

**E-Campus Grant Report**  
**“Online Language Learning: A Comparative Evaluation of Proficiency Outcomes”**  
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**Objective:**

To collect both qualitative and quantitative data that provides information about the proficiency outcomes students are reaching in online language courses and how these compare to face-to-face (f2f) courses in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Oregon State University. Specifically this study looks at overall language proficiency and how this is supported by both environments.

**Methodology:**

*Sample*

Only Spanish courses were evaluated since these have the largest enrollment and are most accessible. Findings for these courses are representative for other language courses, thus recommendations benefit all online language courses.

A total of 12 sections were evaluated (approximately 300 students, with 100 students responding and choosing to participate: 45 on campus, 55 online). The sections were paired (1 e-campus and 1 on-campus) for SPAN 111, 112, 113, and SPAN 211, 212, 213, in order to compare on campus sections to online sections. Initially there were 132 responses, however, only 100 of these resulted in complete and valid data.

Whenever possible paired sections preferably taught by the same instructor were chosen. In cases where this was not possible, instructors using the same teaching methodology and syllabus for both online and on campus courses were selected, in order to control the variable of pedagogy.

Instructors did not assist in the collection of data, and were not be given access to the data in order to avoid bias or limit the number of students willing to participate in the study. Even with these precautions in mind, it was very difficult to get online students to participate in this study, and numerous attempts had to be made in order to recruit a large enough sample from which to draw some initial conclusions.

*Surveys*

A survey was developed in order to gather information on student background, general demographics, and previous experience with language learning and online courses. This survey collected the same demographical data as the survey used in the previous study

(2009-2010), but it also expanded the original survey to include additional information about students and their comfort and experience levels using online resources.

### ***Language Proficiency Exam***

A Spanish language proficiency exam was purchased (Versant, by Pearson Publishers) in order to measure overall language proficiency of each of the students recruited for the study. The exam was administered at the end of the course(s) in fall 2010, winter 2011 and spring 2011. Students were able to follow a set of instructions that took them through the exam via telephone. Results from the exam were accessible to the student participant and the researcher online once the term was completed and grades had been turned in by the instructor. No one else had access to the results.

### ***Use of course assessments***

Whenever possible student performance (in the form of grades or holistic assessments) in additional course assessments shared by both the online courses and the on campus courses were used to compare student outcomes in both media. For example oral and written midterms and finals were included and analyzed for general tendencies. However, these proved to be too subjective for the study, and varied too widely from instructor to instructor and from course to course. In the final analysis, it was more reliable to stay with the proficiency exam as the most objective measure of oral proficiency and performance for both on campus and off campus courses.

### ***Literature Review***

A thorough review of the most recent research literature available is in the process of being completed in order to fully support the research questions and establish a base of comparison for the findings. Once this research is summarized, it will form part of future publications from this study and the previous study conducted on the topic.

### **Timeline:**

- |             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Fall 2010   | develop the literature review, create the research instruments, and submit IRB research forms, choose sample and gather data for fall term.<br>Administer proficiency exam and survey at the end of the term. |
| Winter 2010 | gather data for winter term, choose sample, administer proficiency exam and survey at the end of term.  |
| Spring 2010 | gather data for winter term, choose sample, administer proficiency exam and survey at the end of term.  |

Summer 2010 Data analysis, organization of findings, report and presentation preparation. Conference presentations and manuscript submission will occur in the following academic year.

**Research Questions:**

1. How do e-campus course outcomes in language proficiency compare to face-to-face courses?
2. What pedagogical approaches and techniques are used in e-campus courses to help students reach proficiency outcomes?
3. How does language proficiency attained differ within each environment (on campus vs. online)?
4. What improvements/recommendations can be made in developing language proficiency?

**Initial Findings:**

The following table summarizes demographic data and general background information about the sample’s experience with language learning in f2f and online environments:

**TABLE 1  
Demographics and General Information on Sample**

On campus students, N=45	E-Campus students, N=55
Age range 18-60 years old	Age range 20-53 years old
Mean age 19	Mean age 21
Majority of students 19-23 years old	Majority of students 21-27 years old
Gender: M-16, F-29	Gender: M-25, F-30
Degree seeking? 100% yes	Degree seeking? 50 yes, 5 no
Most common disciplines: Undeclared Public Health Business	Most common disciplines: Public Health Business Education Undeclared
Year in college: Freshman - 11 Sophomore - 9 Junior - 8 Senior - 6 5 <sup>th</sup> yr - 1 6 <sup>th</sup> yr - 1	Year in college: Freshman - 0 Sophomore - 5 Junior - 10 Senior - 21 5 <sup>th</sup> yr - 6 6 <sup>th</sup> yr - 9

grad - 1	grad/post bacc - 4
Taken Spanish before? Yes-42, No-3	Taken Spanish before? Yes-26, No-29
Taken languages other than Spanish? Yes-8, No-37 (French, German, Romanian)	Taken languages other than Spanish? Yes-19, No-36 (Russian, Italian, French)
Taken online language courses before? Yes-1 No-44	Taken online language courses before? Yes- 22, No-33
Taken online courses before? (not language) yes-20, no-25	Taken online courses before? (not language) yes-100%
Ability to practice outside of course? Yes-30, No-15	Ability to practice outside of course? Yes-23, No-32
Studied Abroad for Spanish? Yes-2, No-43	Studied Abroad for Spanish? No-100%
Motivation for taking Spanish: Want to learn to speak-35 Requirement-20 Other-2 (career, enrichment)	Motivation for taking Spanish: Want to learn to speak-43 Requirement-10 Other-12 (career, enrichment, travel)
Level of comfort with technology: Not comfortable at all-0 Somewhat comfortable-1 Neutral-8 Comfortable-18 Very comfortable-18	Level of comfort with technology: Not comfortable at all-0 Somewhat comfortable-0 Neutral-8 Comfortable-27 Very comfortable-20

### ***Oral Proficiency Exam***

The Spanish Oral Proficiency Exam was administered to Spanish courses at both the first and second year levels. Initially, the data was divided to reflect each class (SPA 111, 112, 113, 211, 212, 213) but this did not yield any significant patterns, so the data was compiled only according to first year and second year.

The Exam tested the following oral skills:

*Sentence Mastery*, which reflects the ability to understand, recall and produce Spanish phrases and clauses in complete sentences. Performance depends on accurate syntactic processing and appropriate usage of words, phrases and clauses in meaningful sentence structures.

*Vocabulary*, which reflects the ability to understand common, everyday words spoken in a sentence context and to produce such words as needed. Performance depends on familiarity with the form and meaning of everyday Spanish words and their use in connected speech.

*Fluency*, meaning the rhythm, phrasing and timing evident in constructing, reading and repeating Spanish sentences.

*Pronunciation*, which is the ability to produce sounds in a native-like manner in a sentence context.

In addition, each participant received an *overall* score indicative of the ability to understand spoken Spanish and speak it intelligibly at a native-like conversational pace on everyday topics.

Initial findings show no significant differences in any one skill between on campus students taking f2f courses and e-campus students taking online courses. In addition, there were no significant differences found between first year student performance and second year student performance in f2f courses or in online courses.

Though not all correlations have been completed, in order to determine what variables may be correlated to performance, the initial analyses point to a significant difference between on campus students taking online courses and off campus students taking online courses. This same pattern was found with on campus students taking f2f courses and off campus students taking online courses. Overall, off campus students in online Spanish language courses performed better than on campus students taking either f2f courses or online courses.

Additional statistical analyses will need to be completed and previous study findings will have to be integrated to the current data in order to arrive at more solid conclusions.

### **Summary of Initial Findings and Implications:**

- Traditional online students (who are not on campus students) have a distinct profile, and overall perform better than on campus students. This may be due to different motivations for taking the course, because they self-select for specific courses, they have a tendency to be autonomous learners, they tend to be older, and have more developed learning strategies.
- On campus students who take online courses reported taking them because they could not get into a f2f course, because it is required for graduation, because they had a language deficiency when admitted to OSU, or because it is required for a specific degree. These students tend to be younger, and some reported feeling that the online course would be “easier” than the f2f course because it was more flexible for them and their schedule.
- On campus students in traditional f2f courses are quite diverse in age, motivations, background, and experience. What they have in common is the sense that language is better learned in a f2f class, because this allows them more access to the instructor and they can better practice what they are learning.
- In all cases no significant differences were found in the test results for on campus f2f students and e-campus students, except when separating traditional online students from the rest of the groups. In this case, the latter did perform better than all other groups.

- In addition, no significant difference was found between first year students, and second year students. Some first year students out-performed second year students in the exam.
- As previously mentioned, there are many confounding variables that still need to be sorted and analyzed in order to better understand the performance of the various groups. However, we can conclude that all groups represent the usual diversity that students bring to the classroom, and that teacher-training, familiarity with technological resources, and pedagogical approach---coupled with student's general motivation and learning strategies, are truly the most influential factors in the level of success and achievement (as in any teaching/learning situation).

### **Outcomes:**

- As a result of the last two years of studies, our department now has a Spanish e-campus coordinator, and an e-campus coordinator for the entire department.
- In addition, e-campus instructors meet 3-4 times per academic year to share best practices and concerns.
- Instructors have developed a Blackboard site and discussion board to keep in touch during the year.
- Instructors have also agreed to coordinate syllabi and course outcomes for both f2f and online courses.
- Instructors regularly share resources, books, trainings that can help them improve their interactions with students.
- Instructors are not isolated but integrated into departmental meetings and discussions that are relevant to their duties. Their own networking efforts have proven fruitful not only to their professional development, but also in terms of collegial efforts and collaboration.
- Instructors are developing their own best practices file, which is being saved and shared through their Blackboard site.
- The previous year's study has been presented at two conferences, including the e-campus forum. In addition, results have been shared with FLL faculty.

### **Future Directions:**

- Results from this study will be presented at a conference next year.
- A manuscript summarizing both last year's study and this study will be prepared for submission to an appropriate journal.
- I will recommend that instructors prepare an orientation video that can be included in all e-campus courses, to help students understand expectations and best practices for successful learning of languages online.
- I will recommend that a specific training be provided for online instructors so that they are aware of best pedagogical practices available for online language teaching.

- I will recommend one assessment tool (such as the oral exam used in this study) be developed and integrated into all language courses so that we can keep track of progress and areas in which we can improve teaching/learning.
- I hope to make this an ongoing area of research, and take a longitudinal perspective on improvements and the development of a solid online language program here at OSU.

## **Conclusion:**

I began this study when I was Chair of Foreign Languages and Literatures, in AY 2009-2010, and we launched a significant number of language courses fully online. At the time, I was among the skeptics and was not sure this was the right direction for our language program. In addition, as a language teacher myself, I had many doubts that the medium of instruction was a good fit for our discipline. I decided to make this a scholarly project in order to objectively (as much as possible) study the pros and cons of teaching languages online.

After two years of research, I can honestly say that I did not anticipate finding what I did. There truly is no difference in student performance and achievement between those who take face-to-face courses on campus, and those that take courses online. Both media face similar challenges, both offer various benefits to specific populations.

In effect, the biggest challenge for those teaching online lies in finding the time and resources to truly obtain excellent training in technology and online methodology. By far, the research literature confirms that online teaching is incredibly time intensive in the short term, but time saving in the long term assuming appropriate development of pedagogical toolkits.

I never thought I would say this, but I think there is a great future in online language teaching, and even more so in a hybrid environment. I hope we will all take the initiative and the responsibility to continue to develop our knowledge of online learning, and welcome the potential of excellence in online language teaching. I look forward to continuing to follow the trends and staying on the cutting edge of this particular field.

## **Thank You!**

Thank you for your support of this research. It has been an invaluable tool to improving our online language program, and provide and encouragement and support for our online instructors.