

Using the Spanish Online Resource *Aula Virtual de Español (AVE)* to Promote a Blended Teaching Approach in High School Spanish Language Classrooms

Utilisation de la ressource en ligne espagnole *Aula Virtual de Español (AVE)* pour favoriser l'approche de l'enseignement hybride dans les cours d'espagnol au secondaire

Martine Pellerin, *University of Alberta*

Carlos Soler Montes, *Instituto Cervantes of Albuquerque (New Mexico)*

Abstract

The study explores the effectiveness of the implementation of blended teaching (BT) by combining the Spanish online resource *Aula Virtual de Español (AVE)* with the face-to-face (F2F) delivery approach in second language Spanish programs in two high schools in Alberta, Canada.

Findings demonstrate the effectiveness of combining the online resource AVE to the F2F teaching approach to promote BT in the Spanish language classroom. The use of BT approach in the language classroom had a positive impact on the students' attitudes towards the study of the language, the students' motivation and their participation levels in class, as well as their use of the target language in the classroom. Moreover, the multimodal experiences provided by the use of the online AVE resource combined with the F2F delivery approach responded more to the different learners learning styles and specific needs. Finally, the use of online AVE in conjunction with F2F teaching was also perceived as an effective tool in the preparation for the International Spanish Diplomas (DELE) taken by the students in the more advanced Spanish classes.

Résumé

La présente étude explore l'efficacité de l'enseignement hybride combinant l'utilisation de la ressource espagnole en ligne *Aula Virtual de Español (AVE)* et l'interaction face à face dans les programmes d'enseignement de l'espagnol, langue seconde, dans deux écoles secondaires de l'Alberta (Canada).

Les résultats démontrent l'efficacité de la combinaison de la ressource en ligne AVE à la prestation face à face pour favoriser l'approche de l'enseignement hybride dans les cours d'espagnol. L'utilisation de l'approche de l'enseignement hybride dans le cours de langue a eu une incidence positive sur l'attitude des élèves relativement à l'apprentissage de la langue, la

motivation des élèves et leur taux de participation en classe, ainsi que leur utilisation de la langue d'apprentissage dans la classe. En outre, les expériences multimodales fournies par l'utilisation de la ressource en ligne AVE et l'interaction face à face correspondaient mieux aux styles d'apprentissage et aux besoins particuliers des apprenants. Enfin, l'utilisation de la ressource en ligne AVE et de l'interaction face à face a aussi été perçue comme un outil efficace de préparation aux Diplômes internationaux d'espagnol (DIE) entrepris par les élèves des cours d'espagnol plus avancés.

Introduction

In the past, face-to-face (F2F) conventional teaching approach has been used as the main way of transmitting the content of language programs. The increase in the use of new technologies in the language learning classroom has provided greater opportunities for more meaningful and authentic learning experiences. The use of technology in the language classroom is also causing teachers to re-think how they need to design the F2F learning experiences in their classroom to incorporate web-based and online tools in order to more fully engage their students into the learning process and respond to their different learning needs.

Theoretical Framework

Even though a great deal of studies have provided evidence of the effectiveness of the integration of the Internet and online learning into language teaching (e.g. Kern & Warschauer, 2000; Lamy & Hampel, 2007; Thorne, 2008), many teachers are still unsure as to how to take advantage of it (Dudeney, 2000; Pellerin & Roy, 2006). Language teachers are still conducting their teaching mainly in F2F venues and complement it with CALL venues such as language laboratories or online networks (Hinkelman, 2005). In most language teaching settings, F2F and CALL venues have been commonly separated physically, and also in their ways to deliver the language content. Many language teachers are faced with new challenges when trying to implement blended teaching approaches with their current F2F teaching venue (Pellerin & Roy, 2006). They still require much more guidance and support to move forward with blending OL delivery programs with the F2F delivery in their language classroom. These issues experienced by teachers can be addressed by redesigning learning experiences by adopting a blended learning perspective (Hinkelman, 2005).

There are numerous definitions associated with blended teaching (Motterram & Sharma, 2009). The definition that we have adopted for this study corresponds to the one which defines BT as an approach in language teaching that combines two mediums of delivery: it combines F2F instruction and online program. This BT also introduces a move away from a traditional laboratory-based venue CALL (computer assisted language learning) into a more flexible delivery mode which integrates online-based activities into a F2F teaching language setting.

This type of BT approach is referred to by some as the “best of both worlds” since it combines both the strengths and limitations of both approaches. Leung and Tran (2000 in Wonacott, 2002) have suggested that both F2F and online learning (OL) hold advantages that seem to complement each other.

The strengths of both approaches for second language (L2)

The F2F teaching and learning allows learners to engage in an authentic oral dialogic process involving the co-deployment of multimodal semiotic resources which contribute to the negotiation of meaning and knowledge building (Pellerin, 2005). Therefore, the language classroom environment has its ‘raison d’être’ in the process of learning a second language. The online learning environment, like the online resources *Aula Virtual de Español* (AVE) used for this study, provides access and distribution of a wide range of authentic content (text-based, visual graphic, video and audio) in the target language which has the potential to engage multiple brain channels (Wonacott, 2002). Therefore, blending the strengths of both F2F and online learning holds the potential for maximizing the learning experience and promoting language learning.

The BT approach can also help teachers to enhance the quality and effectiveness of the delivery of their program. The BT approach could also be integrated in the conventional F2F classroom venue to better meet students’ needs and to provide greater interactional and collaborative learning experiences necessary for knowledge building (Pellerin & Roy, 2006). According to Hinkelman (2005), a BT approach in the language classroom “may allow learners of different levels and styles to be accommodated when compared with courses delivered in a single-mode” (p. 25). Finally, the BT approach allows students to engage in more meaningful language experiences with the support of both F2F and the technology which responds more to the way students are learning in the 21st century.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of the implementation of a blended approach (BT) which combined the Spanish online resource *Aula Virtual de Español* (AVE), created by the Instituto Cervantes (see also the section on the online resource *Aula Virtual de Español* (AVE)) with the F2F delivery approach in a second language Spanish high school program established by Alberta Education. The qualitative case method was used to explore the effectiveness of the BT approach in enhancing the delivery of the Spanish high school program established by Alberta Education.

The case study involved the exploration of the implementation process by two teachers in their respective classrooms. The following research questions guided the study:

1. Can blending the Spanish online resource *Aula Virtual de Español* (AVE) with the traditional F2F approach enhance the delivery of the Spanish Language and Culture programs established by Alberta Education?
2. To what extent can students be more engaged in their learning through a blended approach involving face-to-face activities with online activities provided by online AVE?
3. Can a blended teaching approach that integrates the Spanish online resource *online AVE* with the traditional (F2F) approach meet individual students’ learning needs and the program expectations of Alberta Education?
4. What are the specific challenges teachers might encounter when trying to integrate the BT approach to deliver the Spanish Language and Culture program?

5. What kind of implementation process and ongoing support is necessary to successfully integrate and sustain the BT approach in the delivery of the Spanish Language and Culture program?

Participants and context of the study

Two high school Spanish as second language teachers participated in the project. One teacher has taught for nine years and the other one for 20 years. For both teachers, Spanish is an additional language but their level of language proficiency differs. Both teachers were teaching in the same school district in an urban area in Alberta, Canada. However, each teacher taught in a different high school located in a different demographic setting. Both teachers taught the following programs developed by Alberta Education (Alberta Education, 2006): Spanish Language and Culture 10-3Y, 20-3Y, 30-3Y for second language teachers. The programs are intended for students who are beginning their study of Spanish language and culture in senior high school (Alberta Education website, revised 2006). One teacher (teacher 1) taught the following programs: Spanish Language and Culture 10-3Y, 20-3Y. The second teacher (teacher 2) taught the Spanish Language and Culture 20-3Y, 30-3Y. In addition to these programs, she also taught the International Baccalaureate (IB) Spanish Second language programs for grades 11 and 12. All classes varied in terms of their size and the demographic background of the students. The enrollment in these Spanish programs was self-selected by the students, except for the students enrolled in the IB program. The learning of a second language is mandatory in the IB program, but the students have the choice of the language they wish to take on.

The online resource Aula Virtual de Español (AVE)

The AVE or *Aula Virtual de Español* is a Spanish Second Language Teaching and Learning Environment. The system is designed to allow enormous flexibility; this way each institution can adapt it to its' teaching programs without disrupting their general teaching plans. The AVE course material is a potential agent in the teaching, learning and assessment activity. It is organized into six levels, following the Curricular Plan of the Instituto Cervantes and therefore the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. Each level is divided into four courses of three lessons. The creation and design of the teaching material was carried out within a communicative methodology with a task-based and action-oriented focus.

Data Collection

The qualitative case study guided data gathering and analysis in response to the exploratory nature of the research project. Therefore, the data collection involved semi-structured interviews with teachers after the implementation process, classroom observation and field notes, as well as teachers' feedback and comments.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis consisted of organizing, sorting and coding data obtained from the classroom observations and field notes, as well as teachers' feedback and comments provided to the researchers during classroom visits. The second part of the data analysis was concerned with the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews with the two teachers involved in the study. The interviews were first transcribed and imported to a Word document. The researchers reviewed the interview transcriptions and organized them in order to identify emerging themes

and establish the initial main categories. Through a process of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) or layers of interpretation, subcategories were added to the main ones. These categories were used to examine the effectiveness of the BT approach in enhancing the delivery of the Spanish high school programs established by Alberta Education and to provide some answers to the questions that guided the research project.

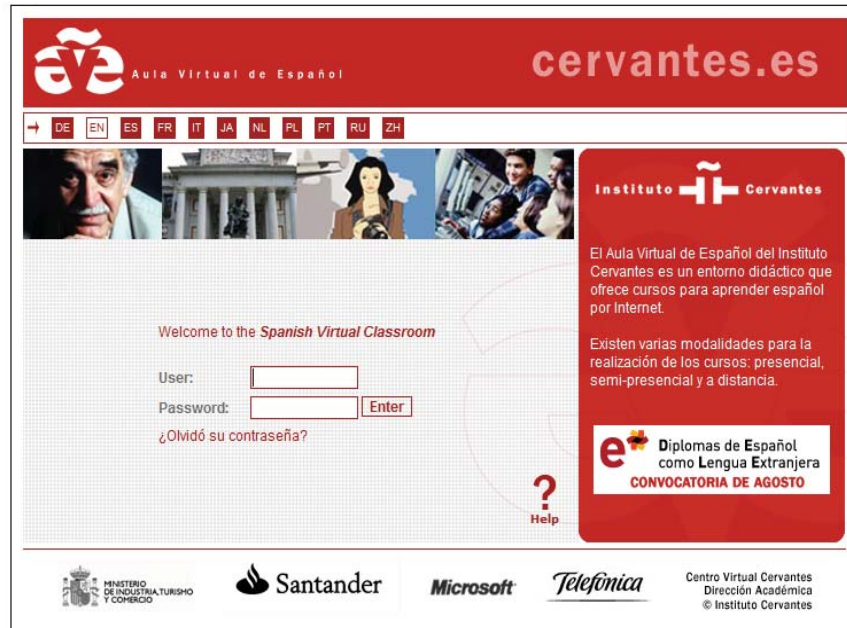


Figure 1. The online resource Aula Virtual de Español (AVE)

The Project Overview

In the fall of 2008 we sent an invitation to all Spanish Second Language high school teachers working for one school district in an urban area in Alberta, Canada. Two teachers responded to the invitation. A full day workshop was organized for both teachers following the acceptance of their participation in the project. During the workshop, both researchers provided details about the project and the nature of their participation.

The second part of the workshop was organized as a hands-on training session regarding the use of the *Aula Virtual de Español* (AVE). Following this section, the researchers discussed the concept of blended teaching which, in the case of this project, would be defined as combining the Spanish online AVE with the F2F delivery approach of the Spanish Language and Culture 10-3Y, 20-3Y programs. Teachers were presented with examples of blended teaching units/lesson plans. Scheduled follow-up visits were organized to help teachers with the implementation of these blended units/lesson plans in their respective classrooms. During each visit to the classroom, the researchers did some observations, took field notes and provided feedback and guidance to the teachers. Although both teachers were provided with examples of blended teaching units/lessons plans, teachers were invited to adapt them and/or develop their own material and implement it to their respective classroom setting.

In the fall of 2009, only one teacher was able to continue with the project. The researchers organized a specific workshop for that teacher in order to respond to her specific needs regarding the preparation of some of her students (IB Spanish program and the Spanish level 30). The use of the online AVE in the F2F as a tool was being implemented in the preparation of the DELE examination (Diplomas de Español como Lengua Extranjera) issued by the Spanish Ministry of Education.

Findings

The analysis of the raw data allowed the identification of emergent categories from the field notes taken during classroom observation, teachers' feedback and comments, as well as the transcription of the interviews from both teachers. Though the identification of the categories had first emerged from the sources of data mentioned above, the establishment of the final categories has also been guided by well established and influential research in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and educational technology. In particular, some of the main categories are very much aligned with the outcomes of SLA research regarding the role of social interaction in negotiating meaning, co-constructing of knowledge and understanding in the learning of a second language (Dona, 1994; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Swain, 2000; Pellerin, 2005). The identified categories relating to the role of social interaction and the notion of co-construction of knowledge while using a BT approach very much reflects sociocultural theories which promotes dialogic interaction, negotiation of meaning, co-construction of knowledge through collaboration and the meaningful use of the new technologies (Wells, 1999; Jonassen, 1999; Pellerin, 2005; Pellerin & Roy, 2006). The categories concerned with the use of the technology following a BT approach and its role in promoting multimodal type of learning were also guided by the outcomes of several studies focusing on the blended approach (e.g. Leug & Tran, 2000; Morison, 2003; Wonacott, 2002; Hinkelman, 2004, 2005; Pellerin & Roy, 2006; Motterram & Sharma, 2009; Wonacott, 2002).

Though the implementation of the BT approach was limited to the experiences of two Spanish language teachers and their students, the analysis of the data allowed for the identification of emergent categories, which provided substantial evidence to support our interpretation of the effectiveness of the implementation of BT in the context of Spanish language classroom in a Canadian context. The finalized categories have been organized into two main strands based on their sources: data obtained through classroom observations and field notes, and data gained from the teachers' interviews. The main categories are first presented with our interpretation followed by the subcategories including explanation, example of learning experiences or quotations from interviews that support their evidence.

Data Analysis: Classroom Observation and Field Notes

1. Language Competence

One of the four components of the Spanish Language and Culture program designed by Alberta Education is identified as language competence which deals with developing knowledge and skills that allow students to use the Spanish language effectively and competently. Therefore, the BT approach needed to provide opportunities for students to develop their language competence. Throughout the use of the online AVE in the F2F, teachers found that the four general skills were always practiced (to know, to know how to do, to know how to be and to know how to learn)

with the integration of communication disciplines of language (linguistics, sociolinguistics and pragmatics), accompanied with exercises that foster knowledge, and the right skills and abilities to develop them fully.

Both teachers insisted on its balanced treatment of integrating the enormous wealth of linguistic and cultural Spanish components. By combining the online AVE material with the F2F delivery of the Spanish language classroom it allowed the students to develop their language competence though contextual learning experiences.



Figure 2: Example of BT activity involving the online AVE material with the F2F delivery

1. The teacher calls on the background knowledge of the students to verify their knowledge and understanding of reflexive pronouns/direct object pronouns;
2. Interactive game with the blue and green pens on the interactive board: the teacher asks students to take turns identifying each type of pronoun on the interactive screen;
3. The students and the teacher discuss errors and try to provide explanations (e.g., *me* is the reflexive pronoun because...).

Table 1: Language competence: Subcategories and explanations

Subcategories	Explanations
Focus on form	During large and/or small group learning activities, students attend to form (e.g. grammatical aspect such as possessive adjective, present tense, etc.).
Metalinguistic awareness	During large and/or small group learning activities students reflect on the use of language.
Negotiation of meaning	During large and/or small group learning activities students negotiate their own understanding of the form through conscious reflection on their own linguistic knowledge as well as their partners' language use.

2. The use of technology (online AVE) and students' interaction

In a teacher's centered F2F classroom, students might have the opportunity to interact with their peers; for the most part they are sitting and listening to the teacher and engaging in individual learning exercises. In a classroom setting where a student-centered approach is used in conjunction with a BT approach, students become more physically and cognitively engaged in their learning. In this case study, students were encouraged to engage in dialogic interaction with their peers as well as to move around the classroom and interact physically with the online AVE materials.



Figure 3: Example of BT activity involving the online AVE material with the F2F delivery
 1. In small group students discuss which pictures go with which of the words below;
 2. Together the whole class verify the response (students take turns coming up to the interactive screen to link the right word with the right picture).

Table 2: The use of technology (online AVE) and students' interaction: Subcategories and explanations

Subcategories	Explanation
Students' interaction with the computer/screen	Students took turns to interact with the computer and the screen to submit or verify answers during different blended learning activities.
Students' dialogic interaction F2F following OL activities	Students engage in learning activities following the OL activities which involve discussion about what they have learned and/or understand and the application of their knowledge during follow up in F2F.
Students' interest and motivation	Students demonstrate an interest and motivation toward the learning activities by being engaged in it with their peers and the technology.
Meaningful learning activities	Students demonstrate that the activities are

	<p>meaningful to them by making links with their own personal experiences and the activities. Students ask questions, make comments and share experiences following the presentation of the content in the lessons using online AVE.</p>
--	--

3. Multimodal Learning Experiences

Language learners come to the classroom with different abilities, learning styles and learning needs. By using the BT approach, language teachers have greater possibilities to meet the needs of a wide spectrum of students' needs.

The access to a wide range of content (text-based, visual graphic, video and audio) in the online AVE allowed for accommodation of learners' learning styles and needs compared to the conventional F2F approach which promotes only the delivery of the language content in a single-mode. The use of multimodal learning experiences found in the online AVE provided multi-sensorial experiences for the students. The delivery of the language content through the adoption of the BT approach with the use of the online AVE material activities with F2F technology also correspond more to the way students are learning for the 21st century.

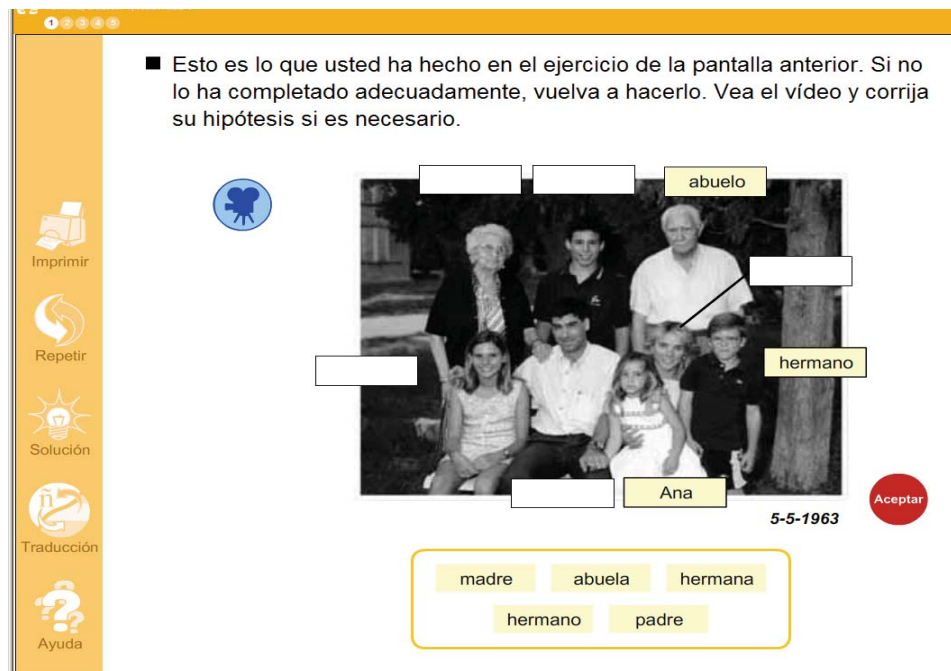


Figure 4: Example of BT activity involving the online AVE material with the F2F delivery

1. Students in large group watch the video once;
2. As a whole group, students discuss what they have understood about the movie;
3. They watch the video again (teacher asks more questions to see if they understood better);
4. The teacher asks students to take turns coming up and choosing the right answer on the interactive computer screen.

Table 3: Multimodal Learning Experiences: Subcategories and explanations

Subcategories	Explanation
Use of videos	The videos from the online resource AVE present the learning content through a different mode which reach the students' various learning styles and keeps them interested and motivated. The use of video provides authentic language learning materials.
Use of visual and kinaesthetic tools	The students see and touch the computer screen or Smartboard. Students interact with the online material. Students are engage and move around in the classroom.

4. Social Interaction, Collaboration, Co-construction of Knowledge

Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), learning does not take place only in the learner's mind, but involves the interaction of the learner with his environment. In the field of SLA, greater recognition has been given to the role of social interaction in negotiating meaning, co-constructing of knowledge and understanding in the social context (Donato, 1994; Ohta, 2000; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Swain, 1998; Swain, 2000; Pellerin, 2005). Therefore, language learning is most effective when it is structured around learning activities which promote dialogic interaction in peer-peer interaction (Ohta, 2000; Pellerin, 2005; 2008; Swain, 1998; Wells, 1999). The use of BT with the use of the online AVE in the language classroom supports socio-cultural perspective that promotes greater dialogic interaction, negotiation of meaning and knowledge building through collaboration among language learners.

Table 4: Social interaction, collaboration, co-construction of knowledge: Subcategories and explanations

Subcategories	Explanation
Dialogic interaction	Through dialogue and interaction in large and/or small groups, students negotiated their understanding and reflected on language use.
Co-construction of knowledge during peer-peer interaction	Students in large and/or small groups provide each other support and 'scaffolding' to gain understanding and problem solve in the target language.



Figure 5: Example of BT activity involving the online AVE material with the F2F delivery:

1. In small group the students make predictions about what is happening in the pictures (they try to use simple sentences in Spanish);
2. Teacher asks students to share in large group their ideas;
3. Students check the right answer by interacting with the screen.

5. Socio-cultural Competence and the Spanish Culture and Language

Sociocultural competence is an essential element in any language-learning program. It is also one of the four components of the Spanish Language and Culture program designed by Alberta Education. Students need to be exposed to different aspects of the Spanish-speaking culture as well as the different variations in the Spanish language and culture. In the online AVE there are 36 video recordings per level that can help teachers to discuss cultural and contextual aspects that are difficult to explain in words. To this supply of videotapes there is also a great quantity of audio material. The use of online AVE in the F2F classroom allowed students to further develop their sociocultural competences by providing learning materials and activities that are more authentic and interesting for students than the one teachers find in conventional textbooks.

Table 5: Socio-cultural competence and the Spanish culture and language: Subcategories and explanations

Subcategories	Explanation
Spanish cultures	Students are exposed to different aspects of the Spanish culture through the viewing of authentic videos. In F2F students demonstrate interest about the Spanish culture by asking questions and providing comments following the viewing of the videos found in the online AVE.
Variation of the accent in the Spanish language	Students are exposed to different Spanish accents and lexicon in the Spanish culture

through the viewing of authentic videos and the listening of audio materials. In F2F students demonstrate interest in learning about the variation in the Spanish language by asking questions, providing comments about what they have seen and heard in the online AVE.

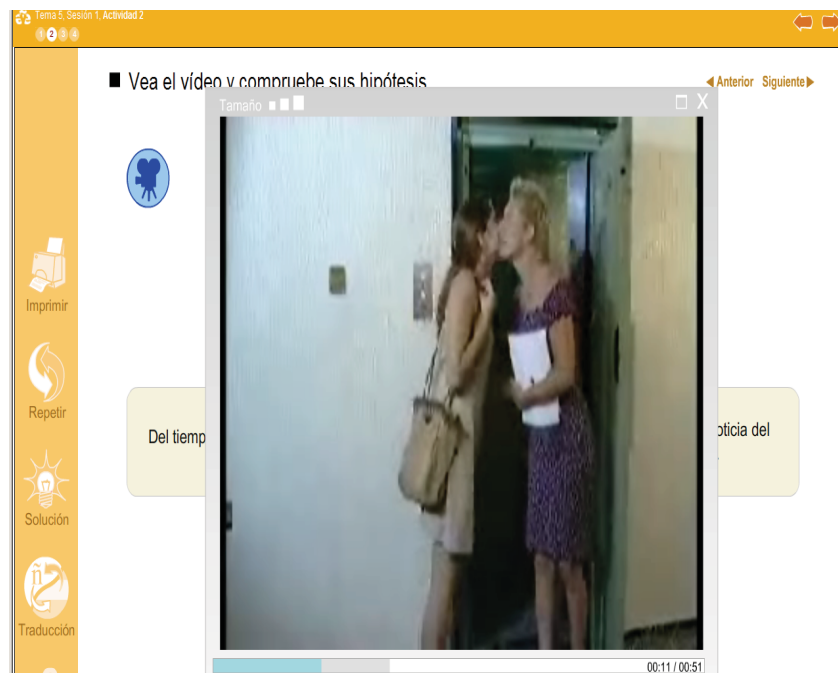


Figure 6: Example of BT activity involving the online AVE

1. The whole class watches the video together;
2. After viewing the video, the students talk about what the movie was about and negotiate their understanding;
3. They discuss the different cultural aspects, for example, “cheek kissing” as a ritual or social gesture to indicate friendship and perform a greeting.

Data Analysis: Teachers’ interview

1. Challenges with new technologies and the online AVE materials

Concerns and uncertainty regarding the implementation process and the design of learning tasks are very much a reality that teachers have to face when trying a new teaching approach as well as using new materials. This case study was no exception. At the beginning, the teachers encounter different challenges regarding the use of the online technology and the application of the new online AVE into the already existent language programs. The teachers were somewhat overwhelmed by the quantity of resources available on AVE. However, it did not take them a lot of time to figure the main sequences of each level and where to find the complementary material of different kinds (language query registers, exercises with internet information pages, exercises that practice the different learning strategies, intonation and spelling exercises, etc.). Also, the

lack of reliability of the school's server at times has caused unreliable delivery of the content when using the online AVE material. The use of the AVE material required a little more time for planning at the beginning, but once the teachers got used to the material, it did not take them longer to plan and re-design their learning activities with the use of the online AVE materials. Once they felt more comfortable with combining the new online AVE materials with their existent F2F programs, they started to take more risks and were willing to re-design their F2F teaching approach to incorporate a more BT approach to it.

Table 6: Challenges with new technologies and the online AVE materials

Subcategories	Examples of teachers' quotes
Learning to navigate the online AVE material	"...I basically tried to go through it and see how the program worked. So that I could figure out a way of presenting it to the students, so I, at the beginning I was going through a lot of it, trying to look through certain things and see what they have for us as teachers to use." (Teacher 1)
Planning with the online AVE	"... you'll know how to use it because you've already tried it with some other, like unit, or something. So you can just keep incorporating it and you can always change it a little bit, but, I find that it, it doesn't really take a great amount of time." (Teacher 2)

2. Blending the online AVE resource with the existent F2F approach

The blending of the F2F learning tasks with the online AVE resource calls for a direct link between tasks which should be started in one venue and extended or reinforced in the next one. In a way these tasks need to lend themselves from F2F to online learning and/or vice versa. The tasks' design also needs to involve the use of teaching strategies that would involve different delivery channels. The implementation of the BT approach requires that language teachers engage in a process of re-thinking how they design the learning experiences that would lend to both F2F and online learning. When the teachers were using the different online AVE materials within their F2F teaching sequences, they discovered that it did encourage students' language study and language use in terms of acquiring linguistic content, allowing them to interact in the classroom more easily and freely. With more experience and seeing the positive reactions from the students in terms of participation and motivation, teachers are learning to combine more of the online AVE with their current F2F teaching approach to continue to enhance the delivery of their Spanish program.

Table 7: Blending the online AVE resource with the existent F2F approach

Subcategories	Examples of teachers' quotes
Use of interactive games from online AVE to engage more students into the F2F learning	"For example, that game for the body parts? I found that the kids really enjoyed that because, it is something they can do themselves, like the interactive portions of

	the programs are very, very beneficial, because the kids are actually excited to come up and try it and when they get it right they are really happy too. (Teacher 1)
Use of the online AVE to support the delivery of the language Spanish high school programs	‘Well, having access to the AVE program, uh, as I can see, all what you have there, it’s, it really reflects really the program of Spanish 10, 20 and 30.’ (Teacher 2)
Using the online AVE to reinforce the content presented in F2F	“... I could go on to the program and start using that just to enhance and reinforce what they’ve learned ...” (Teacher 1) “So as I say, I can use the AVE to introduce my lesson, my grammar, or I can use it to reinforce.” (Teacher 2)
Using the blended approach by combining online AVE with F2F	“Well, like I said before, it gives instant feedback and it also makes the material look a little bit more exciting as opposed to, like, a textbook or even just talking about it and teaching it. It makes the material come alive. It just brings out, a reality to the material that you can’t quite get in a regular setting. And it makes it more exciting and the kids get excited, too ...” (Teacher 1)

3. Diversity of Materials and Language Content

Teachers shared their challenges facing the conventional resources and materials to support the delivery of the Spanish Language and Culture program in Alberta. Although there are videos and audio tapes available, most of them are updates and reflect more the Spanish language and culture from South America. Students show less interest toward these types of materials. Also, since the outcomes of the language competence of the Spanish 30 program are very demanding, teachers feel they need different materials to reach the program expectations. The online AVE presents different multimodal learning activities which are more interesting for students and promotes greater motivation on the part of the students in participating and completing the learning activities. The online AVE also represented various examples of Spanish language and culture from around the world which is aligned with the outcomes of the Albertan’s Spanish Language and Culture program.

Table 8: Diversity of materials and language content

Subcategories	Examples of teachers’ quotes
The conventional resources made available for the Spanish programs and the online AVE	“You can find so many different types of exercises that you usually don’t have in a textbook; you’re limited in a textbook whereas there, they might have matching for one thing and then they’ll have a video; they’ll have a lot of things connected to the vocab and grammar, which you can’t find

	in regular, you know, classroom material.” (Teacher 1)
Diversity of the materials	“... you could ... possibly go through more material, in maybe less time because you have different types of approaches that the program, that the internet program provided ...” (Teacher 1)
Students’ exposure to Spanish language and a variety of Spanish cultures around the world	“And because you have a lot of mini-videos, the kids have a chance to listen to a different accent, because, the resources we are using, <i>Díme 1</i> , <i>Díme 2</i> , I mean this is mostly Latin American accent, we just have, maybe, few lessons that we have, some peoples, from Spain.” (Teacher 2)
Language lab into the classroom	“... this blending learning with the program, AVE, it’s bringing like a lab, language lab, in the classroom. We do not have a language lab, and like, well this is really, something that we are missing when you are teaching a language. So this is really a compromise, to have, this access, technology in the classroom ...” (Teacher 2)

4. Use of interactive technology to motivate and engage students in their learning

Research has consistently demonstrated that students become more engaged in their learning when the tasks are interesting to them as well as meaningful. The learning activities found in the online AVE and integrated into the F2F venue are rich and varied including interactive and multimodal content. Teachers had the opportunity to use a series of interactive activities and games that enrich the play dimension of the language study. Students demonstrated great interest and motivation in actively participating in these interactive activities.

Table 9: Use of interactive technology to motivate and engage students in their learning

Subcategories	Examples of teachers’ quotes
Students’ interaction with the technology	<p>“Well, I, I think it’s very good, to have this technology in the classroom. I guess it’s really an addition to what we, we had so far and, and we can see kids interacting, having a good time with this, something new for them ...” (Teacher 2)</p> <p>“... I think it’s effective because, actually, children nowadays are actually used to having that and they need that kind of excitement, so using the technology is actually good and it creates interest with</p>

	the student as well, so.... It motivates ...” (Teacher 1)
Students’ motivation and interest during game activities using AVE material	“I think I’m probably going to be using more of it because I got a positive reaction from the students-...” (Teacher 2) “And I think this blended learning actually gives students more of an opportunity to participate, as opposed to the usual teaching methods that we know in a classroom, right? ... I think this will actually create possibly more interaction, like student interaction, with themselves, even with the teacher ...” (Teacher 1)
Students are more motivated when using the online AVE	“Yes, definitely. I think that they’re very motivated, especially when they can actually come up and do something as opposed to the teacher doing a lot of the work. ... They’re taking more steps in interacting with the material as opposed to just listening, so I find that it’s actually much more fun for them when ...” (Teacher 1)

5. Using the blended approach with the online AVE to respond to the learners’ needs

More than ever before, language teachers are becoming aware of the need to differentiate their teaching and learning experiences in order to reach the various learning styles and needs of their language students. Teachers find that in the F2F approach, the use of conventional material does not always respond to their learners’ learning style and needs. By using a blended approach which combines the use of multimodal learning experiences like the ones found in the online AVE, teachers found it is easier to differentiate the delivery of the language content as well as the learning experiences.

Table 10: Using the blended approach with the online AVE to respond to the learners’ needs

Subcategories	Examples of teachers’ quotes
Students’ needs based on their learning styles	“... well I find that it’s very effective because as I said before it... you can use the different types of exercises that the program offers so that you can reach different types of learners. ... so you can get all of the different, aspects of the lesson in one kind of little package, which is good cause it’ll reach more people I believe, as opposed to the traditional way of teaching ... in classrooms.” (Teacher 1)
The use of online AVE in F2F to	“So you get the best of both types you

<p>differentiate the learning</p>	<p>know , like the written and the visual. You can reach almost anyone I would say, with this kind of approach. This helps with the visual portion, because sometimes teachers might draw a picture here and there but it’s not the same as having an actual video or an actual diagram.” (Teacher 1) “I guess this, this is a good way to, to reach other students than just the traditional method, you know, just the listening and watching a tape.” (Teacher 2)</p>
--	---

6. The need for professional development when implementing BT into language teaching

The implementation of the BT into a conventional language teaching approach can be an overwhelming experience for novice as well as experienced language teachers. Some type of professional development and on-going guidance and support are needed. Teachers feel that initial in-services are very helpful to get acquainted with the BT approach and the online AVE material. They also believe that it requires hands-on practice, for example, a sharing session with other teachers in order to allow the sharing of learning experiences and the planning of unit/lesson plans. They also believe that the on-going support and guidance from the support team is crucial in the beginning of the implementation process.

Table 11: The need for professional development when implementing BT into language teaching

Subcategories	Examples of teachers’ quotes
<p>In-service to implement the online AVE into the F2F venue</p>	<p>“I think that it would probably be good to have in-services or little meetings just to give teachers an idea as to how they can prepare a lesson and incorporate a certain portion of the blended learning in their lesson.” (Teacher 1)</p>
<p>Learning community</p>	<p>“Just having meetings...with teachers that are using it ... and just giving ideas to each other.” (Teacher 1)</p>

7. Use of the online resource AVE in preparation for the DELE

After a few semesters were completed using the AVE through the BL approach, students from different grades and levels involved in the project were invited to take the corresponding language credentials aligned with their Spanish proficiency level (Levels A1 and A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). These international exams are the wellknown Diplomas de Español como Lengua Extranjera (DELE) issued by the Spanish Ministry of Education.

The excellent results that the students have obtained in these exams provide some evidence to us that the implementation of the BL approach was very successful.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of the implementation of the BT, which combined the Spanish online resource AVE with the F2F conventional delivery approach for the second language Spanish program for high schools in Alberta. Findings of this study provide us with ample evidence regarding the effectiveness of the implementation of the BT approach in the delivery of the Spanish Language and Culture program in the western province of Alberta in Canada. Findings also support the outcomes of previous research on BT (Leug & Tran, 2000; Morison, 2003; Wonacott, 2002; Hinkelman, 2004, 2005; Pellerin & Roy, 2006; Motteram & Sharma, 2009; Wonacott, 2002) which suggests that combining the F2F with online learning programs promotes the maximizing of the learning experience and demonstrates great potential in impacting the language learning process. Teachers in the study still value the use of the F2F venue in their language program. The F2F approach allows learners to engage in an authentic oral dialogic process which contributes to the negotiation of meaning and the co-construction of knowledge among learners. However, not all F2F approaches reflect the socio-cultural perspective which underlines Vygotsky's notion of knowledge as being co-constructed through social interaction. Too often, the F2F approach is based on a teacher-centered approach and individual language practices which lacks the authenticity and potential for engaging all learners with different learning styles and needs. By combining the online venue into the conventional F2F approach, teachers agreed that students have greater access to a wide range of authentic content (text-based, visual, video and audio) in the target language which has a greater potential to engage multiple brain channels. In many language teaching contexts, language teachers experience limited access to authentic material for their students as well as lack of diversity in their learning resources. High school students, who are part of the *iGeneration* (Rosen, 2010), are used to social interactions and access information through a variety of modalities. In order to engage and be motivated to learn, they need to perceive the learning activities as meaningful and authentic, as well as linking with their real life. The BT approach with the use of the AVE online supports this kind of meaningful and authentic learning by providing a variety of digital content through spoken and written text, music, photos, videos and audio recordings and interactive learning activities. Such multimodal language content supports the use of student-centered approach where students are actively engaged in their learning through dialogic interaction, negotiation of meaning, and co-construction of knowledge during collaborative and interactive activities.

To this day, there are a fair amount of language teachers and program designers who are still hanging on to old teaching beliefs and emphasize teacher-centered and individual drills and practice approach. A move away from the traditional language teaching paradigm in favour of the adoption of a student centered approach is sometimes perceived by these same believers that the development of the language competency will somehow be compromised. A greater emphasis in socio-cultural and socio-constructivist perspectives in the field of SLA (e.g. Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) have helped in gaining greater understanding about language learning being a social endeavor, which therefore takes place not only in the mind of the learner, but also through social interaction. Therefore, language competency will develop through the creation of meaningful learning experiences that take place through social interaction, collaborative and

interactive learning activities. The delivery of rich and meaningful learning experiences found in the BT approach (the use of the online AVE in the F2F classroom delivery approach) holds great potential in promoting negotiation of meaning, meta-linguistic awareness and co-construction of knowledge which, in turn, has a direct impact on the language learning process.

Thus, the adoption of a BT meets the expectations of the Spanish Language and Culture programs prescribed by Alberta Education and enhances the quality and effectiveness of its delivery process. Like one teacher participant said: “It does bring the material alive. It just brings out a reality to the material that you can’t quite get in a regular setting” (Teacher 1). By using more authentic resources and meaningful learning experiences (Chapelle, 2000), it further promotes the use of the target language by the students and impacts the development of the language competency. The teachers in the study have also experienced that by using multimodal language content as well as multi sensorial learning experiences, there are greater possibilities to respond to the different learners’ learning styles and needs. In a way, the adoption of the BT approach also promotes the adoption of a differentiated approach to teaching and learning in the language classroom.

Finally, to fully assure the success of the implementation process of the BT approach with the online AVE resource, it requires initial professional development which provides teaching strategies and authentic examples of the implementation of the online AVE to the F2F delivery. Hands-on practice with the online AVE has also been identified as important for teachers before its implementation in the F2F classroom. The development of a community of learning is also perceived by teachers as important to support and guide the implementation process, as well as to provide sustainability to the whole initiative.

Significance of the study, implication, and conclusion

This research study concerning the effectiveness of the implementation of BT in the Spanish Language classrooms in Alberta is significant. The outcomes of the study clearly demonstrate that the use of BT approach with the use of the online AVE resource had a positive impact on the students’ attitudes towards the study of the Spanish language, the students’ motivation and their participation levels, as well as their use of the target language in the classroom. It also supports a paradigm shift in the language learning and teaching that recognizes the necessity to provide students with greater authentic learning experiences involving the use of technology in order to respond to the needs of all language learners.

This study has clear limitations since we were only able to focus on one particular urban school district in the province of Alberta and being limited to two teachers from two different senior high schools in the same city. Therefore, further studies need to be achieved with a greater number of participants in order to be able to generalize its impact on the Spanish Language programs in the province of Alberta as well as elsewhere in Canada. Moreover, many rural school boards in the same province, as well as elsewhere in the country, are faced with the challenges of a shortage of qualified Spanish Language teachers and limited access to authentic Spanish language materials in order to maximize the language learning experience of the students. Therefore, further research would also be needed to better understand the possibilities and benefits of the BT with the online AVE resource in the rural classroom setting and remote areas across the province and the country.

Finally, the demand to prepare students for the DELE international exam has been growing very substantially, not only in the province of Alberta, but also everywhere in the country. In our study, the online AVE resource in combination with the F2F teaching approach has appeared to be instrumental in the preparation of the International Spanish Diplomas (DELE) for one teacher and her students. Therefore, this connection of the BT approach with the use of online AVE resource in preparation for the DELE examination merits further investigation.

References

- Alberta Education. (2010). *Programs of Study*. Retrieved from <http://education.alberta.ca>
- Chapelle, C. (2001). *Computer applications in second language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages. Learning, teaching, assessment. (2001)*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Donato, R. (1994). Collective scaffolding in second language learning. In J.P. Lantolf & G. Appel (Eds.), *Vygotskian approach to second language research* (pp. 157-172). Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.
- Dudeny, G. (2000). *The Internet and the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: UP.
- Hinkelman, D. (2004). EML and implication for task design in blended L2 environments [Online]. Retrieved from http://www.paccall.org/past_events/2004proceedings_papers/hinkelman1.pdf
- Hinkelman, D. (2005). Blended learning: Issues driving an end to laboratory-based CALL. *JALT Hokkaido Journal*, 9, 17-31. Retrieved from http://www.jalthokkaido.net/jh_journal/2005/Hinkelman.pdf
- Instituto Cervantes. (2006). *Plan curricular del Instituto Cervantes. Niveles de referencia para el español*. Madrid: Biblioteca nueva.
- Instituto Cervantes. (2010a). Aula Virtual de Español. Retrieved from <http://ave.cervantes.es>
- Instituto Cervantes. (2010b). *¡Hola, amigos!*. Retrieved from http://www.cervantes.es/lengua_y_ensenanza/aprender_espanol/cursos_holamigos_internet.htm
- Lamy, M. N. & Hampel, R. (2007). *Online communication in language teaching and learning*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Lantolf, J. (Ed.). (2000). *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University.
- Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University.

- Leung, T. Y., & Tran, S. Y. S. (2000). Integrating the strengths of the web-based and traditional models of teaching. International Vocational Education and Training Association Conference, Hong Kong, China, August 6-9, 2000. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 446 247).
- Motteram, G. & Sharma, P. (2009). Blending learning in a web 2.0 world: <http://www.swinburne.edu.au/hosting/ijets/journal/V7N2/pdf/Article2-Motteram&Sharma.pdf>
- Ohta, A. S. (2000). Rethinking interaction in SLA: Developmentally appropriate assistance in the zone of proximal development and the acquisition of L2 grammar. In J. Lantolf, (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 97-114). Oxford, UK: Oxford University.
- Pellerin, M. & Roy, S. (2006). Blended teaching approach: Blending face-to-face language teaching and learning with online technology. Paper presented at the CALL 2006 Conference, Antwerp, Belgium, Proceedings of the Twelve International CALL Conference, Antwerp: University of Antwerp.
- Pellerin, M. (2005). Paradigm shift in the use of the new technologies of communication in the language classroom: A video ethnography study. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.
- Pellerin, M. (2008). Dialogic inquiry-based learning approach for SLA. In S. Roy and C. Berlinguette (Eds.), *Emerging Social and Language Issues in Canada/Enjeux linguistiques et sociaux au Canada en devenir* (pp. 107-140).Blitzprint.Inc. Canada.
- Rosen, L. D. (2010). *Rewired: Understanding the iGeneration and the way they learn*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Soler Montes, C. (2008). Evaluación y variación lingüística: La dimensión diatópica de la lengua en la certificación de la competencia en español/ lengua extranjera. In F. Puig (Ed.), *Evaluación. Marcoele Monográficos 7* (pp. 122-136). Retrieved from <http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/redalyc/pdf/921/92100711.pdf>
- Swain, M. (1998). Focus on form through conscious reflection. In C. Doughty & J. Williams (Eds.), *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition* (pp. 64-81). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Swain, M. (2000). The output hypothesis and beyond: Mediating acquisition through collaborative dialogue. In J. Lantolf, (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 97-114). Oxford, UK: Oxford University.
- Swain, M. & Lapkin, S., (1998). Interaction and second language learning: Two adolescent French immersion students working together. *Modern Language Journal*, 82(3), 320-337.
- Thorne, S.L., (2008). Mediating technologies and second language learning. In Leu, D., Coiro, J., Lankshear, C., & Knobel, *Handbook of Research on New Literacies* (pp. 417-449). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Warschauer, M., & Kern, R., (2000). *Network-assisted language teaching: Concepts and practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University.

Wells, G., (1999). *Dialogic inquiry: Toward a sociocultural practice and theory of education*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University.

Wonacott, M. E. (2002). Blending face-to-face and distance learning methods in adult and career-technical education. Practice application brief No. 23. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED470783).

Authors

Dr. Martine Pellerin is an assistant professor in the Education sector at Campus Saint-Jean of the University of Alberta. Her scholarship background is in the field of second language acquisition and educational technologies. Her research interests lie in several areas: 1) Second language teaching and learning with the use of technologies; 2) Using Mobiles Technologies to Support and Promote Differentiated Instruction in French Immersion. Email: pellerin@ualberta.ca

Carlos Soler Montes was acting as a collaborator in the writing of the article. Carlos Soler Montes was the coordinator of the Aula Cervantes at The University of Calgary. Since August 2011, he has joined the Instituto Cervantes of Albuquerque (New Mexico) as Academic Director. Email: carlos.soler@cervantes.es



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License.