Introduction

Virtual technologies such as computer-assisted language learning (CALL), now available to most students, are ubiquitous in everyday life and are becoming increasingly essential to either online, or hybrid classes—in which students attend a traditional class twice a week but complete their homework virtually in an online platform. Particularly in universities in the United States, virtual platforms are increasingly used for teaching Spanish as a foreign language to students with varying backgrounds. As such, this research project proposes an approach to teaching grammar in an asynchronous setting, while considering common communicative goals that are established in a language course. Likewise, the proposed methods and strategies aim to offer an attractive language course that allows students to remotely learn and practice a language, while enhancing student engagement through interactive activities.

Therefore, after reviewing several literature sources, methodologies for efficiently teaching a language online will be determined and shared in this research project. On one hand, the goal will be to demonstrate how effective certain strategies and tools can be, in order to design an interactive online course, which will allow all students to learn a language. On the other hand, challenges to consider while teaching a language online will also be discussed and analyzed.

Although the efficiency of online language teaching is still questioned and at its infancy as could be noted in O’Dowd (2010) and Uschi (2003)’s articles, this research project will also provide with some data taken from Elementary Spanish courses that were taught at Stanly Community College. Data will support the grade increase that was noted in online and hybrid Spanish courses, after implementing new tools to increase student attention and engagement, and updating the design of Spanish courses according to the Quality Matters Standards. The research question that will be answered is the following: how can online language instructors design a Spanish course that fulfills all communicative and grammatical goals using certain tools and considering both design and student learning outcomes?

Rationale and Purpose

This project will discuss the way languages can be virtually taught efficiently to online students if certain factors and tools are implemented consistently and purposefully. For an online language course such as Spanish, tools have to be selected based on the three American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) model standards (Cutshall, 2012), which include:

- Interpersonal communication through speaking, writing, and listening activities,
- Interpretive communication through listening, reading, interpreting and analyzing activities,
- Presentational communication through narrating, informing and explaining information through a variety of activities using the target language.

Research regarding online language learning and the abilities for technology tools and CALL are showing evidence on how opinions can diverge regarding their efficiency to teach grammar and communication skills to the learners. Some articles from the reviewed literature show that an online language class can allow learners to study a language at their own pace and practice with both teachers and students at flexible times, if the teacher chooses the correct tools to implement in the course (Sun, 2014).

On the other hand, teaching an online language course appears to be a controversial topic, as some authors such as Uschi (2003) still believe that technology has yet to prove to assess the full efficiency of successfully passing on knowledge and grammar concepts to learners, while others are fervent supporters of the quality of teaching through virtual platforms. In a higher education setting, three groups of agents must be considered when establishing online courses: the administrators, the teachers and the students. Administrators believe that online courses allow them to save money, staff and classroom space, while teachers are focused on the quality of teaching, whereas students may resent taking online courses (Uschi, 2003). Therefore, in this article, the purpose will be to discuss the fact that adopting certain strategies, in order to improve the selection of content and tools to include in virtual courses, can help language instructors have successful outcomes at the end of each semester.

However, it is important for instructors to keep certain considerations in mind. Depending on the learners’ background and abilities, certain tools and strategies may be more appropriate than others in order to teach grammar outside of the traditional classroom. As both students and instructors may not have the opportunity to interact with each other as often as in a traditional classroom, presenting a variety of virtual activities will help students to stay engaged and understand the goals of language learning (Levy, Wang & Chen, 2009). Acquiring the grammar is an important component that cannot be neglected, as it is the foundation of language learning. Students can often forget that component as they already have established certain objectives upon completion of their Spanish courses. Motivations can vary, but in the majority of the introductory videos that students created at the beginning of the fall semester of 2019, they mentioned are professionally-oriented or grade-oriented. The goal for the instructor is to accept these motivations and objectives and make students work towards them. However, in order to efficiently do so, they have to show them that in this particular case, Spanish grammar is the base for any communicative goal, and learning a language is paramount to achieve their professional careers.

Therefore, how can instructors successfully design a Spanish course that fulfills all communicative and grammatical goals, using certain tools and methodologies, and considering both design and student learning outcomes?

**Literature Review**

Colpaert (2006) reviews pedagogical implications based on a research study that demonstrates the increase of online interactivity with online language programs. The content delivery, role of teacher and pedagogy are discussed. First, the technology-driven approach attempts to be a pedagogy based on innovative tools. Then, the attribute-based approach analyzes the capabilities of this medium to potentially impact learning. The affordance-based approach
evaluates its potential to enhance the language learning and teaching processes. Finally, the pedagogy-based approach more strictly details the needed technology for teaching and learning. However, there is still a gap between language pedagogy and CALL tools. To bridge that gap, working with language instructors, instructional designers and other multidisciplinary individuals could be potential solutions.

A variety of online tools can be used in order to train language instructors in order for them to be proficient and ready to teach online courses. As Levy, Wang, and Chen (2009) show, in order to train two language tutors, several online tools, platforms and a synchronous learning management system developed by the National Sun Yat-Sen University of Taiwan can be used to teach languages online efficiently. The implementations of the models used to train online tutors include the following learning concepts: learning as behavior, learning as construction of knowledge and meaning, and learning as a social practice, which are concepts that are paramount to then be able to facilitate the students’ learning approaches. The training integrated a variety of synchronous and asynchronous tools that allowed all professors from China and Australia to become more familiar with the tools before starting to teach the students. In addition, using any new material before class is highly recommended to ensure that it works accordingly.

Through this training, it was noticed that learners should first feel confident by practicing using every feature of the learning management system (LMS) or any of the recommended tools by trying them out, assessing the language proficiency level in each class, in order to build familiarity and confidence among the learners. Through self-reflection and monitoring reports, learners were also able to interact with peers and share suggestions to the facilitator when needed.

Additionally, in order to foster interaction among online language learners, O’Dowd (2010) showed that in Spain, programs of online language learning through a system of e-tandem exchanges between some European institutions, who would write and correct each other (it was referred to as “telecollaboration”) was seen as efficient. In some cases, teachers had played the role of facilitators, by monitoring between the students’ exchanges. Communications can take the form of videos, photos and messages. Online intercultural exchange with students from around the world is greatly increasing as it seems to be a great preparation before studying abroad. However, this practice involves both face-to-face and online interactions which, according to the author, are best in order to foster learning. Due to communication cultural differences, it may lack of authenticity without face-to-face interaction.

In both face-to-face and online format, teachers change roles according to the constantly changing classroom settings. Nowadays through the Web 2.0, knowledge is now accessible to all learners and teachers (Senior, 2010). Based on the constructivist theory, knowledge is acquired socially through experience rather than discovered. In the case of language instructors, they have to be ready to teach and adopt different pedagogy as opposed to only focusing on constructivism or connectivity. Their teaching methods will be a blend of all theories.

Within the classroom, teachers must ensure a sense of community and connectedness among the students. The instructor also has to build a relationship with students, no matter the grade. Establishing rapport can be done in a different class setting but is paramount to build a social environment, which will give the students a sense of comfort and engage them to work on the material in group for instance. LMS are great tools to allow students to remotely connect and the teachers play an important role as facilitators of these connections among students. Although traditional classes allow for more interaction, online courses can also be used as a social space if the instructor promotes collective group and learning.
In order to go from a virtual classroom to building an online learning community, learner behaviors are currently changing and will impact the way instructors teach (Sun, 2014). Depending on the level of expertise for online language teachers, not only technology skills must be taught to them but also pedagogy. For a novice online language instructor, these include strategies for online community building, socializing, facilitating communication competence, language learning theories and online language assessment. For an expert, they consist of creativity in using and adopting materials to create more materials to facilitate communicative competence and online interaction, facilitating online socialization and community building, and intuitive integration of assessments (Compton, 2009). Assessing and evaluating progress is an essential part of education and can be done by using the ACTFL guidelines. However, insufficient opportunities for students to speak the language through online tools makes it difficult to correctly assess oral language practice (Lin & Warschauer, 2015).

Wang and Chen (2009) determined that synchronous meetings have been challenging as students cannot meet at the same time, or need to troubleshoot to fix technical issues at first. A traditional class cannot truly be replaced. Nonetheless, a virtual drop-in option has seemed to be more successful in one of their Elementary Chinese I class, as students could log in and practice with the teacher at any time. Learner participation in online language classes is always a priority as language learning is a skill-based rather than a content-based process. Constant synchronous interaction is needed to help learners practice with other peers.

Nowadays, online learning is attracting a variety of students and in this article, Blake (2011) aims to show how the field of CALL and other computer-mediated communications can really facilitate online language learning (OLL). In this study, Blake chose to focus on web-facilitated, hybrid or blended, or fully virtual or online course.

Often times, some concerns exist about OLL educational quality compared to traditional face-to-face courses. However, it is important to remember that traditional courses quality of teaching may also vary depending on the techniques and methods that are used, class sizes, and individual student attention. In fact, Grgurovic (2007) conducted a study that shows that students who took all their classes online performed better than their peers who took traditional courses due to the amount of time spent on them. Regarding CALL design, two areas have flourished in OLL: tutorial CALL, and social computing or computer-mediated communication (CMC). Often used to give grammar activities, there are also other tools recommended by Blake (2011), such as Quia and Hot Potato. However apart from grammar, focusing on lexicon and vocabulary through reading and listening comprehension assignments is also paramount. Nowadays, new tools are emerging rapidly due to the popularity of online courses. CALL such as Livemocha or Mango are constantly improving content delivering to better serve the students and increase language practice (Lee, 2016).

On one hand, Intelligence CALL are used to provide feedback to students’ responses, and allow interactions through keeping track of their work and giving them suggestions. Such programs already exist for German, Portuguese and Japanese. Additionally, the use of asynchronous tools in an online course allows students to develop cognitive engagement, as they have more time to elaborate their responses, engage in the language which contributes to reduce anxiety (Lee, 2016).

On the other hand, Social Computing CALL is another system that is learner-centered and allow both students and instructors to have both synchronous and asynchronous conversation. Social media means allow stimulation for students, however it awakens certain
concerns as personal and academic networks can be mixed together and the purpose could be lost.

Mobile apps are also increasing as cellphones are popularly used and aim to help learners memorize vocabulary and sentences (Hockly, 2015). Apps like Duolingo for instance identify learners’ needs to progress in the language learning process based on computer-generated algorithms. After completing an activity for instance, learners will use points each day if they do not go back to practice it again. This is based on cognitive learning, as the brain will slowly forget certain information after not being used for an extended period of time.

Additionally, studies have shown that videos appear to be as successful for students learning in a traditional face-to-face class, and students prefer to use the chat message in order to react about the content than a microphone. However, through the use of Visu, Guichon (2010) determined the limitations or catachreses than can exist for teachers while hosting a videoconference, such as the navigation between webpage, chat, Word pages, and images shared during the videoconference. Additionally, teachers must establish the time needed for each session, so they can evaluate and assess students efficiently. Both technological and pedagogical objectives have to be considered jointly, and not successively prior to hosting a session. Anticipating possible difficulties can save teachers and students time and energy, as visual materials can be provided before the session in one page so students can follow along easily without losing focus.

Games are another way to stimulate language learning, as it has the potential to combine tutorial CALL with the attractive affordances of social computing. Certain videogames such as World of Warcraft allow different users from all over the world to interact and communicate while pursuing different quests. There are three different types of game: multiplayer, two-players, or single-player games. They have design experiences, which allow the game to be interactive and playful but this will be the main criteria for a learner/player to continue using it.

Role-playing is another way to stimulate students’ attention by adopting a new identity while playing, which is what language instructors except the students to do when learning a foreign language. Students turn off their original language and culture in order to fully embrace the target language and its cultures. Blake (2011) mentions a variety of games can be used for language learning and have captivated students from the new generation as it has been documented. Ultimately, games and technology can be leveraged to connect traditional students as well so that their interests for the language does not fade away.

Chun, Smith, and Kern (2016) talk about how technology and media influence context and forms of expression and communication. They intent to empower the learners so they can use the technology tools at their full potential. Often times, teachers encounter the following dilemma: technology can either be seen as extremely powerful to enhance intellectual capacity and creativity. On the other hand, there is the concern for some that technology could be detrimental to language learning. Tuoven (2000), as cited in Lee (2016), states that the lack of face-to-face communication or interaction and the isolation of students if learning alone with the computer can increase anxiety and decrease student learning process and productivity.

Nonetheless, technology automatically influence on communicative purposes, which therefore can be used in order to learn and teach languages. Multimedia tools such as Camtasia that allows video capture to increase student engagement and interactions, collaborative and social tools such as social media are synchronous and asynchronous tools that can be used for communicative and semiotic purposes. They are designed as CMC. Games and applications are also available to students, teachers and researchers. To some extent, even online translators such
as Google Translate can be used effectively if the teachers offer guidance to students on how to use them, through literacy and creation of digital stories for instance.

Colpaert (2006) conducted a research project based on the ADDIE model (analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation), which helped demonstrate that often times in online language courses, conceptualization is the issue, not technology. Conceptualization is defined as the creation of a concept as an answer or solution to requirements. For instance, an interactive textbook, an adventure game, or a treasure hunt. Teachers should set the pedagogical goals before they pick their language methods and technology tools. They also have the roles of designers when it comes to planning, and contributors when it comes to assisting students.

In a case study, Guichon (2010) talks about how the development of a desktop videoconferencing platform allow students to move from being novice in both language and technology and their difficulties in adapting, as well as the strategies they later developed. Desktop Videoconferencing (DVC) was used in this study to develop methodologies and strategies for online language learners. Both DVC and CALL allow for speaking assessment through synchronous and virtual meetings. Guichon (2009) identified three types of skills: socio-affective (that takes into account individual learning styles and intercultural differences, as well as the ability to establish a relationship with the learner), pedagogical (designing engaging task for online communication), and multimedia skills (which operates the appropriate tools and manages interactions through them). Hosting an online session also requires a planning time prior to the start of the meeting, as well as a reviewing phase after it has ended.

Son (2011) points out the large variety of CALL as well as Internet tools and how they benefit online language learning. Several examples are given depending on the purpose attempted to be achieved in the class, such as communicative, resource sharing, learning management systems, web exercise creation, dictionaries and concorders, presentations and so forth. In order to pick the correct tool, instructors have to ask themselves who will use it, when, where, why and how will the CALL tool will be used.

Nonetheless, Garrett (2009) points out that instructors must include guidelines for the learners to use it efficiently, so they can benefit from them. No assumption can be made and follow-up assignments should exist in order to assess the students. Therefore, the language instructor itself has to be skillful and knowledgeable regarding the new tool. Evaluating the choice of the tools and justify them in and outside of the classroom.

Lund (2006) presents innovative communicative opportunities that emerged from teaching a language online, such as English in a Norwegian secondary school. Using the LMS, the study examines how social factors more than pedagogical ones influence his students’ interactions in order to favor communicative language practice. Not only language acquisition can be done in the classroom, but also in a social context such as in the community. Several practices that were noted in online courses as new opportunities have emerged through technology, and can be connected to didactics so that teachers can adapt their courses while following this cultural trend.

In order to build meaningful activities for the learners, it is important to consider not only how, why and to whom we are building the activities but also where and when, whether it is synchronous or asynchronous. Didactics must take context into account. Between standardization and pluralism, between homogeneity and heterogeneity there is a third space where English as a Foreign Language didactics can emerge as a boundary object translating between different social worlds and discourses while maintaining consistency in the form of a shared goal (Star &
Griesemer, 1989). Although student participation and interaction are important, teachers also need to interact with them in order to remind students of their role as experts and referents.

Online language practices can emerge from different contexts and settings. Therefore, it is the teacher’s role to insure “didacticizing” new virtual spaces, by taking into account historical and cultural contexts as well, and not restrain time and space to the classroom only.

Harrison and Thomas (2009) have found that students presented with different tools will choose the ones that they find most appropriate for their goals, learning methods and style. This learner-centered approach helps foster learners’ creativity and will allow instructors to re-think their roles and teaching methods.

Nonetheless, a challenge that exists in online language teaching is to set some rules for students to be able to communicate and respond to each other. For instance, Nunan (2002) compares the challenges and rewards of teaching online to Japanese and other international students as an L2 at a graduate level. A balance has to be found between teaching and facilitating, as well as including learner-centered activities to allow students to take control of their learning. Online language instructors also have to ensure that all students are participating actively, as some may be new to online learning and more reluctant to participate. In addition, it is paramount to ensure that students are familiar with the technology used in this classroom.

Although in the study, Nunan (2002) underlines the convenience of the course as being able to be taken in different parts of the world, the student evaluations feedback reveals that students would prefer taking face-to-face classes than distance learning. On the other hand, the convenience for both teachers and students to be able to access the course from anywhere in the world was seen as an advantage. In fact, the creation of an online global community was also seen as a reward, as they had the opportunity to socialize, network and exchange tips.

In this study, language instructors that were interviewed show that although they had great technological support by their institution, the pedagogical training to teaching online and hosting synchronous or asynchronous sessions were problematic. Teachers were eager to learn more about telecollaboration and integrating the online component to their classrooms. However, as technical support does not seem to be available to support their project, teachers as very much laggard and would rather adopt this new teaching component after some improvement is ensured, and that their international peers who would be participating would agree in adopting this new teaching method as well.

Another unclear aspect would be how to assess students in these online activities. For their normalization, informal feedback does not suffice in order to give a grade to a student. Therefore, a lot of skepticism still exists among European faculty as to integration of technology within the foreign language classroom. The normalization of an activity still needs to be developed in order to be fully integrated into the course curriculum and the syllabus. Partnership between the European institutions for telecollaboration also has to be settled first through exchange programs for instance such as Erasmus after online language instructors are trained accordingly.

In online language classes, learners have to be emotionally and cognitively engaged by the instructors, who will provide personalized feedback according to the learners’ needs. A variety of synchronous and asynchronous tools to assess listening, reading, writing and speaking should be included in an online learning community. However, it is important to remember that interactions among students is also paramount for an online language course.
Therefore, controversies in online language teaching still exist among instructor, administrator and student standpoints (Uschi, 2003), as they state that technology cannot replace a traditional language class.

In higher education, online teaching has been favored as administrators are interested in saving costs, time, staff and classroom space. However, this format shift may affect the quality of teaching, and students are often more skeptical about taking an online course. According to Noble (2001), education is an interpersonal affair and the use of technology interrupts it.

For language teachers, at first, adding an online component led them to transfer part of the knowledge such as grammar and vocabulary to the online platform and dedicate more time for communicative activities in the classroom. Students appreciated the flexibility of doing homework online and at their own pace. On the other hand, administrators in higher education institutions decided to add online learning to the curriculum due to scarce resources, but without taking into consideration the possible impact on quality of teaching. Several teachers still lack expertise and support for online teaching.

In addition, as new technology quickly appear and evolve, staying up-to-date and exploiting the tools at their full potential is a challenge and learners should be the priority as they will be the direct people to experience it. Adding technology to the language classroom has yet to improve the quality of interpersonal communication and include meaningful gap activities. Therefore, administrators do not save time or staff as students are more reluctant to taking online classes.

**Conclusion**

Despite the cost cutting that technology allows administrators and students to take advantage of whether it is classroom space, faculty stipend or tuition fees, online language teaching has yet to prove how effective completing online work is in order to become fully integrated in the curriculum. The pedagogy must be revisited by language instructors in order to maintain the quality of teaching that already exist in traditional language classes in order for their learners to feel a sense of community and allow communicative interactions.

As Chun, Smith, and Kern (2016) showed in their study, the inclusion of technology in language courses will ultimately be subjective to each instructor. The tools that are implemented and their uses should align with the learning outcomes, as well as the learners’ interests, abilities, the available resources to each instructor and the culture of each institution.

However, to support the efficiency of teaching a foreign language online, data was collected from beginning and intermediate classes at Stanly Community College. Previous to fall semester 2017, students did not yet have access to virtual tools in language classrooms. Between fall semester 2017 and fall semester 2018, online students began having access to more virtual tools with which they could interact orally, auditively, and in written form. Software we have discussed such as Zoom, Screen-Cast-O-Matic and Adobe Connect became available for instructors and students. This interactive use of technology has benefited students with the same quality of teaching students would get in a traditional classroom. Therefore, that can in part justify the growing curve that has been observed in specific language skills.
Nevertheless, one limitation in presenting the data is that the percentage is calculated by the number of students in each class. This number can vary every semester depending on the demand. It is also important to note that every semester, students who register at the beginning level have a diverse profile. Some come with no previous knowledge of Spanish while others may already have some knowledge of the language from high school or from growing up in a bilingual climate.

As to the results taken from the intermediate class online, it is to consider that the majority was already familiar with the online format, as they had previously taken the elementary level with the same instructor. That could possibly justify the reason for which all
students from the fall 2017 and spring 2018 semesters had above average results in their oral skills, given that oral evaluations previously had a similar format. However, an increased curve between fall 2017 and spring 2018 was also observed in student’s writing, interpreting, and listening skills after implementing more virtual and interactive tools in the class. As a result, we are able to establish that even though a class is online, it is always important to show that a professor is present and available for students. The simple reality of being able to show one’s face through video creates more personal contact between students and their instructor. This leads to greater confidence between them, and the student’s autonomy and interest begin to grow.

Although until now, few researches have been conducted on the efficiency of online language learning when integrated correctly, technology tools appear to be beneficial to OLL when they allow students to improve their listening, reading, writing and speaking skills and when instructors are able to assess their progress by providing substantial feedback and interaction (Blake, 2011).
References


