

EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE SPANISH EDUCATORS OF HYBRID TEACHING TRAINING

Ana Capanegra*
Cleveland State University

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims at the implementation of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) advancements on the role of educators in technology-enhanced language learning. It reviewed perceptions of foreign language instructors and teaching assistants regarding the quality of the training for the teaching of hybrid courses at an urban university in the Midwest. The incorporation of the pedagogical aspect to the online component helped them with class dynamics that fostered learning and retention. Additionally, they formed a learning community to share their experiences of pedagogical issues.

Keywords: blended teaching; teacher training; higher education; foreign languages; professional development

RESUMEN

El presente estudio apunta a la implementación de los avances del *Consejo Americano para la Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras* en referencia al rol de los educadores en el uso de la tecnología mejorada en el aprendizaje de otros idiomas. El estudio examinó las percepciones de los instructores y alumnos asistentes de lenguas extranjeras con respecto a la calidad del entrenamiento a la enseñanza de cursos híbridos en una universidad urbana en el oeste medio de los Estados Unidos. La incorporación del aspecto pedagógico al componente en línea los ayudó con la dinámica de la clase favoreciendo así el aprendizaje y la retención. Adicionalmente, se formó una comunidad de aprendizaje para compartir las experiencias de temas pedagógicos.

Palabras claves: enseñanza híbrida; entrenamiento de educadores; enseñanza avanzada; lenguas extranjeras; desarrollo profesional.

* Author's email: a.capanegra@csuohio.edu

Introduction

The *ACTFL Position Statement of the Role of Technology on Language Learning* (2017) recommended leveraging the use of technology to enhance language instruction and learning. ACTFL further advocated instructors to use effective technology applications since the success of language learning is based on the interaction students have with their instructor rather than the use of technology in isolation. Consequently, it approved the redesign of method of instruction such as hybrid learning, online or distance learning when language opportunities are standard-based, classes are student-centered, and the students' needs are taken into account in lesson planning and assessment.

If the hybrid classroom is now so prevalent and effective, then instructors need strong pedagogical guidance to manage this online medium along with the transformation of their role. Thus, to ensure high levels of competence, pedagogical understanding, and teaching effectiveness, teachers as well as institutions need to invest much more time, effort and commitment into such learning (Comas-Quinn, 2011).

This research evaluates the training of a diverse population of instructors and teaching assistants who teach hybrid courses at an urban university. Urban educational student populations are highly diverse in their ethnic, cultural and economic characteristics (Rajagopal, 2011). Consequently, the purpose of the present study is to explore the experience of Spanish instructors and TAs in training sessions that fostered the integration of technology into beginning level language teaching classes at a Midwestern urban university.

Literature Review

With the increased presence of technology in foreign language classes nationally (Comas-Quinn, 2011; Kirkwood, A., & Price, L., 2005; Lam, 2000; Levy & Hubbard, 2005; Murdayet al., 2008), few research studies offer guidelines on evaluating the quality of both instruction and of the class itself. A number of scholars (Comas-Quinn, 2011; Demetriadis et al., 2003; Murdayet al., 2008) have advocated further training and guidance for instructors in order for students to succeed at online language learning. Lack of training might bring a lack of confidence regarding the incorporation of technology (Goertler, 2009; Lam, 2000; Zemsky & Massy, 2004). Also, many institutions have incorporated technology in the language classroom and welcomed teacher training (Arnold & Ducate, 2015). This literature review discusses the general research conducted in relation to online and hybrid learning effectiveness.

Previous Studies

Several studies have showed the efficacy of hybrid learning. Scida and Saury (2006) conducted a study with lower language level students and compared the performance of a hybrid class with a traditional class. The results of their study showed that the use of computers at lower language levels helped because computers can be used as tutors helping the learners practice vocabulary and structures and ultimately aiding communication. Not only is considerable investment needed towards the use of computers in language programs, but also careful planning of lessons and development of the multimedia environment (Bañados, 2006). Pellerin and Montes (2012) conducted a case study on the teaching of Spanish in a Beginner level class through the use of blended teaching and found that students' attitudes, motivation and participation levels towards blended learning were positive.

Likewise, the implementation of new technologies in the language classroom also offer several challenges. In order for the teachers to become confident users and supporters of their students, they need to be trained. Wang et al. (2010) examined the online teacher training process in a synchronous cyber F2F environment. The results of the study showed that it is essential to offer

trainee teachers the kind of support they need when they need it, be it pedagogical, technological or psychological. Another study conducted by Son (2006) used online discussion groups in a CALL teacher training course. The findings showed that the teachers' reactions to the discussion group were positive and contributed to collaborative learning. Also, Beriswill et al. (2016), who followed the Common Core State Standards, prepared teachers in economically disadvantaged schools to promote the innovative use of technology in the classroom. The participants explored content, pedagogy and technology. The pre- and post-tests of the study revealed a significant level of improvement in all three levels. However, not only the teachers, but also the students need to be educated on how and why they should use the new technologies (Kirkwood & Price, 2005). Murday et al. (2008) examined students' and instructors' satisfaction with language hybrid courses. The results of the study showed that students were more satisfied with online courses than traditional ones. However, the recurring themes among instructors were the need of more training, course materials and connection with students.

While the use of CALL has become the norm in most language programs, Kessler (2006) has demonstrated a lack of preparation in language teacher training. Training should be extensive with regular support (Demetriadis et al., 2003). Training in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is generally welcomed by instructors (Demetriadis et al., 2003). Gallardo de Puerto & Gamboa (2009) showed how important it is to train teachers in the use of technology in the language classroom. They conducted a study in relation to second language instructors' needs and beliefs about information and computer technology and language learning. The results of the study showed that teachers' use of technology was neither very sophisticated nor productive. They seldom used computers as a means to foster collaboration and interaction in language learning. The findings revealed that there was a strong need for CALL training. Another study conducted by De Laat et al. (2006) showed the relevance training has to help assume the new role to conduct an effective online class. The online teaching styles of two teachers were examined. It was concluded that the teacher with the least experience and training was the one who delivered classes in a more teacher-centered way than student-centered, and the instructor had a weaker involvement with the online learning community than the trained peer teacher. Therefore, if coordinators do help to build a learning community among online teachers and aid them in regularly reflecting and sharing their experiences on pedagogical issues, this guidance will enhance the success of any online course (Ernest & Hopkins, 2006).

Additionally, some of the different skills enumerated in the literature with regard to CALL training are as follows: First, teachers should become familiar with a variety of information regarding computers, software, hardware and lab use to develop a skillful understanding of the use of CALL (Chapelle & Hegelheimer, 2004). Second, for the teaching to be effective, there should be an integration of both the pedagogical and the technical aspects for effective teaching and learning outcomes (Hubbard & Levy, 2006). Third, the training and integration must be ongoing (Northrup & Little, 1996), and instructors should be retrained as new technologies and materials are developed/accessible in the market (Halttunen, 2002). Consequently, "Our knowledge and use of CALL should not rely solely on the skills we acquire as we dabble in personal use of the Web, email and online chatting" (Kessler, 2006 p. 26). Teachers must be trained to be prepared to make important decisions regarding the manner of implementation in CALL (Jones, 2001). One of the few who have looked at the teachers' attitudes towards the use of technology, Kadel (2005) stated that teachers must be open to new things and be willing to invest time. To examine the effectiveness of teacher training in hybrid classes, the following questions guided the present research:

- How do Spanish instructors and teaching assistants (TAs) teaching urban students react to blended teaching after training?
- Has training for blended teaching aided instructors and TAs in teaching?

- How has their teaching been affected by the incorporation of technology?
- How do their views contribute to the improvement of the future training and the teaching of hybrid courses to urban students?

Research Design

The present study was conducted in at a Midwestern urban university that just had incorporated hybrid teaching in foreign language instruction at the elementary level. Thirteen sections were using hybrid teaching in their classes. The researcher set up the blended courses. Four TAs and four instructors were invited to participate by the researcher. Seven agreed to participate. All the participants were trained by the researcher on how to teach blended courses. All the participants had a minimum of a three-day training of seven hours each day prior to the beginning of the semester of instruction. The Teacher Training Agenda was as follows: On the first day of the training workshop, a tech specialist explained the software they needed to familiarize themselves with such as activities, gradebook, exams, correction, due dates, students asking for help, and the general use of the online text. On day two of the workshop, the researcher related how they could bring together the pedagogical aspect of F2F teaching by giving mini-mock classes on how to align the F2F teaching with the online component. The class expectations were also discussed: First, classes should focus on developing language proficiency following the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (2012) in relation to the language performance outcomes. Second, classes should center on communication practicing the interpersonal, interpretive and presentational modes set by *ACTFL World Readiness Standards for Language Learning* (2015) as well as developing their cultural competence by making connections to other disciplines and comparisons. Third, classes should be more student-centered than teacher-centered. On the third day, the instructors and TAs brought their questions and a tour was organized to show them the technology that they as well as the students would be using during class time and how they should help students understand the online materials.

Some classes had F2F instruction on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and did their assigned online work on Tuesdays and Thursdays; others met on Tuesdays and Thursdays and worked on their online activities on Mondays and Wednesdays. The online activities that were assigned to them were selected activities provided by the textbook *Vistas*; not more than 6 to 9 were assigned on each of these days. These activities ranged from listening comprehension, video or reading comprehension, games, writing or cultural activities, to vocabulary or grammar activities that served mainly as revision or practice. Some activities were created by the researcher.

Also, during the course of the semester, TAs met regularly with the researcher to follow-up and to pose any questions or concerns they might have. The instructors e-mailed the researcher with any inquiries they had.

This qualitative study included one questionnaire (Appendix A) of 18 items that included open-ended- and closed-ended questions. The questionnaire was administered at the end of the semester of instruction to explore the different perceptions the instructors and TAs had of the training of blended teaching.

The researcher predicted that the participants' attitude towards the training in teaching blended courses would be positive. At the same time, if different perceptions were to be found, these would help future training designs to enhance hybrid learning instruction.

Methodology

Participants

The elementary language program at the Midwestern urban university was rather small in size, a group of eight instructors altogether. All eight subjects were invited to participate in this study; however, only seven consented. Threewere Spanish lecturers and four TAs who agreed to participate. Out of the seven participants, two were males and five were females. The body of

participants was diverse in age and origin as well as in teaching experience. Their ages ranged from 19 to 49 years. There were three Americans, one Italian, and three Hispanics in origin. They were all trained in the teaching of blended courses by the researcher.

The three female instructors' teaching experience ranged between 10 years to 25 years of teaching either Spanish or Italian or both languages. All of them had used technology for many years, such as Power Point or by assigning online homework. One of them had taken 25 required credit-bearing courses that involved teaching with technology; another, nine required credit-bearing courses; and the other one, none. However, foreign language blended teaching was new to all of them.

The teaching assistants' teaching experience ranged from one semester to nine years of teaching Spanish. Two of them made use of technology in the language class: Power Point or Smartboards; the other two had no experience teaching with technology. Only one had taken two required credit-bearing courses in the degree program that involved the use of technology: One Math class and one French class; the other three had taken none.

Their onsite teaching would mainly involve practicing of listening and speaking; students would occasionally have other activities to complete such as a reading or short written activity. Students would work in pairs or groups during this time. The instructor would go over some grammar when needed. The class was student-centered so as to foster student independence. The online activities were set up by the researcher at the beginning of the semester. These activities came from the online textbook or had been created by the researcher. Students would sporadically have to instruct themselves about a new topic or learn new vocabulary online. One day prior to the test unit, students would take an online practice test.

Instrument of Data Collection

A questionnaire was administered to all of the instructors and TAs at the end of the semester of instruction of the hybrid course. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather their perspectives about the training of the teaching of hybrid courses. The questionnaire consisted of 18 items: close-ended and open-ended questions (Appendix A). An interview was not used as an instrument since the researcher was a figure of authority and considered that the participants' answers could be affected.

Data Collection Procedure

At the end of the semester, the participants were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire of 18 items. The questionnaire was mailed to the participants on the last day of class and the participants were asked to complete it within a week. The questionnaire was brief and questions short and direct (Ary et al., 2006). The questionnaire included closed-ended and open-ended questions. A few questions were adapted from a survey used by Kessler, 2006. A content analysis approach was used to analyze their answers. For closed-ended questions the data was tallied by counting the number of "yes" and "no" answers. For open-ended questions and explanations, the data was analyzed in detail by examining the participants' responses and establishing the recurrent topics (Ary et al., 2006; Dörnyei & Tagushi, 2009).

Findings

Attitude towards the Use of Technology

As the participants' background and teaching experience varied considerably, they were asked about their views on the use of technology in the classroom. The participants' responses were tallied in Table 1.

Table 1

(N=7)

Respondent Attitudes towards the Use of Technology

Item #	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not important at all	
10. How important is for you to teach with technology?		4	2	1	0

Out of the seven participants, four considered teaching with technology in the language classroom very important. These participants were the ones with the most experience in the use of technology either because they took classes that involved the use of technology in their degree program or had been teaching the longest. However, two thought it was important, and one commented “but not indispensable.” One participant considered it “somewhat important.” This last participant had not taken any classes that involved the use of technology and had no experience teaching a foreign language.

Past and Current Training

Table 2 summarizes the participants’ responses concerning their previous and current training on blended teaching:

Table 2

(N=7)

Respondent Answers towards Past and Present Teacher Training

Item #	Yes	No	No answer
11. Have you ever received any training in your degree program that involved teaching with technology?	3	4	
12. Have you benefitted from the training on blended learning provided by the institution?	6		1

Out of the seven participants, only three stated that they had received training in their degree program that involved teaching with technology. One of the participants indicated that teaching with technology was included in the classes in her degree program since it was important to be trained in the use of technology in the classes. Two others stated they had some basic training that involved teaching with technology. However, six participants out of seven stated that they benefitted from the training on blended learning provided by the institution. One of the participants mentioned that the information provided during the training “was focused enough to adequately inform without overloading.” Another participant commented that the training helped to “gain experience” in the teaching of blended courses. One other explained that it helped in the understanding of the use of technologies and resources for class delivery. Additionally, another mentioned it helped in the organization of the course itself. Finally, one added that the “training provides experience and knowledge about the innovative teaching environment.” These comments suggest relief on the part of the instructors and TAs and readiness to teach these new courses after they were trained.

Positive and Negative Impact of the Training

When asked how the online component informed their teaching, six out of seven participants elaborated on their positive answers. Two out of the seven participants commented that they were able to learn how to focus more on the students’ oral skills during class time which helped make

classes more active. Two other participants pointed out that the workload was less since “I did not have to take the time to prepare the material beforehand” and “I do less explaining and the students do more exercises.” Another participant expressed, “I can focus on more critical needs, such as addressing individual student issues and knowledge gaps” and that classes were more student-centered than teacher-centered as they had two sources of instruction. One participant felt that the students were “more confident and prepared for class.” These are all positive comments considering the participants were teaching a language blended course for the first time; their observations reflect confidence as far as their understanding of the new environment of the language class and their workload are concerned.

However, when asked about what the training lacked on question 14, two of the instructors believed students needed more training at the beginning of the course to understand what the online component entailed. Another TA stated that it would have been useful to explain to students the reasoning behind using blended courses to deal with “the intense push-back to buying the book.” Considering that a number of the students take the class as a requirement at this level, sometimes they do not want to spend money, even though they will use the text extensively. The rest of the participants said the training did not lack anything for them regarding teaching blended courses.

Impact of Training on F2F Teaching

When asked how the training aided their teaching in question 15, all the participants’ responses were positive. On the one hand, one instructor referred to the fact that it helped organized her coursework better; another instructor referred to the fact that there was less correction involved, and a third instructor emphasized that it had aided the implementation of technology in the class. All these remarks referred mainly to the better use of time and lesson enhancement.

On the other hand, the TAs’ opinions varied significantly as to how the training aided their actual teaching to help students’ success: One reported that “it allowed me to focus on more important subjects or to teach more difficult topics.” Another TA commented that it was helpful that the training focused more on the actual classroom teaching. A third TA felt the fact that the training focused on class management, teaching strategies, and behavior issues, it covered a number of scenarios that might arise in the classroom as well as with the use of technology.

The different views could be due to the fact that the instructors had more experience teaching and, consequently, they focused on other aspects of the training. Despite the fact the training aided the participants differently, it ultimately helped their management of the new teaching environment.

Integration of Pedagogical Aspect and Technology

All of the participants but one (six out of seven) expressed they were able to integrate the pedagogical aspect and the use of technology effectively. The participants’ responses are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3

(N=7)

Respondents Answers on Effective Integration

Item #	Yes	No	I do not know
16. Were you able to incorporate the pedagogical aspect and the use of technology effectively?	6	0	1

Out of the seven participants, five expressed that the online component helped them to focus more on the students’ speaking abilities during class time. One considered the online listening activities were helpful to improve listening skills; another was of the opinion that with the online

activities there was more “flexibility” when teaching. Two others expressed that there was a better connection with the students. One of them remarked that the learners were more involved in class time since they had already practiced the grammar at home which helped for more effective use of class time in practice and correction.

The New Learning Environment

Although new technologies enhance language teaching, instructors might be reluctant to incorporate them fearing they would be forced to change how they teach (Goertler, 2009). However, seven out of the seven participants validated their affirmative choice for question 17.

Table 4

(N=7)

Respondents Answers of Attitudes towards the New Learning Environment

Item #	Yes	No	No	Answer
17. Do you think blended learning is effective to teach beginner students?	7	0		18
Would you recommend frequent training to teach blended courses?		6		1

Two participants elaborated that this style of learning gave more room to conversation and less focus on grammar, and that it motivated students “in a sense of discovery.” However, a TA expressed that the new environment could sometimes be a bit overwhelming for beginner students. Another TA expressed that students have a chance to practice more. Moreover, an instructor expressed that this learning environment was effective for responsible students and not for irresponsible ones and emphasized the fact that students should be given a more rigorous training. Another TA noted that students found the online work “burdensome.” However, “the regular structure and format allow the students to understand the consistent expectations and rhythm of the course.” Students benefitted from regular and instant feedback since they “regularly do not seek out interaction with the instructor if it can be avoided.”

Out of the seven participants, six recommended frequent training in the teaching of blended courses. Their reasons and interpretations varied somewhat in their answers. Three of them agreed that it is necessary to keep up-dated with technological changes as this would benefit their teaching. Another one agreed and disagreed indicating that when needed, there should be training: “I personally didn’t feel like I needed additional training since we can rely on tech support and ask any questions any time we need.” Additionally, the TA expressed: “It took me almost no effort to accustom myself to the system and the students were also with the program very quickly. It facilitates progress through the course in a way it allows students and teachers to focus on more pressing tasks.” Also, another TA stated: “I think that the frequent workshops and exchange of ideas will help us improve our teaching practices and have group uniformity to unify the teaching methods.”

Limitations of the Study

This study was mainly exploratory because of the number of participants in the unit. It sheds light on aspects to consider when training language instructors to teach online. The study should be replicated with a larger population to gather more data for a broader understanding of the participants’ attitudes. The participants were asked to complete a true/false questionnaire and they were given the opportunity to justify their answers to measure the participants’ perceptions. A questionnaire was used in this study so as not to affect the participants’ answers because of the power relation between the researcher and the participants. In a future study, detailed interviews should be used to collect more data.

Interpretations and Implications

The *ACTFL Position Statement of the Role of Technology on Language Learning* (2017) recognized the advantages the use of technology in the language classroom can bring to language learning. Furthermore, ACTFL acknowledged a role for digital learning: hybrid, online and distance learning. However, these instructional models should be coordinated with the state and national standards and facilitated by language instructors. Moreover, some scholars agreed in that the use of technology in the language classroom enhances instruction (Levy & Hubbard, 2005) and, it was regarded as an indispensable part in teaching today (Lam, 2000).

Comas Quinn (2011) suggested that training instructors to teach online can help ease misinterpretations. As far as the training the language instructors received to teach blended courses, their comments showed that the training informed them about the new technologies and resources available for the classes, and it was focused enough so as not to overwhelm them. They became familiar with information needed regarding computers, software and hardware for the use of CALL (Chapelle & Hegelheimer, 2004).

Additionally, some instructors believe that educational technology can be confusing and discouraging for users (Zemsky & Massy, 2004). After the training, the majority of the participants expressed that the training had a positive impact on their teaching since it helped in class organization, class focus, students' needs, and class management as classes had two sources of instruction. However, a few participants expressed concern regarding students' training.

Despite the above considerations, the majority indicated that the training also helped them in the integration of both the pedagogical and technological aspects (Hubbard & Levy, 2006). They expressed that their classes became more "flexible." They improved class delivery, and their rapport with students improved. Also, this group of teachers was extremely diverse in age, experience, origin, and professional needs. Therefore, the training sessions covered a wide variety of scenarios to try to support each and every one of their needs, such class management and class delivery, teaching strategies, and the use of computer technology. The actual training gave them the support and confidence they needed to feel comfortable in this new learning environment.

Furthermore, all the participants considered that blended learning is effective for teaching beginner students. Also, the majority of participants recommended frequent training so as to be updated on new technology; as Northrup & Little (1996) suggested, training and integration should be ongoing. However, a few did not consider the idea of collaborative learning and the benefits for teaching.

Moreover, the *ACTFL Position Statement of the Role of Technology on Language Learning* (2017) encouraged educators to use content knowledge, research-based teaching strategies and digital tools to support language learning. Consequently, this exploratory study considers various aspects of training a diverse body of language instructors to teach online: First, teachers and students should be educated on how and why they should use the new technologies (Chapelle & Hegelheimer, 2004; Kirkwood & Price, 2005). If the students and teachers are proficient in the use of the new technologies, they will be able to relate better as they will understand this new learning environment. Second, language instructors need to be trained on how to integrate the pedagogical and technological aspects in their classes (Hubbard & Levy, 2006) for effective teaching to foster students' success. Not only should the training be straightforward, but it should also meet every teacher's needs (Wang et al., 2010), especially when the group of trainees is diverse in experience, age and origin. Third, training and integration should be ongoing (Northrup & Little, 1996). Coordinators should offer workshops regularly to help build a learning community among online instructors to share their experience on pedagogical issues. This regular interaction will help them reflect on their teaching and benefit the success of the course (Ernest & Hopkins, 2006). The

continuous collaborative practice among experienced and new language educators can help establish a learning community to exchange and contemplate teaching practices, examine their own beliefs, and life experiences. Reflection can affect professional growth and help instructors reach their full potential (Pedro, 2006). However, reflective practices of teachers should be proactive to guide any future actions (Farrell, 2004) such as collaborative learning among peers

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Appendix A**QUESTIONNAIRE**

Please complete the questionnaire as thoroughly and accurately as possible.

- 1) Nationality: _____
- 2) Gender: _____
- 3) Age Range: 19 – 29 30 – 39 40 – 49 50 - 59 60 - 69
- 4) Academic Position: Teacher Assistant _____ Lecturer/Instructor _____
- 5) Years teaching: _____
- 6) Languages you teach: _____
- 7) What's your experience teaching with technology?
- 8) How many courses did you take in your degree program that involved teaching with technology?
- 9) Were these courses required?

YES _____ NO _____

- 10) How important is for you to teach with technology?

_____ VERY IMPORTANT
 _____ IMPORTANT
 _____ SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT
 _____ NOT IMPORTANT AT ALL

- 11) Have you ever received any training in your degree program that involved teaching with technology?

YES _____ NO _____

If so, please specify

- 12) Have you benefitted from the training on blended learning provided by the institution?

YES _____ NO _____

Please explain

- 13) How has the online component impacted your teaching?
- 14) In your opinion, what has the training lacked to teach urban beginner FL learners?
- 15) How has the training aided your teaching?
- 16) Were you able to integrate the pedagogical aspect and the use of technology effectively?

YES _____ NO _____ I DO NOT KNOW _____

Please explain.

- 17) Do you think blended learning is effective to teach beginner students?

YES _____ NO _____

Please explain.

18) Would you recommend frequent training to teach blended courses?

YES _____

NO _____

Please explain.