A Comparison of Student Achievement in the Second Language Acquisition of Spanish in both Total Online and Traditional College Level Courses

A proposal submitted by

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Beginning with World War II, the Department of Defense noted the importance of understanding a foreign language and culture in professional and national defense matters (Jackson & Malone, 2009). In addition, the Modern Language Association (2011) stated that an increase in foreign language education was needed in all educational levels as a result of the 9/11/2001 attacks on the United States. Today, online education allows schools to offer more foreign language courses and provide flexibility in order to reach more students. With the addition of online courses, it becomes important to make sure that students in online courses achieve at similar levels to the traditional on-campus students.

There is little research that examined student achievement of any type in online courses in the area of foreign language. Most of the literature available focused on specific skills taught within foreign language courses. These skills included reading comprehension, oral proficiency, cultural knowledge, and grammar. In addition, the research focused on student achievement in the given skill in on-campus or hybrid style courses. There appeared to be no literature that addressed neither student achievement on final exams nor comparable achievement to on-campus courses for fully online courses. This provided a gap in the literature for research to be conducted on student achievement between the two types of courses. One research study that provided relevance for this study was the examination of equivalency theory in online and on-campus courses. Equivalency theory basically stated the students in online courses should have the same outcomes and experiences as on-campus students (Lapsley, Knlik, Moody, & Arbaugh, 2008). Based on this theory, it was hypothesized that students in online college level Spanish courses would achieve at similar levels to their on-campus counterparts.
This study examined student achievement in online and traditional on-campus college level courses in SPAN 1001- Elementary Spanish I and SPAN 1002- Elementary Spanish II. It involved quantitative, comparable data through an ex-post facto model of study. Two types of final exams were examined for each course, the final oral exam and the final written exam. The study took place at a two-year college in middle Georgia over a six-semester period and included college students enrolled in each course. There were a total of 375 students involved in the study, and they varied in age, previous foreign language background, sex, race, and responsibilities outside of college. There was an online and on-campus version of each course taught concurrently during the six-semester period. Each version of the course was taught by the same instructor and utilized the same text and materials. At the end of the semester, each student in the course had to complete both an oral and a written final exam. The final exams were the same for both types of courses, covered all materials taught in each course, and were tied to level and instruction of each course.

Once the data were collected, the scores were organized into the type of course, online or on-campus, and the type of exam, final oral or final written. All scores of 0, for non-submission of work, were eliminated from the database. Once the organization of the data was complete, two independent samples t-tests were performed through SPSS, a statistical analysis program. Based on the results of the t-tests, the study found that students in SPAN 1001 did have comparable scores on the final oral exam and on the written exam. However, students in SPAN 1002 had a mixture of results. They did not have comparable scores on the oral final exam, but the scores were comparable on the final written exam.
As with any study, there were some limitations and variables that may cause the results to vary. Some of these limitations involved the inability to randomize the final oral exam for the online courses, the inability to eliminate demographic variables between the students in each course, and the length of time students had to prepare for each exam. The implications of the study included offering more courses in online settings and addressing as many of the limitations as possible. In addition, recommendations for improvement of the courses were addressed which included finding a way to randomize the oral exam in the online course; performing more versions of the study to see if curriculum, text, and student background in the language have any effect on the final exam scores; create additional oral practices for SPAN 1002 online to aid in preparation of the final oral exam; and create and launch the instruction of more foreign language courses in online settings.
References

