Interaction theory posits that neither internal nor external processes alone can account for language learning, and asserts that it is more likely that a complex interaction of these factors (input and output; psycholinguistic and sociocultural) accounts for SLA (Long, 1996). Interaction theory emphasizes the need for interactive and communicative activities that provide comprehensible input and opportunities for output during which “negotiation for meaning” occurs (Long, 1996, p. 414, emphasis theirs). The curriculum designed for 210W attempted to maximize the opportunities for exposure to comprehensible input and interaction (including opportunities for output and negotiation of meaning) in the target language. For instance, both asynchronous and synchronous voice-based interaction was included in the initial course design. See the section on “Course Design” for a detailed description of design and development of communicative and interactive activities in SPAN 210W.

Virtual Learning Environment

A virtual learning environment (VLE) refers to the website or learning management system (e.g. Moodle, Desire2Learn, Blackboard) that an instructor uses as a classroom space in online language learning. These systems offer a wide range of both synchronous (e.g. text chat or audio conferencing) and asynchronous (e.g. text discussion boards, blogs) technology tools. In many VLEs, external web-based tools can be integrated within the system. In the case of SPAN 210W, course design used Desire2Learn, an enterprise VLE adopted university wide. Desire2Learn offers various technology tool options for instruction: synchronous text chat, quiz and survey functions, asynchronous discussion boards, blogs, and a content repository for sharing files, videos, and other content. Desire2Learn also has a number of course management tools: a drop box for electronic file submission, customizable widgets and homepage, a checklists function, a newsfeed, and a grade book. The number of technology tools available for use within a single VLE such as Desire2Learn as well as the numerous web-based tools available, makes choosing among them a challenge.

Asynchronous tools.

Benefits. One of the principal advantages of asynchronous media is that it allows anytime, anyplace access to course materials and activities (Simonson, et al., 2012). Specifically, voice-based asynchronous CMC provides advantages such as flexibility in pacing, relaxed time pressure for response, reduced learning anxiety, and has the potential to improve pronunciation (Gleason & Suvorov, 2012; Yaneske & Oates, 2012). Text-based asynchronous CMC may promote more accurate, complex, and lengthier second language production than synchronous CMC (Lai & Li, 2011). Further, there is evidence to suggest that text-based

asynchronous CMC is an “accessible and a non-face threatening” way to tackle challenging topics, and can promote learner-centered inquiry and socialization among learners (Kosunen, 2009, p. 348; Saritas, 2008).

Drawbacks. Although convenience is maximized for the learner using asynchronous CMC, if a question arises during study, feedback from the instructor may be delayed (sometimes for days), thwarting the learner’s efforts (Simonson, et al., 2012). Low participation and social loafing, correlated with a lack of facilitator participation, has also been associated with asynchronous CMC (Hampel & Pleines, 2013; Kosunen; Saritas). In order to counter some of the challenges to using asynchronous CMC in SPAN 210W, a clear policy on when learners could expect feedback was developed and participation in the VLE-based asynchronous discussion was required (graded) which, at least anecdotally, seemed to promote engagement.

Asynchronous CMC and 210W. Use of asynchronous CMC aligns with the learning outcomes of SPAN 210W regarding accuracy and complexity of language production in both written and oral production. The design of SPAN 210W included use of VLE-based asynchronous text-discussion board and quiz functions as well as additional asynchronous tools such as Screencast-o-matic and YouTube and an asynchronous online workbook (iLrn Advance) developed by the publisher. See the Course Design section for a discussion on the implementation of these tools.

Synchronous tools.

Benefits. Synchronous media has been associated with negotiation of meaning interactions (beneficial to acquisition) and production of language that is similar to face-to-face discourse; audio conferencing even more so than text chat (Bueno-Alastuey, 2010; Lai & Li, 2011; Peterson, 2010). Other potential advantages of synchronous CMC include the promotion of a sense of social presence and the development of intercultural competency (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2011; Jauregi & Bañados, 2008; Ko, 2012). Hampel and Stickler (2012) in their study of multi-modal videoconferencing found that new patterns of communication emerged in the multimodal environment, such as the combined use of the audio and text modes to contribute to the conversation without interrupting the speaker, for example, providing feedback or requesting clarification. These unique functionalities meant participants had “multiple modes for making meaning” and interacting with the target language (Hampel & Stickler, 2012, p. 134).

Drawbacks. However, factors such as technical difficulties, a lack of visual cues in text-based synchronous CMC, or pressure to perform may lead to negative perceptions, higher learner anxiety, and lowered motivation (Bueno-Alastuey, 2010; Ko, 2012; Hampel & Stickler, 2012; Stickler & Hampel, 2010). Further, lack of knowledge in necessary computer skills, such as typing accuracy and speed, in text-based synchronous CMC could limit participation (Ko, 2012). Synchronous CMC also requires a designated time and day. That can present a time management challenge for distance learners that are balancing home, work, and educational pursuits.

Synchronous CMC and 210W. Despite these challenges, synchronous tools align with the learning outcomes of SPAN 210W related to spontaneous language production (the “conversation” in Composition and Conversation). Multi-modal video conferencing (Anymeeting.com, Skype) was chosen to supplement the tools available in the VLE to promote face-to-face like discourse, social presence, and provide multiple opportunities for engagement in the target language. A discussion of how this was designed and implemented can be found in the section on Course Design.

Course Learning Outcomes

After the theoretical foundation and pedagogical approach had been established, course outcomes were written that would later guide curriculum development. The course outcomes for SPAN 210W were developed from Minnesota State University, Mankato standards for General Education Category 8: Global Perspectives and Writing Intensive (“W”) courses. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities were also central in learning outcome development. The outcomes were generated from a competency-based perspective, focusing on what the students would be able to do by the end of the course (Pérez Cañado, 2013). As the curriculum for each weekly unit was created, module-level objectives were written and alignment with the course level objectives was assured. See Table 1 on the next page for an example of module- and course-level outcome alignment.

Course Design

Composition and Conversation (210W) was designed around theoretical, pedagogical, and research-based frameworks in second language acquisition and distance learning such as student-centered teaching, self-regulatory learning, input hypothesis, output hypothesis, and interaction theories. The design was also informed by the research-based evaluation rubric for online and hybrid courses developed by Quality Matters. The most recent edition of the Quality Matters Rubric for Higher Education is based on a review of 21 peer-reviewed journals and five academic databases journals that publish educational and e-learning research (Shattuck, Freise, Lalla, Mickalson, Simunich, & Wang, 2013). The rubric focuses exclusively on course design, is non-prescriptive, and generalized to apply to a wide range of subject matters. In addition to the general course design elements described by the Quality Matters rubric, an effective and quality online language course founded in second language acquisition methodology and theory must include three central considerations, immersion, interaction, and competency-based activities.

Designing Immersion

Carefully designed immersion experiences are essential to language learning, as they can provide an ample source of comprehensible input necessary for SLA

Table 1. Alignment of course learning objectives and module one learning objectives

General Course Outcomes	Specific Course Outcomes	Module One Outcomes
1. You will be able to demonstrate intermediate language proficiency.	1.a. You will be able to demonstrate an increase in vocabulary in Spanish.	1. You will be able to... recognize vocabulary related to the topic of stereotypes.
	1.b. You will be able to express opinions, pose a variety of questions, and answer questions with direct uncomplicated responses in Spanish.	2. Narrate personal experiences and opinions, describe yourself and others, ask and respond to questions in Spanish, especially in the present tense.
	1.c. You will be able to apply understanding of Spanish grammar, spelling and punctuation norms.	3. Apply understanding of Spanish grammar and spelling norms in written and spoken Spanish, particularly the present tense.
	1.d. You will be able to produce written and oral Spanish in major time frames with some breakdown in understanding.	2. Narrate personal experiences and opinions, describe yourself and others, ask and respond to questions in Spanish, especially in the present tense.
	1.e. You will be able to show general, but not detailed, understanding of written and oral Spanish.	4. Demonstrate understanding of a text and a video regarding the topic of stereotypes in Spanish.
2. You will fulfill the “W”: Writing Intensive requirement of the course.	2.a. You will be able to engage in effective writing processes, including the ability to generate ideas, draft, revise, format and edit your own work	-
	2.b. You will be able to use writing to learn.	2. Narrate personal experiences and opinions, describe yourself and others, ask and respond to questions in Spanish, especially in the present tense.
	2.c. You will be able to produce appropriate texts for an intended audience, purpose and context.	-
	2.d. You will be able to locate, evaluate, analyze and use source material in your writing.	5. Apply understanding of MLA format and citation.
3. You will fulfill the General Education Category 8: Global Perspectives requirement of the course.	3.a. You will be able to describe and compare and contrast political, social, economic, cultural and humanistic elements.	-
	3.b. You will be able to demonstrate knowledge of cultural, social, religious and linguistic differences.	6. Discuss stereotypes and cultural norms.
	3.c. You will be able to analyze specific international problems and illustrate the cultural, social, economic, political and religious differences that affect their solution.	-

(Krashen, 2008). SPAN 210W is an immersive course, in that all of the learning activities and content are exclusively in Spanish (the target language) with the following exceptions. Neither the university-wide VLE nor the publisher's workbook allow for changes in the navigation language, so all of the pre-set navigation titles and functions were in English. Furthermore, because the course was online and the instructor was not present to quickly resolve questions regarding course format or organization, select organizational activities in the first three weekly units such as video overviews, syllabus, course and unit schedules, unit study plans, and instructions for the first three weeks of the course were in English (most learners' first language). In the following two weeks of the course, only instructions and organizational activities, such as assignment checklists, were in English. The content and learning activities, such as videoconferencing, were in Spanish. After the first three weeks of the course, all course activities (both organizational and learning) were presented entirely in Spanish. The organization, format, and instruction language of the course was mirrored in each unit so that when learners entered the fourth week of the course (full immersion) they could more easily interpret instructions and navigate through the course based on their previous exposure.

Designing Interaction

According to interaction hypothesis, language learners must have opportunities to receive input, produce in the target language, and negotiate meaning in order to promote SLA (Long, 1996). Interaction, particularly in synchronous CMC, can also promote social presence and a sense of belonging that is an essential component in rich learning experiences (Pachler & Daly, 2011; Ko, 2012). SPAN 210W was designed for instructor-learner and learner-learner interaction through asynchronous discussion boards (text and voice) and synchronous conversation (video conferencing). Although artificial and temporally disjointed, this asynchronous interaction was designed to lower the pressure to perform (by giving ample time to post and respond; one week per discussion), promote practice in formulating questions, and assure learners participated relatively equally in the dialogue. Grammatical, phonological, and orthographical accuracy were a secondary focus in asynchronous discussions. The videoconferences were designed to promote spontaneous language production and listening comprehension skills. Emphasis was placed on equal participation, peer-to-peer interaction, and communication, whereas error correction was minimal and only implemented when meaning was obscured.

Designing Competency-Based Instruction

Competency-based language instruction focuses on aptitudes the learner can demonstrate or perform, simply put—knowledge, skills, and behaviors students should have at the end of a course (Pérez Cañado, 2013). SPAN 210W is a competency-based course. The course- and unit-level learning outcomes are designed to be concrete and measurable behaviors, skills, or knowledge. The course activities are designed with

these competencies in mind. For example, course outcome 3.a. states, “You will be able to describe and compare and contrast political, social, economic, cultural and humanistic elements.” The module-level learning outcome associated with the first composition states, “You will be able to compose a composition that describes and compares and contrasts a Spanish or Latin American cultural tradition with your own.” The first composition asks students to describe and compare and contrast a Spanish or Latin American holiday with their own cultural practices and traditions. Based on what is written, it will be clear if learners have met their module-level objective and have, in part, fulfilled the aligning course level objective. All learning activities were designed to align with one or more module-level competencies (outcomes) in this way. See Table 2 for an outline of the general alignment between course learning activities and learning outcomes.

Table 2. Alignment of course outcomes and learning activities

General Course Outcomes	Detailed Course Outcomes	Learning Activities
1. You will be able to demonstrate intermediate language proficiency.	1.a. You will be able to demonstrate an increase in vocabulary in Spanish.	Compositions, <i>Diario</i> (Journal) Activities, iLrn Advance (publisher’s online workbook)
	1.b. You will be able to express opinions, pose a variety of questions, and answer questions with direct uncomplicated responses in Spanish.	Conversations (asynchronous and synchronous, text and voice based), <i>Diario</i> Activities
	1.c. You will be able to apply understanding of Spanish grammar, spelling and punctuation norms.	Compositions, <i>Diario</i> Activities Conversations
	1.d. You will be able to produce written and oral Spanish in major time frames with some breakdown in understanding.	Compositions, <i>Diario</i> Activities Conversations
	1.e. You will be able to show general, but not detailed, understanding of written and oral Spanish.	Compositions, Conversations, <i>Diario</i> Activities, iLrn Advance, Quiz Activities
2. You will fulfill the “W”: Writing Intensive requirement of the course.	2.a. You will be able to engage in effective writing processes, including the ability to generate ideas, draft, revise, format and edit your own work	Compositions, <i>Diario</i> Activities
	2.b. You will be able to use writing to learn.	Compositions, <i>Diario</i> Activities
	2.c. You will be able to produce appropriate texts for an intended audience, purpose and context.	Compositions
	2.d. You will be able to locate, evaluate, analyze and use source material in your writing.	Compositions
3. You will fulfill the General Education Category 8: Global Perspectives requirement of the course.	3.a. You will be able to describe and compare and contrast political, social, economic, cultural and humanistic elements.	Compositions, Conversations, <i>Diario</i> Activities, iLrn Advance
	3.b. You will be able to demonstrate knowledge of cultural, social, religious and linguistic differences.	Compositions, Conversations, <i>Diario</i> Activities, iLrn Advance
	3.c. You will be able to analyze specific international problems and illustrate the cultural, social, economic, political and religious differences that affect their solution.	Compositions

Online Learning: Preparation and Support

A number of design strategies prepared and supported learners. These strategies were designed to teach and promote SRL behaviors and were embedded into the course as part of the weekly activities.

Some organizational strategies used to support online learners included using video guided tours or overviews. For example in the first week of the course, a “Course Tour” video guided learners through the different functions they would be using in the VLE as part of the week’s activities. In each of the next two weeks of the course, a video guide walked learners step-by-step through the learning activities for the week. Because the structure, instructions, and organization remained relatively constant throughout the course, additional video guides were unnecessary after the initial few weeks of the course. Each week an assignment checklist was also included to help learners monitor their progress.

The course curriculum also contained embedded self-regulation training and prompts. For example in the first week of the course, the *diario* (journal) activities served a training function that promoted SRL behaviors, focusing specifically on time management and language learning strategies. As a general introduction, students reviewed Minnesota State University, Mankato technical requirements and skills necessary for online learning. Learners watched a short informational video on time management and created their own time management plan for the next week. Time management was an important focus because one of the most frequently cited reasons for failing to complete an online course is falling behind and not being able to catch up (Fetzner, 2013). Students also went to a website (e.g. StudySpanish.com/topten_tips.htm) with a list of cognitive, affective, and behavioral language learning strategies, chose three, and reflected on how they might be beneficial in 210W. In this way, even low self-regulating learners would be exposed to some techniques for success in an online language-learning course. Throughout the course, learners reflected on their language learning strategies (with a focus on conversation) after each weekly real-time conversation. See Table 3 for the list of reflection prompts used.

Table 3. Instructions for Real-Time Conversation Reflection

1. **Summary.** Give a brief summary (3 sentences) regarding what you found out or learned during your conversation.
2. **Evaluate.** Indicate your level of comfort with conversation this week:
 - 1 - The conversation was very challenging and I was very nervous.
 - 2 - The conversation was somewhat challenging and I was nervous.
 - 3 - The conversation was not challenging nor was it too easy and I was not nervous at all.
 - 4 - The conversation was somewhat easy, and I was mostly relaxed.
 - 5 - The conversation was very easy and I was relaxed the whole time.

Answer: Why do you think you felt the way you did?
3. **Analyze.** Identify three words or phrases you had trouble with or learned during the conversation. Write their definition or translation here.
4. **Reflect.** State one thing that was a challenge and one thing that was easy for you. Answer: What do you think you could do in order to feel more comfortable or feel more successful in the next conversation? What strategies can you use next time? Mention three specific things.

Note. The instructions were provided to students in Spanish (the target language), they have been translated here.

Taking time for socialization (e.g. providing opportunities for quality communication and collaboration) is important for creating a sense of belonging that fosters meaningful learning (Pachler & Daly, 2011). Thus, during the first week of the course, the text discussion served as a space for getting to know each other. The discussion prompted learners to share some information about themselves in Spanish. The instructor's introduction served as a model for the activity as well as a way for learners to get acquainted with their teacher. The instructor included a photo in the self-introduction and encouraged, but did not require learners to do so as well. An asynchronous discussion forum was also created as a place for learners to ask (and respond) to questions related to the course or to interact with their classmates.

Curriculum and Organization

The curriculum for SPAN 210W was based around the textbook *Senderos: Comunicación y conversación en español* (Pathways: Communication and conversation in Spanish) published by Heinle Cengage Learning (Doutrich & Rivera-Hernández, 2013). The course curriculum includes seven of the eight chapters in the text. Themes explored (by chapter) included: stereotypes and diversity, the changing notion of family, environment and consumerism, immigration, human rights and indigenous populations, technology, and health and eating habits, all framed within the context of the Hispanic world. The text was chosen based on the variety of topics and their pertinence to building language skills and intercultural competence essential to success in a globalized, quickly evolving world.

SPAN 210W was divided into weekly units with weekly deadlines for all assignments. Each week was designed with the same structure and organization to support SRL and minimize confusion. These components were found under each week's module in the Content section in the VLE: (1) study plan, (2) checklist, (3) *diario* (journal) activities (4) asynchronous text and voice conversation, (5) real-time conversation (6) compositions and composition revisions, (7) iLrn Advance, (8) quiz learning activity, and (9) an optional music or film exploratory. Occasionally, these activities varied from week-to-week. For example, during certain weeks a vocabulary review activity (in Quizlet.com) was included and in other weeks there was no composition activity. Some of these components, such as the study plan and checklist, served an organizational function to promote SRL. The other learning activities (compositions, conversations, *diarios*, iLrn Advance, and quiz activities) contributed to one or more course outcomes. See Table 4 on the next page for a list of organizational and learning activities through week four.

Study plan. The study plan included a brief introduction to the course work of the week, indicated how much time students should plan to spend on work that week, gave a due date, outlined the materials needed that week, and provided a list of the weekly learning outcomes. A suggested weekly homework schedule was also provided to support time management.

Checklists. The checklist is a feature in the VLE that allows learners to digitally check off items as they complete them. Each week a list of the required course

Table 4. Fall 2013 SPAN 210W Organizational and Learning Activities through Week Four

Week	Dates	Activities	
		Organizational Activities	Learning Activities
Orientation Week	28 August – 1 September	Course Video Tour, Study Plan, Checklist, Tutorial Video for Quiz Function, Syllabus Scavenger Hunt Quiz, Registration in iLrn Advance	<i>Diario</i> Activities, Text Conversation: Meet your instructor and self-introduction
Week 1	2 September – 8 September	Week Overview Video, Study Plan, Checklist	<i>Diario</i> Activities, Text Conversation, Real-Time Conversation: Complete the availability poll, Quiz: MLA Citation & Format, iLrn Advance
Week 2	9 September – 15 September	Week Overview Video, Study Plan, Checklist	Vocabulary Review Activity, <i>Diario</i> Activities, Text Conversation, Real-Time Conversation: First meeting, Composition 1, iLrn Advance
Week 3	16 September – 22 September	Study Plan, Checklist	<i>Diario</i> Activities, Text Conversation, Real-Time Conversation, Quiz: Revising a Composition, Composition 1 Revision, iLrn Advance
Week 4	23 September – 29 September	Study Plan, Checklist	Vocabulary Review Activity, <i>Diario</i> Activities, Text Conversation, Real-Time Conversation, Quiz: Connector Words for Composition, iLrn Advance

work was provided to students so they could easily monitor their own progress throughout the week.

***Diario* activities.** These activities were designed to address learning outcomes regarding accuracy of language production, vocabulary building, writing skills, and occasionally global knowledge. The *diario* activities included two components, a brief instructional video and a written assignment. The instructional videos were instructor created presentations (using PowerPoint) that corresponded to the vocabulary or grammatical lesson of the week. The narrated videos were created with Screencast-o-matic, uploaded to YouTube, and then embedded into the VLE. The instructional videos also included comprehension checks that allowed learners to gauge their understanding. The written *diario* assignment included three or four written exercises (typically from the textbook) that required the

learner to respond in complete sentences to questions or writing prompts related to the material covered in the video, or to the theme of the unit.

Text and voice conversation. These conversations were designed to address learning outcomes related to accuracy and comprehensibility of both written and oral language production as well as global knowledge. The text and voice conversations were asynchronous discussions created in the VLE discussion board. Learners were provided with a conversation prompt or a list of questions and were asked to create an initial post. The conversation prompts typically focused on giving an opinion about a thematic topic in order to stimulate interaction. Learners were required (graded) to respond to two other classmates' posts with a comment and a question, and answer at least two questions posed to them by classmates. These conversations were text-only the first four weeks of the course to allow learners to become accustomed to the discussion board procedure. The remaining weeks incorporated voice posts. Learners created an initial post using Vocaroo.com and included either the link to their voice post or attached an .mp3 file to the discussion post. The procedure otherwise remained the same.

Real-time conversation. The real-time conversations addressed course competencies related to spontaneous oral production and interpreting spoken Spanish. These conversations were synchronous discussions hosted in a videoconferencing site and led by the instructor or a teaching assistant. The VLE discussion board served as the springboard for these meetings. A list of questions or conversation prompts, instructions for access to video conferencing, and a reflection assignment were available in the VLE discussion board.

Compositions. The compositions (each about two or two and a half pages long) addressed several learning outcomes, including: developing global knowledge, proficiency in written Spanish, and general effective writing skills such as planning, organizing, revising, and citing sources. The topics of the compositions are as follows:

1. Describing, comparing and contrasting a Spanish or Latin American holiday with your own countries holiday.
2. Defining and describing an environmental problem, identifying results and consequences, and examining the potential solutions across cultures and societies.
3. Defining privacy across cultures, identifying challenges to maintaining privacy in the digital age, and analyzing actions taken by various countries to protect privacy.
4. Discussing globalization, identifying and analyzing the benefits, drawbacks and impacts of globalization.

Each composition cycle involved three steps: (1) the student wrote, revised, and submitted the composition, (2) the instructor graded and gave feedback on the composition, and (3) the student revised and re-submitted the composition based on their instructor's feedback. The cycle for each composition was two weeks long: one week to compose and submit and a second week to revise based on instructor feedback. A correction code, indicating grammatical and orthographical errors

as well as omissions, gave learners the opportunity to notice their writing errors with the help of scaffolding provided by the code. Errors relating to content, organization, or format were inserted as comments in the document. Learners were provided a copy of the correction code guide to assist them in revisions.

iLrn Advance. The iLrn Advance exercises from the publisher's workbook addressed learning outcomes related to vocabulary building, grammar use, and interpretation of spoken and written Spanish. The VLE served as a jumping off point for iLrn Advance exercises. A written document within each week's module outlined the exercises due on iLrn Advance and directed learners to the website for completion.

Quiz activities. The quiz activities were created to primarily address course learning outcomes related to writing skills and accuracy in written Spanish. Rather than tests, the quiz activities (multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, true/false, short and long answer questions) were available an unlimited number of times to allow learners multiple opportunities to review and apply their knowledge. The quiz activities included topics such as MLA format and citation, writing processes, connector words for composition in Spanish, composition revision, rules of accenting and their connection to pronunciation, and review of particularly challenging vocabulary or grammatical structures, among other topics.

Optional activities. The optional activities were based on music or film from the Spanish-speaking world. These activities related in some way to the topic of their respective units. They included reading biographies of artists, directors, and actors, listening to music with lyrics, watching film trailers, and reflecting on the information presented. These activities were designed to give learners an opportunity to expand on the theme of that particular unit and build cultural knowledge.

Assessing Design

After the first delivery of SPAN 210W in Fall 2013, the online course design was informally and formally assessed. The assessments included a formal peer-review process, student evaluations of the course, assessment of course outcomes, and instructor reflection and notes.

Formally, a Quality Matters peer review team evaluated and certified SPAN 210W as a quality course design in February of 2014. In a formal Quality Matters review, three reviewers evaluated the course, one of whom is a subject matter expert. Reviewers assessed whether the design met the Quality Matters standards for quality course design outlined in the rubric at the 85% level or better (Quality Matters Program). The reviewers looked at eight general standards related to general design elements that are important for student success, for example: course overview and introduction, learning objectives, assessment, instructional materials, course activities and learner interaction, navigation and technology, student support services, and accessibility (Quality Matters Program).

A non-anonymous mid-term survey and an anonymous end-of-semester course evaluation survey were conducted to gather learners' perspectives on various aspects of the course. The end-of-semester evaluation was a standardized

evaluation for online courses provided by the university. At mid-term, learners (n=5) expressed difficulty in meeting multiple deadlines a week and with uneven distribution of course work. For example, one learner wrote: "I think having less of a load of coursework for each week. Maybe don't assign a diario on the weeks that compositions are due. Or perhaps only do one or two iLrn Advance activities a week." In general, learners responded positively to the course in the mid-term evaluation, for instance, many mentioned they enjoyed the opportunities for interaction and the quality of feedback from the instructor.

On the end-of-semester evaluation, students were asked to evaluate: the course as a whole, grading techniques, instructor's contributions, use of technology, interaction and discussion, and strengths and weakness of the course among other items. Responses on the final course evaluation (n=3) were generally positive with an average rating of 4.8 out of 5 (five is high, one is low) for all categories. Learners were also able to write in comments regarding the course, one learner wrote:

"I think the writing portion was incredibly beneficial. I have picked up on a lot more vocabulary (especially commonly used words) because I used them a lot in the papers that I wrote. It also helped to have discussions with students because you had to listen to what they were saying and understand what they were saying to be able to respond, and seeing the written words has really helped my translating and speaking skills in spanish [sic]."

One learner also wrote that they felt their mid-term suggestions had been incorporated in the course and that those changes had made the course more beneficial to their learning. Overall, learners found the systematic organization of the course, the opportunities for interaction, timely and quality feedback (usually within three days of the due date), weekly video overviews, the wide range of topics and assignments that helped build vocabulary, clear rubric and assessment techniques, and the flexible once a week deadline helpful. Other learners perceived the synchronous meeting time negatively, principally due to scheduling constraints or technical difficulties, while others mentioned it was difficult to find out how to start the course because some of the first week organizational activities were in Spanish.

Final oral exam scores, an ACTFL Modified Oral Proficiency Exam (MOPI) conducted by the instructor, and composition grades were examined to evaluate whether learners had met the outcomes of the course. Examination of the MOPI revealed that all learners in the Fall 2013 course had an oral proficiency score of intermediate-low or higher on the MOPI at the end of the semester, indicating they had likely met the learning outcomes for oral proficiency (n=6, one native speaking learner was excluded from this discussion). In this iteration of the course, there was no oral exam pre-test so it was not determined if this proficiency level was directly correlated with engagement in the course activities or due to previous experience or other factors. Evaluation of composition grades revealed a change from a class average of 83.86% on the first composition to an average of 87.86% on the final composition (n=7). All learners successfully completed (with a grade of C- or better) all five compositions and composition revisions and demonstrated a

grade improvement from the first to the last composition, indicating students had likely improved their writing skills and met the learning outcomes regarding the “W” requirement.

The instructor kept a log of reflections and notes based on observations and interactions with students. The log included information regarding a number of topics including organization, technology tools, activities, and course content. Changes to the course design were made based on this log of notes, feedback from learners, and the formal review team comments. Table 5 outlines the changes and rationale from the 2013 to the 2014 course.

Table 5. Rationale for Changes to Course Design Based on Formal and Informal Assessments

Original Course Design (2013)	Changes to Design (2014)	Rationale
Unsupervised peer-to-peer real-time discussions.	Real-time discussions are facilitated by an instructor or teaching assistant.	Informal feedback from learners indicated some felt lost during conversations and felt they couldn't rely on their peers to make sure they were making sense. Evidence that suggests non-native speaker (NNS-NNS) pairs may limit noticing of errors (Bueno-Alastuey, 2010).
5 Compositions	4 Compositions	The first cohort of SPAN 210W online wrote well over 10 pages (minimum requirement for “W” courses) with 5 compositions. The composition load was reduced as a result.
Anymeeting.com was used for videoconferencing.	Skype was used for videoconferencing.	Reports of technical difficulties using Anymeeting. Skype was chosen for its usability and reliability. Muting the microphone when not speaking and/or turning off the video feed to minimize audio disruptions was also implemented.
Text and Voice Conversations every week.	All but the very first week's text and voice conversations were eliminated.	Evidence to suggest that asynchronous boards are perceived as “tedious, isolating, and dry” (Capra, 2014, p. 112). Learners already engaged in conversational experience in synchronous CMC making the activity somewhat redundant.
Multiple due dates throughout the week (first half of the semester only).	A single deadline on Sundays (also implemented the second half of Fall 2013 semester).	Feedback from learners that indicated a single deadline would clarify responsibilities.
Multiple video activities in iLrn Advance per week.	A single video activity in iLrn Advance per week.	Feedback from learners regarding unbalanced workload on certain weeks of the course.
Some instructions and organizational activities in Spanish the first week of class.	All instructions and organizational activities in English the first week of class.	Learner feedback regarding confusion about how to start the course, particularly in regard to deciphering Spanish instructions.

A proposed ongoing assessment strategy for SPAN 210W includes continued analysis of oral exam and composition data, use of the mid-term and end-of-semester student course evaluations, re-evaluation of alignment between course learning objectives, unit learning objectives, and learning activities, and maintenance of an instructor log. In addition, a review of the literature (approximately every two years) regarding CALL, e-learning pedagogy, and SRL would help inform beneficial changes in design, technology tool use, and content. Possible questions for student evaluations might focus on general course design elements (such as proposed by Quality Matters), as well as aspects specifically regarding language learning. See Table 6 for a list of potential student evaluation questions.

Table 6. Possible Questions for a Student Evaluation of Online Language Courses

1. Thinking back to the first week of the course, was it clear how to begin the course and how to complete your activities? If so, what was the most helpful in making this clear? If not, what would have helped it be clearer?
2. Are the instructions for participation and how to complete course work clear? If so, why or how was it made clear? If not, what could help this be clearer to you?
3. Was it clear how you would be graded? Were the criteria for how your course work is evaluated clear? If so, what was the most useful in making it clear? If not, what could make this clearer?
4. Do you feel you have had many opportunities to measure your learning and progress in the course? What activities or feedback (like instructor comments, auto-graded exercises, quiz activities, discussions, etc.) have been most helpful for your learning?
5. Do you think that this course has been interactive and promoted active learning (learning by doing)? If so, what activities were the most helpful for this? If not, what do you think would help make the course more interactive or promote active learning better?
6. Do you think that the various tools and media used in the course were effective and engaging? If so, which were the most helpful (discussion boards, videoconferencing, etc.)? If not, what suggestions do you have for making this course more interactive or engaging?
7. Comment on the instructor's contribution to this course. Comment on your own contribution to your learning. Do you have any other suggestions for improving the course experience?

Note. These questions were modified from the mid-term course evaluation given to learners in the Fall 2013 cohort of SPAN 210W.

Conclusion

Going online presents multiple challenges to implementing effective second language pedagogy (Andrade & Bunker, 2009; Hampel & Pleines, 2013). However, the design and assessment of SPAN 210W has dispelled my doubts regarding the feasibility of teaching an immersive, interactive, and competency-based language course online. Based on their course work (compositions and oral exams), learners met the central language learning outcomes of the course. Whether meeting outcomes was directly correlated to the 210W course work or to other factors is unknown. Future research, such as the use of a pre- and post-course oral exams, the comparison of writing samples pre- and post-course, interviews with students regarding their learning, or analysis of course evaluation responses may provide evidence to clarify the factors that were most important in student learning. The course design and assessment experience has further underscored

the importance of maintaining an immersive, interactive environment that also is flexible and supports online learners' needs. Consistent organization, embedded support for SRL, once a week deadlines, clear and timely feedback, and requiring synchronous interaction have been identified as particularly important to online language learner success, specifically in SPAN 210W and in any online language course. Going online with language learning is a challenge. However in the case of SPAN 210W, these obstacles were overcome using pedagogically sound practices and instructional design principles.

The strategies proposed here have potential applications to the design of flipped or hybrid courses, in addition to other online language courses. In the simplest form, hybrid or flipped classroom models could replace the synchronous real-time conversation meeting described here with face-to-face class meetings. For example, at Minnesota State University, the face-to-face SPAN 210W meetings typically include a review of previous material, a brief content presentation, focused practice exercises, and conversation practice. In a hybrid and flipped classroom model, the *diario* instructional video and written exercises and iLrn Advance exercises described here would take the place of the content presentation and practice exercise portions of the traditional meeting and would be completed online, outside of the course meeting time. The weekly face-to-face course meeting(s) would include review, but primarily focus on conversation skill development.

Like the general enrollment trend in online higher education, enrollment in online Composition and Conversation has increased significantly even over the course of a single year (Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011). In Fall 2013, there were seven students enrolled in SPAN 210W, and in Fall 2014, there were 18 students enrolled. Several students in the current 2014 cohort virtually commute to videoconferencing conversations from other area cities and many others are busy student athletes or double majors. These learners, who perhaps otherwise would not be able to study languages, have been able to develop increasingly important global knowledge and intercultural competency because 210W was offered in a flexible and accessible medium in which learners were able to "Learn Languages, Explore Cultures," and "Transform [their] Lives." Therein lies the benefit of going online: access. Specifically, students have been able to increased access to quality learning and transformational experiences through the study of languages and cultures.

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