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Article

Developing Oral Proficiency in Spanish across Class Modalities

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Abstract

There is a growing demand for online course options, including classes offered and required in foreign languages. However, offering courses in multiple formats presents the challenges of developing high quality online courses and assessing the overall program effectiveness as students may elect to take the sequenced language acquisition courses in different formats. Thus, students complete the courses through various combinations of modes (i.e., all online, all face-to-face, some online/some F2F, transferring from another university or after successfully completing a placement exam). The purpose of this study was to examine a second language program offering both seated and online Spanish language acquisition classes at a small regional campus in the Midwest. Oral proficiency was tested using the Pearson Versant Test for Spanish and students' (n=108) scores were then compared to the ACTFL established benchmarks after one and two years of language study. In this study 42% met or exceeded the first year overall oral proficiency benchmark of Intermediate-Low and 27.5% met or exceeded the second year overall benchmark of Intermediate-Mid. These results suggest online Spanish course options can be an effective mode for students to meet oral proficiency benchmarks when programs require asynchronous and synchronous oral production, and provide speaking practice opportunities. However, additional research in this area is needed to better understand why some students are not meeting the benchmark.

KEYWORDS: ORAL PROFICIENCY, SPANISH, ONLINE LEARNING, BENCHMARKS

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Introduction

Enrollment in online post-secondary programs increased annually for 13 consecutive years in the United States (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016). Despite the growing demand and the fact that many studies have compared the educational outcomes of online instruction to face-to-face modalities and found them to be either equivalent or superior (Angiello, 2010; Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008), many faculty members are still reluctant to offer classes in the online platform. Allen et al., (2016) report that only 29.1% of faculty regard online learning as a viable means of instruction. Furthermore, while employers reacted positively to the flexibility (Astani & Ready, 2010), they expressed some uncertainty about hiring graduates from online universities (Tabatabaei & Gardiner, 2012; Vukelic & Pogarcic, 2011). However, these studies did not distinguish between traditional universities that may also offer online coursework/degree programs and for-profit institutions (Fogle & Elliott, 2013).

Foreign language, regarded as a more difficult discipline to adapt, is less frequently taught online (Allen et al., 2016). All online course offerings are increasing in the United States, but language education is predicted to grow 9% by 2021 (Technavio, 2016). Therefore identifying and assessing effective strategies for teaching foreign language online is critical.

The current study suggests curriculum design and development of an online (OL) task force made of faculty, staff, course assistants, administrative support, and a third party to assess pedagogical effectiveness, provide a viable way to incorporate effective OL second language acquisition courses into a Foreign Language program. Institutions attempting to offer OL language classes are faced with unique challenges including: (1) a need for administrative support, (2) resources to fund the task force, (3) access to a third party assessment to measure proficiency, as well as (4) obstacles associated with transient student populations. Spanish is the focus of this study because it has the greatest enrollment nationally; since 1995 in the United States its enrollment exceeded that of all other languages combined, excluding English (Goldberg, Looney, & Lusin, 2015).

Oral Proficiency through Online Instruction

Students are more active in the second language (L2) with a learner-centered approach (Hauck & Stickler, 2006); there is less "top-down" instruction and increased student production of L2 (Bayle & Youngs, 2013); and online tools can also increase confidence and equalize participation between students (Satar & Özdener, 2008; Yanguas, 2010). Online tools, such as asynchronous recording can improve pronunciation skills (Carey, 2004; Tanner & Landing, 2009) and syntactic complexity and accuracy (Guillén & Blake, 2016).

Finally, no significant differences for oral proficiency were found between online and face-to-face students (Blake, Wilson, Cetto, & Pardo-Ballester, 2008). But, much of the past research comes from hybrid or face-to-face (F2F) courses that use Computer Aided Language Learning (CALL) technologies (Lee, 2016). Currently, research examining programs where students complete course requirements in different modes (e.g., F2F and online, transfer in from another university) is lacking. Given the new paradigm of higher education in the UnitedStates, where 31.6% of all students now take at least one distance education course and roughly half of those categorized as "distance students" take a mix of instructional modes (Allen et al., 2016), determining whether students are meeting established standards is essential.

The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) suggests the Intermediate-Low (IL) benchmark for students after one year of college study (CARLA, 2015). IL students manage uncomplicated communicative tasks, straightforward social situations, and basic discourse related to themselves and their families. With pauses and self-correction they can discuss daily routines and their likes and dislikes as well as meet simple needs, such as ordering in a restaurant or shopping in a store. They are largely reactive, but can create with language and recombine known elements into short sentences.

Between 400 and 600 hours of instruction, generally acquired after two years of college language courses, is required to meet speaking benchmarks between IL and Intermediate-Mid (IM) (Ohio Department of Education, 2012). IM students can navigate straightforward tasks, sustain conversations related to self, physical and social needs, and ask questions. Other researchers agree, IM is an appropriate benchmark after two years of study (Goertler, Kraemer, & Schenker, 2016; Norris & Pfeiffer, 2003). Curricular design, regardless of modality, should ensure that students can reach these proficiency levels.

To promote proficiency, CALL can increase participation (Roed, 2003), individualize learning, increase learner autonomy in task-based instruction (Guth & Helm, 2010; Lai, 2013), and improve skill sets like pronunciation (Carey, 2004; Tanner & Landing, 2009). Adequate input, the opportunity to utilize L2 to communicate meaningfully, and receiving corrective feedback (Lightbown & Spada, 2013) are essential to an L2 learner's proficiency. Hampel (2010) found that language tasks should promote participation, interaction, and collaboration in order to best help students' language use in both meaning (idea) and form (grammar). An ideal task increases language awareness and interlanguage (Lee, 2008), evolving linguistic patterns and norms of a transitional phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. With this in mind, OL curriculum design here will concentrate on increasing audio input and oral output via task-based instruction.

Course Design and Management Strategies Tested in Current Study

Designing an online L2 proficiency-centered curriculum involves both asynchronous and synchronous oral/aural activities (Blake et al., 2008). Asynchronous activities can include listening to e-texts, videos, and songs. Instructors can incorporate asynchronous online homework with auditory components, like listening to a prompt and answering comprehension questions. Students can also record themselves in online homework to be evaluated based on pronunciation, fluency, grammar, and content.

The courses in this study (online and F2F) regularly required asynchronous aural/oral activities that involved listening and speaking exercises to evaluate comprehension. For example, simple prompts such as, "¿De dónde eres?" (Where are you from?) with a recorded or in person response of, "Soy de …" (I am from …) were incorporated. Recordings were also required as part of exams via a variety of pronunciation readings, dictation, and short answer oral responses for both OL and F2F classes. Guillén and Blake (2016) noted the increased quality in student output when using asynchronous oral activities. As proficiency increases, these activities can solicit more detail and require a longer discourse.

Synchronous oral activities require real time interaction between two or more speakers. They can be conducted one-on-one between professor and student, in student pairs or groups, or with an instructional assistant. Despite technological advances, Automated Speech Recognition software cannot yet mimic the kind of feedback an individual can offer (Guillén & Blake, 2016). An instructor can choose from multiple forms of feedback, from merely repeating a student's response with corrections to giving more details explaining grammar choices. Furthermore, Guillén and Blake (2016) argue that these synchronous online sessions can "evoke a more intensive speaking experience than sitting in class and responding only two or three times in an hour, which is the norm in most language classrooms" (p. 132). However, flexibility is the most common reason for a student's selection of OL coursework instead of F2F (Parsad, Lewis, & Tice, 2008). Requiring synchronicity in online courses mandates flexibility. Offering various time slots for attendance and considering different time zones can help accommodate an online student's needs.

In the OL courses tested here, students attended live meetings through Skype, Google Hangouts, or Zoom for small group sessions with the instructor and one to three other students. These sessions aligned closely with F2F classroom conversation experiences and added great value online. Five required conversation sessions per semester counted as 10% toward their overall course grade. Each week there were several different sessions, lasting approximately 30 minutes. In first year Spanish, the sessions covered introductions, class schedules, hobbies, health, and travel. At the end of the first year, particular

attention was applied to navigation of present indicative, compound future, and preterit/imperfect. Students were also encouraged to respond in strings of two to three sentences.

In second year Spanish sessions, students discussed cultural productions and learned to add in compound tenses and the subjunctive mood. With the goal of paragraph length discourse, using connectors and transitions was encouraged. In the online sections, student evaluation was based solely on attendance and participation, creating a low-stakes opportunity to practice their language skills. Informal feedback suggests the sessions were helpful to students in their language development; course evaluations revealed they preferred this stress-free (i.e., non-graded) way to practice speaking. However, even with the sessions being low-stakes and required, some students chose not to attend.

Deeper assessment of synchronous oral skills occurred via one-on-one interviews with the professor or through recorded conversations with others. The oral interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes. In the online sections, recorded synchronous conversations between students were evaluated by the instructor and feedback was provided to the student on his or her oral output (pronunciation, fluency, grammar, and content).

Offering several weekly conversations, oral and written compositions, oral homework, recorded activities on exams, and assessing recorded conversations with other speakers are essential in a high quality online L2 course. Ensuring L2 production is paramount. However, professor workload is a concern; a "language task force" can help. The institution studied employs a Spanish Course Assistant (CA). Similar to a graduate teaching assistant, the CA has a bachelor's degree in the field and is paid hourly. He/she holds weekly conversation sessions, tracks attendance and participation, and gives oral redirection to help students improve pronunciation and grammar when appropriate. This individual ensures regular oral production in the L2 and provides frequent and immediate feedback to students, tools that are essential for best practices in language instruction (Moneypenny & Simon, 2017).

With instructor training and guidance, the CA can also grade short recorded or written activities. Having the CAs focus on these lower-stakes activities allowed the instructors to focus on grading tests, recorded conversations, and interviews, as well conducting one-on-one oral exams. This partnership created a rich learning experience for the students, with multiple points of contact, many opportunities for exchange, various modes of production, and feedback woven throughout their L2 learning experience. The CAs have proven vital for ensuring a quality L2 learning experience, particularly with regard to oral production.

In addition to CAs, these courses offered "supplemental instruction." A supplemental instructor (SI) is a student who has been successful in the course.

They offer study and tutoring sessions for the class in a collaborative space. SIs can re-explain/practice grammar concepts, conduct exam reviews, and give student-to-student advice based on personal experience. While useful, mandatory attendance to yet another synchronous activity did not align with a dedication to flexibility. So, the courses required either synchronous attendance or an asynchronous quiz based on the recorded session. This built-in flexibility has proven useful for students.

In order to assess the efforts of the techniques employed in this study the following research questions were put forth:

RQ1: *Do college Spanish students meet the ACTFL benchmarks for overall proficiency at the end of years 1 and 2 after completing a mix of online and face-to-face courses?*

RQ2: *Do college Spanish students meet the ACTFL benchmarks for pronunciation at the end of years 1 and 2 after completing a mix of online and face-to-face courses?*

RQ3: *Do college Spanish students meet the ACTFL benchmarks for fluency at the end of years 1 and 2 after completing a mix of online and face-to-face courses?*

RQ4: *Do college Spanish students meet the ACTFL benchmarks for sentence formation at the end of years 1 and 2 after completing a mix of online and face-to-face courses?*

RQ5: *Do college Spanish students meet the ACTFL benchmarks for vocabulary at the end of years 1 and 2 after completing a mix of online and face-to-face courses?*

Methods

Participants

Participants (n=108) for this study were undergraduate college students who completed the first year (or equivalent) Spanish (n=50), and/or completed second year Spanish (or equivalent) (n=58), at a small Midwest regional campus in the United States. This regional campus forms part of a large state and urban university with a unique shared online system. Students from any regional campus or the larger state universities can enroll in any online course at any sister campus, shifting between campuses as needed/desired. In this program, as part of systematic program assessment, all students must complete an oral proficiency exam at the end of the first and second years of language study. While all students are required to complete the assessment, consent for their data to be included in this study was voluntary. Reported demographic

data shows that 16 students were male and 92 were female. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 45 with a mean age of 25 (*SD* =6.09). A majority of the participants identified as Caucasian (*n*=81). Eighty-seven identified as Not Hispanic or Latino/a.

Procedures

The foreign language requirement is often comprised of two to four semesters or one to two regular academic years. Students were required to complete an online placement exam to enroll in the appropriate level course. Students elected to take courses OL or F2F based on their individual preferences or needs and, thus, completed the courses in a variety of modes. Nine students took courses only in the F2F format. All other participants completed one or more OL language course(s); others successfully passed a placement exam or transferred credits (from Advanced Placement or after having completed the courses at another institution) into higher level courses, bypassing more basic courses of Spanish.

The Versant test employed in this study to measure oral proficiency at the end of each year takes 15 minutes to complete via telephone. It includes 63 questions that measure pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and sentence formation as components of an overall proficiency score. For pronunciation, students read scripted sentences and repeat words and sentences they hear. Fluency is measured through story retelling, open-ended questions, pauses, utterances, and words per minute. Vocabulary is assessed through opposites, for example, a prompt of "hot," elicits "cold." Sentence formation is assessed through a jumble of words that students must rearrange to form a sentence. The sub-scores feed into an overall oral proficiency score. ACTFL benchmarks suggest a Versant score ranging from 33–42 (Intermediate-Low) for the first year and 43–52 (Intermediate-Mid) for the second.

After first year and second year Spanish, students completed the Versant for Spanish Test in their own time. They had the option of granting consent for their data to be used in a research study by participating in an online demographic and language experience survey. Instructors had no knowledge of who granted or denied consent as the consent form was housed by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) third party. This study was approved by the university's IRB.

Data Analysis

The Versant test uses parser and speech recognition tools, which are based on Levelt's (1989) psycholinguistic theories of language acquisition of facility with five levels: conceptualizer, lexicon, formulator, monitor system, and articulator, as well as Cutler's (2003) theory of automaticity. The correlation

between ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview results and Versant test results is .86 (versanttest.com).

In order to account for the variety of student experiences, at the end of year 1 students (n=50) were grouped into one of five completion modes. See Table 1.

Table 1
First Year Students' Completion Modes

Online only	n=19
Face-to-face only	n=9
A mixed format, one course online and one face-to-face	n=3
Test-in or transfer and then took second semester online	n=18
Test-in or transfer and then took second semester face-to-face	n=1

At the end of the fourth semester (end of year 2), four groups of students (n=58) emerged. See Table 2.

Table 2
Second Year Students' Completion Modes

Online only	n=5
Face-to-face only	n=0
A mixed format, some online and some face-to-face	n=5
Test-in or transfer and then took second semester online	n=45
Test-in or transfer and then took second semester face-to-face	n=3

There were many sections and instructors teaching these classes. To be sure that the instructor(s) and pattern of course mode(s) did not significantly impact proficiency in this program, the researchers controlled for these variables to be sure that having a different instructor or mode(s) of course completion would not produce a significantly different proficiency score. Linear regressions (as shown in Tables 3 and 4) were conducted. The results suggest professor and mode of course delivery do not significantly predict overall Versant scores with $F(3, 26)=.9$, $p=.46$, with an $R^2=.09$ at year 1 (see Table 3) or at year 2 (see Table 4), $F(3, 22)=1.12$, $p=.36$, $R^2=.13$. This means that variations in Versant scores between students are not due to instructional quality or pattern of course modality. For example, students in the mixed format mode (i.e., some online/some in-person) did not differ in oral proficiency from those students who took both semesters online.

Table 3
Results from Linear Regression First Year Spanish

	B	*SE B*	*β*
Constant	27.597	6.578	
Professor for 1st semester Spanish	1.048	.755	.335
Professor for 2nd semester Spanish (end of year 1)	-.277	1.004	-.072
Mode of course(s) pattern	-.286	1.833	-.034

Table 4
Results from Linear Regression Second Year Spanish

	B	*SE B*	*β*
Constant	10.126	21.418	
Professor for 3rd semester Spanish	1.684	1.772	.205
Professor for 4th semester Spanish (end of year 2)	2.155	1.447	.325
Mode of course(s) pattern	4.709	3.318	.300

Results

To answer *RQ1: Do college Spanish students meet the ACTFL benchmarks for overall proficiency at the end of years 1 and 2 after completing a mix of online and face-to-face courses?*, the overall Versant mean score, standard deviation, and frequencies were calculated in SPSS. At the end of year 1 (see Table 5), the overall Versant test scores (n=50) ranged from 20–66 with a mean score of 33.28 (SD=10.25), within the benchmark range of Intermediate-Low (33–42). Results show 42% of students achieving oral proficiency at or above the IL level. While 52% of students scored in Novice-High (NH), the level below the benchmark, it is important to note that nine of the 26 scores were within two points of the IL threshold.

Table 5
Overall Versant Results after Two Semesters

ACTFL level	Versant score	Students scoring in range
Novice-Mid	20–22	n=3, 6%
Novice-High	23–32	n=26, 52%
Intermediate-Low*	33–42	n=15, 30%
Intermediate-Mid	43–52	n=3, 6%

ACTFL level	Versant score	Students scoring in range
Intermediate-High	53–62	*n*=1, 2%
Advanced-Low	63–72	*n*=2, 4%

*ACTFL benchmark

At the end of year 2 (see Table 6), the ACTFL benchmark range is 43–52 (Intermediate-Mid). Scores ranged from 20–80 with the average overall Versant score of 39.59 (*SD*=15.04), or IL. Only 28% of the students (*n*=16) scored at or above the benchmark after year 2. Over 36% of students scored in the range just below the benchmark, Intermediate-Low, with six students within three points of the benchmark. Although students were not meeting the benchmarks for year 2, there was growth in all areas.

Table 6
Overall Versant Results after Four Semesters

ACTFL level	Versant score	Students scoring in range
Novice-Mid	20–22	*n*=4, 6.9%
Novice-High	23–32	*n*=17, 29.3%
Intermediate-Low	33–42	*n*=21, 36.2%
Intermediate-Mid*	43–52	*n*=6, 10.3%
Intermediate-High	53–62	*n*=3, 5.2%
Advanced-Low	63–72	*n*=4, 6.9%
Advanced-Mid	73–79	*n*=0, 0%
Advanced-High	80	*n*=3, 5.2%

*ACTFL benchmark

To address pronunciation, *RQ2: Do college Spanish students meet the ACTFL benchmarks for pronunciation at the end of years 1 and 2 after completing a mix of online and face-to-face courses?*, after year 1, in the area of pronunciation, students' scores ranged from 33–57 with a mean of 41.66 (*SD*=6.84). The students' scores for pronunciation after one year of Spanish were between IL (33–42, *n*=30, 60%), IM (43–52, *n*=16, 32%), and Intermediate-High (IH) (53–62, *n*=4, 8%). Thus, at the end of the first year of Spanish, these students met or exceeded ACTFL benchmarks for pronunciation.

At the end of year 2 students' pronunciation scores ranged from 31–80 with a mean of 45.38 (*SD*=12.33), in the IM (43–52) category for pronunciation. Half of the students scored (*n*=29, 50%) at the IM level or higher, which means many of the students met the benchmark established in this area.

Fluency was addressed in *RQ3: Do college Spanish students meet the ACTFL benchmarks for fluency at the end of years 1 and 2 after completing a mix of online and face-to-face courses?* At the end of year 1 scores ranged from 20 to 63 with a mean score of 34.68 (*SD*=11.50), placing students in IL (33–42), which is appropriate at the end of two semesters. With 54% (*n*=27) of students meeting or surpassing the standard, a majority of the students met the ACTFL benchmarks for fluency after one year of Spanish.

Fluency was also measured at the end of year 2 and scores ranged from 20–80 with a mean score of 40.59 (*SD*=13.87). ACTFL suggests students should be at IM (43–52) after four semesters, and while some of the students reached or surpassed this level of language proficiency (*n*=18, 31%), most did not (*n*=40, 69%). However, it is promising that the mean score did increase by approximately six points from the end of year 1 to the end of year 2 in this area.

Sentence formation was examined in *RQ4: Do college Spanish students meet the ACTFL benchmarks for sentence formation at the end of years 1 and 2 after completing a mix of online and face-to-face courses?* After year 1, scores showed a mean of 31.34 (*SD*=14.52), ranging from 20–80. This placed the average score at NH (23–32), which is below the benchmark of IL (33–42) after one year of Spanish. Only 34% (*n*=11) of students met or exceeded the IL standard. On the whole, students did not meet the sentence formation ACTFL goal range for the second semester. The results from the sentence formation portion of the Versant test demonstrates that this skill was much more challenging for students after one year of L2 study than the other skills tested.

After year 2, scores for sentence formation ranged from 20–80 with a mean score of 39.52 (*SD*=19.96). ACTFL suggests students should begin to enter IM (43–52) at this level, and some did; 12.1% (*n*=7) of the students' scores for sentence formation did move into the Intermediate-Mid level and 12 students exceeded the benchmark. Additionally, the mean score increased by approximately eight points from year 1 to 2 in this area of oral proficiency.

Vocabulary was addressed in *RQ5: Do college Spanish students meet the ACTFL benchmarks for vocabulary at the end of years 1 and 2 after completing a mix of online and face-to-face courses?* At the end of year 1 scores ranged from 20–77 with a mean score of 29.38 (*SD*=13.87), the upper end of Novice-High (23–32). Thus average score is not meeting the ACTFL benchmark in vocabulary acquisition; however, 30% of students (*n*=15) after year 1 are meeting or exceeding IL (33–42).

At the end of year 2 vocabulary scores ranged from 20–80 with a mean of 35.16 (*SD*=17.65), which is below the benchmark of IM (43–52); however, 16 students (27.6%) did score within or above the benchmark. The mean increased by approximately five points from year 1 to 2.

Table 7 outlines that, after two semesters of coursework, 42% of students in this study met/exceeded the ACTFL Intermediate-Low benchmark for language proficiency. After four semesters of study, approximately 27% reached or surpassed the Intermediate-Mid standard. Sentence formation and vocabulary acquisition tended to be the more difficult subcategories for students; however, growth between the second and fourth semesters was evident in all areas.

Table 7
Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding Overall and Subcategory Benchmarks

	Overall score	Pronunciation	Fluency	Sentence formation	Vocabulary acquisition
Intermediate-Low Benchmark Year 1	42%	100%	54%	34%	30%
Intermediate-Mid Benchmark Year 2	27.5%	49.7%	30.6%	20.6%	27%

Discussion

When assessing proficiency, scores will fall across a wide range. Dixon et al. (2012) suggested that a range of three to seven years of instruction/immersion are required to reach native-like proficiency. Additionally, this study used the Versant Test for Spanish. This test relies heavily on auditory comprehension and oral output and tests only oral proficiency. Students read only a small portion of the test, which is linked to the pronunciation exercise. Throughout the rest of the exam, students must react and respond solely to audio prompts. Reading and writing proficiencies were not assessed. Relying almost exclusively on audio prompts, and thereby aural comprehension, may have caused the exam to be difficult for beginning language learners.

In this study 42% met or exceeded the first year overall oral proficiency benchmark of Intermediate-Low and 27.5% met or exceeded the second year overall benchmark of Intermediate-Mid. It is expected that those who did not reach the benchmark at the time of testing would achieve it with another year of study. ACTFL suggests it may take four to six semesters to meet the benchmark; because this study ended after of four semesters it is feasible that many more students would meet or surpass the benchmark after another year of study. Variations in scores, as seen in this study, may be explained by factors such as learner attitudes, motivation, or anxiety (Wesely, 2012). These individual learner traits may contribute to a range of learner scores at each assessment level and provide a fruitful area for future research.

In this study, sub-score areas also denoted a range of proficiency. Most of these corresponded with the overall score, but pronunciation was an outlier.

The small group instruction and feedback of OL conversation sessions and the audio compositions may have bolstered pronunciation. Others have found similar positive effects on students' pronunciation skills associated with technology (Carey, 2004; Tanner & Landing, 2009). For the pronunciation section of the Versant test students are given a series of sentences to read from paper and are also asked to repeat what they hear. In every other area of the test, students most respond to aural prompts, making oral production skills reliant on aural reception skills. This area merits more research.

A limitation of this study is that the assessment ends at the fourth semester. A longitudinal progression through the undergraduate years of L2 would help researchers and instructors better understand what teaching strategies are most effective for student learning in OL L2. Testing further along in the students' language study, at year 3 for example, would also allow a longitudinal analysis of individual student progressions and comparisons to the benchmark.

Contrary to studies focused on the F2F classroom meeting benchmarks (Goertler et al., 2016; Norris & Pfeiffer 2003), studies focused on students enrolled in OL coursework have to account for the greater flexibility in course completion. Many students at the institution in question, and per national trends, tend to enroll in a mix of modalities. Some students transfer into the program from other institutions. In the world languages program, most of the enrollment comes from OL course offerings and the majority of L2 students take exclusively OL language courses, though many students switch between modes at their convenience. This leads to a unique situation in which the most traditional (and best-researched) mode of teaching, F2F, is the least popular choice. Although complex, these situations reflect the reality of many of the students examined and their authentic learning experience merits study.

While the current study measures a mixed program as a whole and reflects the growing reality of higher education in the United States, the current sample is too small to test group differences between modes and scores. For example, this study examines students who were exposed to online Spanish in varying doses – some took both courses F2F (less than 10%), some had a mix of online and F2F classes, and others took both courses online. Variations in how or when a student completes a course in a specific mode could be important. For instance, it is possible that not having any F2F courses during year 2 may have contributed to the lower proficiency scores observed in this study. However, Moneypenny and Aldrich (2016) found no significant difference in oral proficiency for students who completed Spanish OL versus those who completed Spanish F2F for the first year and, in fact, found that OL student scores had a higher mean than F2F. Future studies need to examine how different course completion mode combinations influence oral proficiency. These

questions are outside the scope of the current study, but they should be examined in the future.

Finally, even with increased instructor emphasis on skills, choosing to engage and complete required work is the responsibility of the student. The researchers found that online students can be resistant to live class work (e.g., conversation sessions). Even though conversation sessions constituted 10% of the students' final grade, some elected to partially complete or neglect the requirement. In the future, the relationship between attendance at oral production sessions and oral proficiency scores should be examined.

Conclusion

Rather than taking a comparative approach of OL versus F2F, the current study examined Spanish language students who completed the courses in various formats at the end of year 1 and year 2. An intentional and universal curriculum design, development of an online (OL) language task force made of faculty and staff, and an assessment of pedagogical effectiveness were put in place. The results suggest that, regardless of course delivery patterns, L2 students can reach the ACTFL benchmarks of Intermediate-Low after two semesters and Intermediate-Mid after four semesters.

The implications of this study are that OL foreign language instruction within a mixed modality program or as part of a standalone program can be successful and should be supported, but more research is needed to ensure that student outcomes are met in these formats. With the increase in OL course offerings in general, and specifically in L2, testing the validity of these courses and their effectiveness in scaffolding students to appropriate proficiency benchmarks are essential.

Distance courses in languages face unique challenges. Each student must get sufficient practice in the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). Furthermore, instructors are often confronted with a transient student population that will switch between modalities, which can lead to an adjustment period for each transition. Also variations in language abilities due to individual student traits may require special attention in the OL format. Therefore, specific learning and teaching tools should be developed and assessed to help students reach proficiency benchmarks regardless of course format patterns.

Developing languages online requires more than faculty input and effort. Administrations and other governing bodies must support OL language pedagogy in the form of resources to develop these courses. Funds will also be required for an assistant(s) to lead conversation sessions, thereby ensuring that students have the opportunity to participate in consistent synchronous language practice. There is also a need to pay for third party assessments (e.g.,

Versant) to test the program's effectiveness and to allow for necessary revisions in curriculum to ensure a high quality and continually improving learning experience for students. When such support is provided and best practices in curriculum are implemented students can meet oral proficiency benchmarks through a variety of formats.

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