

Chapter 6

Teaching Foreign Languages in the Twenty–First Century: Lessons from Spanish Hybrid Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the case of a hybrid Spanish program where technology, standards, and teacher expertise in foreign language education are merged to bolster students' learning. The chapter identifies the instructional elements relevant to 21st century foreign language education, and depicts the transactional relationship between technology, standards and teacher experience in a Spanish hybrid teaching environment. Finally, we provide a set of recommendations for current and future Spanish educators, as well as foreign language educators in general based on the experiences shared by students, educators, and administrator in the program.

INTRODUCTION

In our technology-driven and media-saturated world, foreign language educators' role is quickly evolving (Luke & Britten, 2007). Digital communication has become an essential 21st century skill for students who are exposed to an increasingly globalized and multicultural world where advances in technology are connecting them to different cultures with an ease that was unfamiliar in past centuries. Spanish language, in particular, is not only the most spoken non-English language in the United States, but is also the fastest growing one, with a 233% increase of its number of speakers since 1980 (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2013). The influence of Hispanic cultures in the United States is indeed visible in everyday life, in the professional world, the arts, and in the entertainment industry. Twenty-first century students are aware that being proficient in Spanish is a marketable skill if they are aiming to develop a presence in a globalized world, as well as to develop an interest for their neighboring cultures (P21, 2011). But

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how can foreign language educators be prepared to face the new challenges of teaching relevant material to students while understanding the reality of today's digital connectivity? How can the integration of technology in foreign language courses—particularly in hybrid environments—help develop students' language practices in and out of school?

The growth of information and communication technologies has generated novel opportunities while creating new challenges for foreign language education. In fact, using technology to access information about the world that surrounds us is now considered an essential 21st century skill for students (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2014; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). Because of their increasing online presence (Lenhart, 2015), students' authentic exposure to foreign languages and cultures is occurring increasingly in digital environments (Kessler, 2013). Nowadays, a student has more chances to communicate with someone living abroad through the Internet than through traditional methods of communication. Students are in constant interaction with technology in their personal lives, and it is important for foreign language education to reflect this reality while reflecting goals set by national and international standards in their field.

Building upon contemporary scholarship on teaching in hybrid environments, educational standards, and teacher knowledge, this chapter therefore describes the efforts conducted in a set of hybrid (i.e., face-to-face and online) Spanish courses offered at a small Northwestern college in order to feature its experience in bolstering students' insights into the nature of Spanish-speaking cultures and languages through technology. We describe the case of these hybrid courses through surveys conducted with instructors and evaluations shared by students to highlight teachers' experiences teaching Spanish in said hybrid program. Finally, we conclude with a set of recommendations for current and future Spanish educators interested in integrating technology in their teaching. These recommendations are derived from the lessons learned from this investigation, and supplemented with an administrative perspective through an interview conducted with the course's program director. First, we describe the elements that play a role in the successful integration of technology in foreign language education, namely hybrid teaching environments, standards, and teacher knowledge.

BACKGROUND

Hybrid Environments in Foreign Language Instruction

From online programs to blended, hybrid, flipped classrooms, and MOOCS, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has been prominent over the years in assisting students' foreign language learning, along with producing research looking at how technology shapes education in that area while enhancing learning processes (Hill, 2014; Kessler, 2009). This chapter focuses specifically on hybrid—sometimes called “flipped”—environments in CALL (Muldrow, 2013). Hybrid programs represent a mixed mode of instruction where traditional face-to-face instruction and online learning are blended (Olapiriyakul & Scher, 2006). “Flipped classroom” is a term that is now commonly used for classes that are a form of blended learning using technology with the underlying intention that the teacher will be able to interact more with students instead of lecturing during class time (Bell, 2015). Garrison and Kanuka (2004) described the flipped classroom as “an integration of face-to-face and online learning experiences—not a layering of one on top of the other” (p. 99). This model represents a mindset where learning is centered

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