Intensive online foreign language learning at the advanced level: Insights from a summer online Spanish course

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Hybrid and online foreign language courses are becoming increasingly more important for students. However, several gaps in the literature point to needing studies investigating courses taught online, at the advanced level, and during intensive summer timeframes, since these classes can be advantageous for learners. This paper discusses an advanced-level online Spanish grammar course that was taught during the summer, and examines: (1) learning gains from a beginning-of-course test to end-of-course test (i.e., a pretest-posttest covering course content), and (2) students' perceptions of the course gleaned from an end-of-course survey, which collected both quantitative and qualitative data. The pretest-posttest results showed a significant improvement in learners' scores, and the survey results indicated mixed opinions. Specifically, positive course attributes included the course's self-paced nature and practical benefits, however the course's fast-paced nature may have led to several drawbacks. These findings offer insight into these types of courses, and may prove helpful for instructors who want to plan similar classes.

Keywords: online foreign language courses, advanced-level online L2 learning, intensive summer online L2 courses, Spanish learning

1 Introduction

According to the Babson Research Survey Group, 7.1 million students in the United States take at least one college course online (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Indeed, both online (fully online) and hybrid (partially online) courses are becoming more common in foreign language departments, and teachers must be prepared to teach these types of courses (Lord, 2014; McNeil, 2016; Rubio & Thoms, 2012). The current study therefore focuses on a topic that can be of interest to many foreign language educators.

As the popularity of hybrid and online courses increases, research on their effectiveness is needed. Various studies have utilized comparative research designs in which hybrid and online courses have been compared to counterpart face-to-face (F2F) courses (e.g., Enkin & Mejías-Bikandi, 2017; Gascoigne & Parnell, 2013). The results have shown that learning outcomes in these types of courses

are similar to those of F2F courses. Moreover, many of these and other studies (e.g., Murday, Ushida & Chenoweth, 2008) have examined students' perceptions of hybrid and online courses, as student opinions have become an important topic of discussion in this research area. Overall, student perceptions have suggested that hybrid and online courses are seen as effective and useful, especially with respect to students enjoying the convenience and self-paced environment that these courses can offer; however, problems with self-motivation and not enough or absence of F2F interaction with other students and teachers have been issues that have been discussed. Indeed, as hybrid and online courses can present challenges for teachers as well, a related research trend has been to explore instructor preparation needs and professional development for teaching these classes (see e.g., Hampel & Stickler, 2015; McNeil, 2016).

Although literature on hybrid and online courses continues to grow, with regard to second language (L2), and specifically foreign language, learning, there remain several gaps in the research. Specifically, research to date has largely focused on examining: (1) the effectiveness of hybrid courses (rather than of online courses), (2) the effectiveness of hybrid and online courses for beginner and intermediate-level learners (rather than for advanced-level learners), and (3) the effectiveness of hybrid and online courses that are taught during regular-length semesters (rather than during intensive timeframes). This article therefore aims to address these gaps through a study examining the merits of an advanced-level Spanish course taught online during an intensive timeframe (a university summer session). This research is important since this type of course may prove advantageous for language students, as will be discussed below.

2 Research on the effectiveness of hybrid and online foreign language courses

2.1 Comparative studies and learner perceptions

Research investigating the effectiveness of hybrid and online foreign language classes has generally measured learning outcomes of these courses through comparison with counterpart F2F classes. Students' overall grades and scores on assessments such as exams covering course content, tests of grammar or culture, and tests examining the four skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – have been compared, and the results have largely shown that both modes of teaching (hybrid/online and F2F) can lead to a comparable level of learning (e.g., Blake & Delforge, 2007; Chenoweth & Murday, 2003; Chenoweth, Ushida & Murday, 2006; Cubillos, 2007; Gascoigne & Parnell, 2013; Green & Earnest Youngs, 2001; Isabelli, 2013; Rubio, 2012; Thoms, 2012). However, as Blake and Delforge (2007) discuss, most studies in this area have examined hybrid courses rather than online classes, and both Gascoigne and Parnell (2014) and Lin and Warschauer (2015) add that this research is largely limited to investigating beginner or intermediate-level learning. Recently, in an effort to fill the gap in this research area, Enkin and Mejías-Bikandi (2017) compared F2F and online learning for an advanced-level Spanish grammar course, and found similar results to those in previous studies: learning in F2F and online classes was comparable. The researchers looked at learner improvement on beginning and end-of-semester tests as well as performance on quizzes.

Despite the lack of research on online courses, Blake and Delforge (2007) note that these types of courses are becoming increasingly more important for students who may face both time and geographical constraints. Moreover, although hybrid courses have been praised for their ability to offer students the benefits of both online and F2F instruction (e.g., Lindsay, 2004; Rosen, 2009), it may not be the case that hybrid courses necessarily provide a significant benefit with respect to learning. Indeed, Blake, Wilson, Cetto, and Pardo-Ballester (2008) found that oral proficiency levels were comparable when comparing F2F, hybrid, and online introductory Spanish courses. Looking at literature from English language learning, similar results have been shown in Harker and Koutsantoni (2005), where no substantial difference was found in achievement levels when comparing an English for Academic Purposes course taught both as hybrid and online. Their data also suggested that it was level of commitment to the course that was important for success, rather than mode of delivery.

To gain further insight into the effectiveness of hybrid and online courses, and of computer assisted language learning overall, several researchers have argued for more studies examining students' perspectives (e.g., Levy, 2015; Murday et al., 2008; Stepp-Greany, 2002; Trinder, 2015). Furthermore, although examining students' academic performance and course perceptions may be equally important in studies evaluating hybrid and online classes, Rubio and Thoms (2012) discuss that *comparison* with counterpart F2F classes is not necessarily what should be the focus of future research. They explain that,

> As blended [hybrid] models continue to evolve, assessment will have to adapt as well. But rather than using the traditional face-to-face course as the benchmark against which blended (and online) courses need to be measured, …assessment needs to address how new modes of delivery meet the needs of a changing student population, in terms of both facilitating their linguistic gains and addressing their social and cognitive needs. (p. 5)

The authors go on to echo the importance of assessing students' perceptions of hybrid and online courses by highlighting that important elements of evaluation include factors such as satisfaction levels of students and students' ability to adjust to different styles of learning.

Although largely limited to hybrid and beginner/intermediate-level courses, various studies have looked at students' perceptions of both hybrid and online courses (either as part of their studies or as the main focus of their studies). Many of these studies have shown positive reactions, indicating that students do indeed believe that these courses are effective. For example, Blake and Delforge (2007) found that beginner-level Spanish learners in an online course reported that they had made satisfactory progress in their Spanish and also noted that a large merit of the course was its self-directed pace and the flexibility it offered, particularly insofar as allowing them to spend additional time on challenging material. Similarly, Cubillos (2007) found that as compared to Spanish learners who took an intermediate-level course F2F, those who took it as hybrid reported a higher level of satisfaction. The students in the hybrid class specifically highlighted that positive course attributes included its self-paced nature, flexibility, and convenience. More recently, Gascoigne and Parnell (2013) also found positive results when looking at beginner-level hybrid French: hybrid learners' course ratings were almost exclusively more positive than those from the counterpart F2F class with respect to issues related to course effectiveness, such as learning,

level of enthusiasm, interaction as a group, assigned work, assessment, and overall impressions of the course and teacher.

There have been other studies focusing on hybrid courses that have discussed more varied reactions to these classes. Often, negative opinions were due to frustration related to technological and practical issues, such as course materials residing only online and being unstructured (Chenoweth et al., 2006) and the format of web activities being problematic as well as having technical issues (Green & Earnest Youngs, 2001). However, Murday et al. (2008) looked at beginner and intermediate Spanish and French students taking hybrid courses, and discussed mixed student reactions related to both technology use as well as the online nature of the course itself. For example, while learners indicated appreciation for the reduced amount of F2F hours, they also noted lack of motivation as a drawback and discussed the need for self-discipline to keep pace with the course. Other issues highlighted anxiety related to not having the teacher present for explanations or questions, loss of interest or nervousness (in chat sessions), and needing more structure. However, many students did comment that the course's self-paced nature was beneficial and that it even facilitated self-study beyond the course. Issues concerning technology included problems with loading web pages, limitations of workbook-type of activities, and students wanting a tangible textbook rather than only online materials. On the other hand, learners did note the advantages of working with web materials (e.g., having access to sound files).

In a more recent study where intermediate-level students' experiences in both technology-enhanced F2F and hybrid courses were compared, Gleason (2013) also highlighted mixed student reactions related specifically to the online component of the hybrid class. Positive attributes of hybrid learning included reduced class time helping with students' scheduling, that the online time helped shy students participate more and promoted speaking during F2F time, and that during online time students were able to focus on the teacher without distractions. Drawbacks of the course for students included difficulty forming friendships with other students, no immediate peer feedback on speaking ability, and not enough F2F time available for student-student interactions, for playing language games (e.g., charades), or for obtaining answers to questions from the teacher.

Although the literature is limited, advanced-level L2 learners have, on the whole, responded well to hybrid and online classes. In a recent study, Gascoigne and Parnell (2014) compared beginner-level and advanced-level students' perceptions of hybrid French courses (an elementary-level course and an advanced-level linguistics course, respectively), and they found that advanced-level students experienced greater satisfaction with their course. The researchers' survey questions focused on asking about the nature of the class with respect to motivation and self-pacing, the quality of the course with respect to course content, technology used, and interaction, as well as perceived level of learning and overall impressions. The authors explained their results in light of the fact that advanced-level learners are more mature and have higher proficiency levels, thereby helping them thrive in a learning environment where they must take responsibility for their own learning. The researchers therefore noted that, "Not only are there many individual differences and learning styles that will impact students' preferences for course delivery, but level of study and type of course are likely to matter as well" (p. 60–61). In open-ended comments, both beginner and advanced learners highlighted flexibility as a large advantage of hybrid courses, but also pointed to less F2F interaction with teachers and students as a drawback.

In a more recent study, Enkin and Mejías-Bikandi (2017) also echoed the above results. The researchers looked at students' ratings of an advanced-level online Spanish grammar course, and found that learners thought the course was overall effective: the class and materials worked well, and the course provided more flexibility than other (F2F) classes. In open-ended comments, students highlighted that some of the materials even facilitated a classroom-feel (through lecture presentations they could listen to), and that the format offered a lot of flexibility both in terms of learning and for scheduling reasons. However, learners also noted the lack of F2F interaction and potential negative effect it had on their learning. Furthermore, although students overall enjoyed the course structure and flexibility of it, the authors also noted that the online format may bring about self-awareness of learning habits, and, as their results showed, sometimes these learning habits are not aligned with online courses. In other words, although many students may succeed in this type of flexible learning environment, some may not. Enkin and Mejías-Bikandi (2017) therefore note that learners should be made aware of the structure and nature of an online course before they register for it.

2.2 Hybrid and online intensive summer courses

University departments often offer intensive summer courses, which afford students the opportunity to take a regular semester course during a condensed timeframe. These courses allow learners various advantages: for example, students can take courses they have missed during the semester, they can lighten their semester course load, and they can graduate ahead of schedule (Kretovics, Crowe & Hyun, 2005). Research has also shown that intensive courses can be effective learning environments (see Daniel, 2000, for a review of research findings). For example, Anastasi (2007) found comparable academic achievement levels and course ratings for students enrolled in the same psychology courses during both the regular semester and summer session. For L2 learning, Buzash (1994) reported that at the end of a summer French honors course, high school students showed language skills that were comparable to having had completed a college semester-length class, and students also indicated positive learning experiences. Furthermore, Scott (1995) discussed that intensive summer courses may hold other benefits, such as helping students remain more focused and concentrated on coursework as well as allowing for better planning and more time to be spent on the course, since summer courses can be taken individually rather than with others during a regular-length semester.

With respect to hybrid L2 courses, although not investigating a summer course, one study (Young, 2008) has compared learning in a hybrid section and F2F section of the same intensive course. The class was taught during a regular-length semester, but was considered intensive (thus somewhat similar to a summer course) because it covered first and second-semester Spanish in one semester-long course, and was intended for those students who were between the beginner and intermediate level. The results indicated no overall significant differences between the two class sections (with respect to proficiency in areas such as speaking, listening, reading, grammar, and vocabulary), though when the components of the speaking test were further broken down, several significant differences were found favoring the hybrid format. The achievement tests that covered course content (the midterm and final) did show a significant difference (on the midterm) favoring the F2F class, but this finding was explained in light of

technical problems. Furthermore, the author showed that choosing teachers that are experienced and skilled can have a significant impact on the outcomes of both F2F and hybrid courses.

For online L2 courses, one recent study (Lee, 2016) focused on students' perceptions of a summer online beginner-level Spanish course, specifically with respect to digital tools in task-based instruction. The results showed that learners had an overall positive experience in the course: course content and class activities were easily accessible via the course wiki, weekly calendars were helpful for self-pacing and planning, and students enjoyed the course activities, such as creating oral recordings and blog posts, as well as interacting in real-time with their classmates online. Students, however, did prefer more structured activities as opposed to open-ended ones (which were preferred only by those learners who were stronger linguistically), and it was found that both teacher feedback and student self-regulation were important aspects that contributed to student success. Students also noted the critical value of teacher support and guidance (via Blackboard Collaborate and email) for facilitating learner autonomy.

Outside the L2 learning field, Ferguson and DeFelice (2010) looked at the effectiveness of an intensive summer course taught online. The researchers compared two sessions of the same online graduate education course – a regular semester session and a five-week summer session, and they found differences in both students' achievement and perceptions. Summer session students achieved a significantly higher final grade average, but the regular semester students perceived greater learning gains (though not significantly). The authors explained that the higher grade achieved by summer session students may have been due to the fast-paced nature of the course – that is, a condensed timeframe may force more focused and uninterrupted learning. The researchers also found that regular semester students showed significantly greater satisfaction with professor communication, but interestingly lower satisfaction with student-to-student interaction. The authors explain that this finding may be connected to the fast-paced nature of the summer course as well: an instructor of a summer online class may be overwhelmed with many questions and emails that come in, and thus instructor oversights made unintentionally may in effect lead students to interact more amongst themselves (through email or discussion boards) in order to find answers to their questions. It is therefore important to consider how the timeframe of an online course may further affect learners' needs and perceptions.

3 The present study

As discussed in the earlier sections, most of the research on hybrid and online L2 courses has examined hybrid courses (mostly at the beginner and intermediate level), even though online classes, for all levels, can be useful for students who cannot attend class for various reasons. Moreover, despite the many student advantages of intensive summer classes, studies on the effectiveness of both hybrid and online courses have concentrated on examining regular-length courses. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to fill a research gap by examining the merits of an undergraduate advanced-level Spanish course that was taught online during an intensive summer session. This research may be especially important given that intensive summer courses can be particularly useful for advanced-level learners because upper-level courses that are offered during the regular semester often have fewer class sections or may be offered less often than

lower-level classes. This is because universities in the United States (which is where this study was conducted) often have institutional foreign language requirements for graduation, which necessitate that all students complete either two or four semesters of lower-level (beginner/intermediate-level) courses; alternatively, these courses may also serve as options to fulfill an institution's general education requirements – see the 2012 Modern Language Association Report for a discussion (Lusin, 2012). Before discussing the specific research questions of this study, a description of the course of interest is provided.

3.1 Course description

The course of interest was an advanced-level (400-level) Spanish language course focusing on grammar, and specifically Spanish sentence structure. It was taught at a large Midwestern university in the United States during the summer session. The course was entitled *Spanish Stylistics* and was conducted online, using the Blackboard course management system, for a total of five weeks. The course focused on teaching complex Spanish structures, and covered types of coordination and subordination, sentence connectors, and verbal mood and subordinate clauses. The course also included comparisons between Spanish and English specifically as they relate to these structures. As the overall objective was to help students learn and be able to use complex Spanish structures, one of the intended outcomes of the course was for students to improve their Spanish writing ability and translation skills.

The course was designed around a specific set of materials and format. There was no required textbook for the course; instead, narrated PowerPoint lecture presentations (in Flash format) as well as lecture notes accompanying those presentations were uploaded to Blackboard (the lecture notes also summarized some relevant information from pages assigned from an optional textbook). These materials constituted the course's content. There were five one-week modules (each module ranging from three to six PowerPoint lectures), and all material (e.g., lecture notes, PowerPoint lectures, directions for assignments) was uploaded to Blackboard, and students submitted assignments and completed tests and quizzes through Blackboard as well. In addition, the professor also put up web links to helpful online dictionaries. To foster an online community, a Blackboard discussion board was opened, and students were free to post questions regarding course material, and both the professor and other students would respond to these questions. The professor was also very available through email, making sure to check it and respond to students' questions at least twice per day, and typically even more frequently than that, especially when replying to follow-up student questions within an email thread. In addition, one weekly virtual office hour was held through Adobe Connect in a "virtual classroom" for those students needing additional assistance. During this time, the professor and students could communicate via text and voice, and there was also a virtual whiteboard that could be used to help illustrate explanations visually to students.

Students completed various homework assignments and tests, and these were all due at the end of a given week (Friday by 11:59pm). For testing materials, students were given a limited timeframe in which they needed to complete online quizzes (three) and assessment tests (two). The assessment tests and quizzes contained multiple choice questions, which tested course content. Quizzes were graded, but assessment tests were not (i.e., students received full credit for

completion) since these were used as a diagnostic tool (and they were also used as part of the materials in this study – see the Methodology section below). Students took one assessment test at the beginning of the course and the other at the end of the course, and they were encouraged to do their best since these assessments would help them preview and review material as well as give them an idea of overall gains in Spanish knowledge. Students also completed practice activity sets that provided them with further practice for each module, as well as two writing exercises and one translation assignment, which both aimed to put the topics covered into practical use. For the writing exercises, students were given an opinion article in Spanish from a news source and were required to write an academic-level summary and critical reflection (students wrote both a draft that the professor gave feedback on and then a final draft for each). For the translation assignment, students were provided with an online-translated Spanish version of an English newspaper article and were asked to correct errors in the translation as well as explain their corrections.

3.2 Research questions

The present study examines the effectiveness of the *Spanish Stylistics* summer online course. This was done with a beginning-of-course test and end-of-course test (i.e., a pretest-posttest) that was used to obtain insight into learning gains from this course, and students' perceptions of the course were also evaluated. The evaluation of students' perceptions responds to calls made in the literature (discussed earlier) for more studies examining learner satisfaction of online learning. Although there is no summer F2F counterpart class for this study, as the literature that was discussed earlier has suggested, comparison with a F2F class may not always be necessary for assessing the effectiveness of an online course. The research questions are as follows:

(1) Do learners show a significant improvement in their scores from beginning-of-course to end-of-course assessments (i.e., on a pretest-posttest), which tested course content?

(2) What are students' perceptions of the course as illustrated by results on a survey?

(a) First, what are students' satisfaction levels – of the course, its format, and its design – as measured through quantitative (Likert scale) questions?

(b) Second, what are students' perceptions of the course as measured through qualitative (open-ended) questions? In particular, what are the positive course attributes and drawbacks that were highlighted by students in their responses?

4 Methodology

4.1 Participants

There were seventeen participants in this study. They were undergraduate students (all native English speakers), each enrolled in one of two class sections

of the summer online Spanish Stylistics course: one class section was taught each summer for two summers, and each time the course remained the same and was taught by the same professor. Participants were Spanish majors or minors, or were Spanish Education majors. Prior to taking the course, students must take twelve credits of 300-level Spanish courses – i.e., four courses focusing on advanced reading, advanced writing, literature, and linguistics, respectively.

4.2 Materials and procedure

As noted above, the two assessment tests that were part of the course were used as the pretest-posttest in this study. Each test (pretest and posttest) contained 50 multiple choice questions. The actual questions were different between the pretest (assessment 1) and posttest (assessment 2), however the tests were counterbalanced such that they were matched on content and difficulty: there was the same proportion of questions between assessment 1 and 2 focusing on (1) correct forms of subordinate verbs in a fill-in-the-blank format, and (2) correct translations specifically targeting (a) sentence connectors, and (b) relative pronouns and syntactical forms of relative clauses (example questions appear in the appendix). The first assessment was completed during the first week of the summer session, and the second assessment was completed during the last/fifth week. Students had a total of one and a half hours to complete each assessment test.

An end-of-course online survey was completed during the last week of class. The survey contained five statements that participants needed to rate using a five-point Likert scale (5-strongly agree to 1-strongly disagree) and seven open-ended questions. This survey was adapted and modified from a survey used in previous research on online learning (Enkin & Mejías-Bikandi, 2017). The Likert scale items asked participants about their opinions of the effectiveness, format, and design of the course (see Table 1 for items). The seven open-ended questions asked participants to further elaborate on their course experience and reasons for taking the class: they discussed (1) if they enjoyed the format and design of this summer online course and what in particular they liked (or did not like), (2) why they decided to take this summer online course, (3) in what way they thought their learning was affected due to the summer course being online, (4) how helpful they thought the tools for instructor support were, (5) if and why more summer online classes should be offered, (6) if and why they would consider taking another summer online course in the future, and (7) if they would rather take an online course during the summer session or during the regular-length semester, and why.

5 Results and discussion

5.1 Learning gains from the course

To answer the first research question, learning gains from the course were measured by analyzing scores from the beginning-of-course to end-of-course assessment tests (i.e., the pretest-posttest). All seventeen participants completed both assessment tests, and the results showed that students improved significantly from pretest (mean score of 22.76 out of 50) to posttest (mean score of 28.82 out of 50) by a two-tailed within-subjects t-test (t [16] = 3.31, p < .01), thereby suggesting that learners can make significant gains in their Spanish

knowledge in this type of class[1]. The result is further supported by previous research focusing on comparative studies that have shown that intensive hybrid and online classes can be effective: recall that Young (2008) found that for an intensive beginner-intermediate Spanish course, hybrid students showed a comparable level of learning as their F2F counterparts, and Ferguson and DeFelice (2010) found that for a graduate education course that was taught online, summer session students showed a higher level of achievement than their regular semester counterparts.

5.2 Satisfaction levels with the course

To answer the first part of the second research question, responses to the quantitative part of the survey were examined. In total, ten of the participants completed the survey, and the results showed that satisfaction levels with the course were mixed, but were overall more positive than negative. Combining "strongly agree" and "agree" responses, 80% of participants thought the online format of the course worked out well, 80% thought the online format enabled more flexibility in learning, 60% thought that online teaching was suitable for the course's advanced level, 60% thought the course's online materials and tools were satisfactory for learning, and 50% would recommend taking a summer online advanced-level course. Table 1 shows the percentages of responses from 5 to 1 (strongly agree to strongly disagree), as well as mean ratings.

Table 1. Percentages and mean ratings of responses on quantitative items on survey.

Items	5-Strongly Agree	4-Agree	3-Neutral	2-Disagree	1-Strongly Disagree	Mean Rating
This summer course's online format worked out well.	20%	60%	10%	0%	10%	3.8
The online format of this summer course enabled more flexibility in learning.	50%	30%	10%	0%	10%	4.1
Online teaching is suitable for this summer course's advanced level.	20%	40%	20%	10%	10%	3.5
This summer course's online materials and tools were satisfactory for learning.	30%	30%	20%	10%	10%	3.6
I would recommend taking a summer online advanced-level course.	20%	30%	20%	0%	30%	3.1

These items offer an overall snapshot of student satisfaction levels with the course. With respect to the highest-rated statement (rating of 4.1), learners agreed that the online format enabled more flexibility in learning (the benefit of flexibility and self-pacing in online and hybrid courses has been a finding also noted elsewhere: e.g., Blake & Delforge, 2007; Cubillos, 2007; Enkin & Mejías-Bikandi, 2017; Gascoigne & Parnell, 2014; Green & Earnest Youngs, 2001; Murday et al., 2008). However, students would not all recommend taking a summer online advanced-level course (mean rating of 3.1). This may have been due to perceived shortcomings related to satisfaction with the online materials and tools (mean rating of 3.6) and whether online teaching was suitable given the advanced level of the course (mean rating of 3.5); drawbacks of the course as discussed by participants in their open-ended responses are explored below. Although all learners may not have been completely satisfied with every element of the course, as mentioned above, 80% of learners did indicate that the online format worked out well (mean rating of 3.8), thereby showing a uniform level of satisfaction with the course format.

5.3 *Positive attributes and drawbacks of the course*

With respect to the second part of the second research question, the responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed by looking for repeated themes particularly related to positive attributes as well as drawbacks of the course. Students discussed issues related to self-pacing/flexibility, the need for F2F teacher time and support, the course design and materials, the practical benefits of summer online courses, and the fast-paced environment of these courses.

5.3.1 Self-paced learning

Supporting the quantitative results, a recurring merit of the course that was highlighted by participants was that working at their own pace was beneficial. For example, one student explained, "[The course] was flexible and I could learn at my own pace." Another student further discussed why this was important for them: "I really enjoyed the ability to work on [the course] at my own pace, as I had prior obligations that at times would not allow me to work." Interestingly, one student also noted that there should be more summer online courses offered because their self-paced nature could actually help develop important skills: "More flexible scheduling, [which] helps develop personal time management skills."

5.3.2 Lack of F2F teacher time and support

A recurring drawback that was noted by students was missing the real-life experience of having a teacher physically in front of them, and needing further support for their learning. For example, one student stated, "I would [take another summer online course] because it is quick learning and well paced for me, but I found it difficult to learn from only online media so I would prefer in class classes." Another student noted, "I feel like learning a language is difficult to do online by yourself", and another further explained, "I couldn't see as many examples or different explanations [as in a F2F course]." Indeed, lack of F2F support has been noted elsewhere as a drawback in both online and hybrid L2 courses (Enkin & Mejías-Bikandi, 2017; Gascoigne & Parnell, 2014; Murday et al., 2008). However, it is possible that some students may find lack of F2F teacher time especially challenging within the compact nature of a summer online course (and perhaps

especially at the advanced level). Indeed, recall that the results from Ferguson and DeFelice's (2010) study showed that for a graduate education course, students in the online regular semester class perceived satisfaction levels with professor communication that were greater than the satisfaction levels of students in the online summer class.

With respect to overcoming the above challenge, students knew that they could use email, the discussion board, and the weekly virtual classroom (with visual, text, and voice communication) as platforms, which interestingly are elements that Carr-Chellman and Duchastel (2001) discuss should be incorporated into a well-structured online course. Indeed, students indicated positive experiences with instructor support by stating that the professor was "prompt with answering questions" and "helpful", and that "examples [explaining course material] were well thought out". However, as one student pointed out, online communication may still pose an issue: "I did like the fact that I could email the instructor, but if there was a problem with miscommunication, then I would not get the answer I needed." It therefore seems that when replying to more complex questions through email, instructors may want to confirm that they have understood questions correctly. As discussed earlier, the professor for this course was very careful about email, making sure to check it frequently and reply quickly. The professor also assured students that if there were any further questions, they should email again. However, by explicitly asking if a given question was understood correctly, this might encourage a hesitant or shy student to re-ask their question if needed. Interestingly, Enkin and Mejías-Bikandi (2017) discuss that email can be a large part of an online course and that course content may need to be discussed in detail through it. However, in a fast-paced summer course where answers are needed quickly, extra care may need to be taken, and furthermore, instructors may also need to be prepared to check and answer emails several times a day. Indeed, Ferguson and DeFelice (2010) caution that,

> In a five-week session, the burden on the professor to keep track of every email and to respond to every discussion board entry is, from experience, much more intense and demanding than if the communications were spread out over a whole semester. (p. 80)

In order to further address lack of F2F teacher support, an additional suggestion might be to make virtual synchronous class sessions via the virtual classroom platform part of a summer online course. Virtual synchronous class sessions were not made part of this course so that students could choose to work independently on their own time, and would not be required to find time in their summer schedules to attend a weekly virtual class time. Nevertheless, virtual synchronous class sessions could be an option that teachers take into consideration when planning these types of courses.

Another issue related to lack of F2F teacher time is that virtual office hours need to be chosen carefully, since scheduling conflicts may interfere with students being able to take advantage of them. For example, one student specifically explained that they could not use the office hour because they had another class during that time, and another student also indicated that the office hour should not be held the same day every week (though they did not give a specific reason why). An instructor may therefore first want to take a poll of availability in order to establish a time that works for most students, or one could also vary their office hour week to week if that would work better. Another idea would be to have "by-

appointment only" office hours, which may serve students better since they could set up specific times to meet with their teacher, and would not feel pressured to be available for one specific office hour each week. In addition to "by-appointment" online meetings, instructors may also want to offer an in-person office hour on campus as an option for those students who are able to come to campus and who would rather meet F2F.

5.3.3 Course design and materials

For course design and materials, the narrated PowerPoint lectures and the accompanying lecture notes were a highlight that students discussed, specifically noting that they enjoyed them and that these materials made the course effective. For example, one student stated,

> I really liked that the instructor had narrated power points so that we could listen to [the professor] explain [the material] and see it in writing. Also the added notes sheets were great to reference without having to go back through the power points.

In an intensive course format, this last point may be important, since quizzes and assignments come up faster than in a semester-long course, and it may therefore be convenient to have succinct and organized overviews for each module/section of the class (each of the lecture notes/notes sheets documents ranged from three to eight pages, and there was either one or two of these documents for each module). Indeed, as Chenoweth et al. (2006) and Murday et al. (2008) found, lengthy materials that reside online may be difficult for students' study habits and may feel unstructured or disorganized, and Enkin and Mejías-Bikandi (2017) also found that students appreciated an organized format. Outside the L2 learning research, Scott (1996, 2003) also noted the importance of organization, but specifically for intensive courses. Gleaned from student interviews and classroom observations, Scott (2003) reported that,

> Students believed that organization was one of the most important factors to successful intensive courses. Because intensive courses progress so quickly, instructors need to be organized and present material in an easy-to-follow manner. Without organization, intensive courses quickly become overwhelming and chaotic. (p. 32)

Indeed, a student in one of their comments specifically noted that being able to follow the parts of the course/cohesiveness was a positive course attribute: "…all the documents and ppts and exercises really complimented each other."

Still on the topic of course design, when planning summer online courses, instructors may want to take into account that learners' schedules in the summers may be quite different from their regular semester schedules. Indeed, one student specifically discussed that the Friday deadlines were problematic for their summer schedule:

> …I think that [summer online] classes should not have such a strict schedule with deadlines and such. The reason I'm taking an online class in the summer is because I'm busy and I'm planning on working on things during the weekends.

Another student also noted that taking a summer online course was difficult for them because they were working full time in the summer. Thus, students in summer online courses may go into these classes with their own plans about when they will complete the self-paced online work. Instructors may therefore want to consider various elements when developing their syllabi, such as allowing time over the weekends to complete coursework.

5.3.4 Practical benefits of summer online courses

The topic of student schedules discussed above is also connected to a larger theme: the practical benefits of taking summer online classes. Participants in this study largely reported that they had taken the course for practical reasons: for improved regular semester schedules, because they needed the course for graduation and could not take it during the school year, and because it was online and they could therefore take it despite not being able to come to campus in the summer. For example, one student noted, "I have two majors and had to take this class in the summer to fit in all my other classes for my second Music Education major", and another student explained, "…I am currently living in a place where traveling to a campus weekly would be nearly impossible. With the online course, I did not have the concern of drive time or traffic conditions." Also, participants discussed that more summer online courses should be offered for practical reasons: they may fit summer job schedules better, they allow advanced-level courses to be offered more frequently, they help students complete a Spanish major or minor in addition to another program, and they allow students to learn remotely. For example, one student noted that,

> There should be more classes offered online in the summer because to fit in Spanish with another major is very difficult because so many courses during the semester are only offered two maybe three different times and those times are all in the main time that all classes are only offered in. A more flexible schedule could allow more students to pursue a minor/major without having to sacrifice other parts of their interests.

Another student explained that, "More summer online classes would be nice, since a lot of people go home from college for the summer."

5.3.5 Fast-paced nature of summer online courses

Even though summer online courses may be convenient and needed by students, it is important to remember that these courses may not be the right fit for everyone due to a previously raised issue – that is, their fast-paced nature. Indeed, one student noted that they would rather take regular semester online courses because summer online classes are "…very compact and short". Another student further elaborated on the benefits and drawbacks of a fast-paced learning environment:

> …[E]veryone has a different learning style. For me, I like to work ahead of schedule so an online [summer] class fit me well because I would have things done by Thursday normally. But for people who are very busy or don't have good time management, they could struggle with keeping up in a fast-paced online summer class.

Therefore, combining an online (self-paced) course with the fast-paced environment of a summer class may be difficult for some, but others may thrive in this environment.

5.3.6 Summary

In summary, the above data suggest that although some learners would like more F2F teacher support or that a fast-paced summer course may not be ideal for everyone's learning needs or summer schedules (though for some learners fast-paced courses are ideal), learners overall appreciate several of the benefits that accompany summer online courses, most notably the flexible learning style and freedom that go along with them, as well as the diversity in classes offered by the department that they provide.

6 Conclusion

The goal of this study was to examine how effective an online advanced-level summer course for a foreign language (Spanish) could be, with respect to learning gains as well as students' perceptions. The pretest-posttest data showed significant gains in Spanish knowledge, thereby supporting the effectiveness of these types of courses. The survey data showed mixed student opinions (though opinions were more positive than negative), and students particularly highlighted the advantages of the self-paced nature of the course, as well as discussed several obstacles, some of which may be connected to the course's fast-paced nature.

In addition to the significant improvement found through the beginning-of-course test to the end-of-course test (i.e., the pretest-posttest), which suggests that students can make gains in their content knowledge through online advanced-level summer courses, there are also specific conclusions that can be drawn from the mixed results found in the survey data. As noted above, flexibility in learning (i.e., the ability to self-pace) can be one of the largest benefits of this type of online course. In particular, self-paced learning allows students to work at their own speed and at their convenience, which can also help them to develop important time management skills overall. Moreover, this type of course is highly convenient for learners with respect to scheduling. Students can take the course remotely from anywhere, and it can help them with on-time graduation (this can be especially useful for those students who have more than one major, and therefore who have to take many required courses).

However, as also mentioned above, the fast-paced nature of this type of course may not be ideal for all students. In order to help students with this, teachers should make sure their materials are highly organized, easy to follow, and are not overly lengthy (for example, as in the course discussed in this study, course content could be organized into modules that include narrated PowerPoint lectures and accompanying brief written overviews). Furthermore, because lack of F2F teacher support may be amplified by the fast-paced nature of this type of course, teachers should be attentive to their email, since various problems or questions may occur more frequently during a condensed timeframe. It may also be necessary for teachers to follow up more often with students via email to make certain that questions have been answered. Another idea would be to include weekly virtual synchronous class sessions as part of the course, and perhaps also offer an in-person (F2F) weekly office hour on campus for those students who

would like to meet in person. Given the various challenges with the fast-paced environment, at the start of the course, it may be beneficial for teachers to explicitly mention these challenges and how they will be addressed to students.

Lastly, it is important for teachers to take into account that each student's schedule is different, and that summer schedules may largely differ from regular semester schedules. Therefore, choosing virtual office hours may be best done by taking a poll of student availability, or by switching to a by-appointment-only format so that students can each choose the best time for themselves without feeling pressured to be available during set office hour times. Furthermore, deadlines for course assignments should be carefully considered, especially since students may be working more in the summer and may be using weekends to study.

Going forward, more studies should be carried out in this area in order to gain further understanding about these types of courses. However, it is also important to keep in mind that recruiting participants for studies on online courses can be somewhat difficult given that there are simply less of these courses offered and thus less participants to recruit; furthermore, it may also be difficult to engage participants for study purposes when there is no in-person contact with them (see Blake et al., 2008, for discussion). Therefore, and given this difficulty, this study is valuable and timely because it works to fill a gap in this research area, and because it offers insight into a type of course that can be helpful for students who would like to major or minor in a foreign language. Moreover, the results presented here are important to consider since each course is structured differently, and insights from various different classes (and therefore diverse research projects) will continue to add to our knowledge about these courses. Future research may also want to focus on intensive summer courses taught as hybrid classes in order to learn more about what that type of format can offer students.

In conclusion, it is the hope that this paper has offered insights that can help foreign language teachers plan similar types of courses. As discussed in the results section, and as summarized above, teachers may want to consider issues such as the course's self-paced nature, students' summer schedules, the importance of constructing materials that are appropriate for the summer online format, and the time that may need to be devoted to students' (frequent) questions. Due to the lack of research in this area, the findings from this study may help teachers be more prepared to teach these classes.

Endnote

[1] To provide additional context for this finding, the result of a power analysis that was run for a within-subjects *t*-test is discussed. The power analysis was run in the statistical software R (R Core Team, 2013) in order to determine if the sample size (*N* = 17) would be sufficient for reaching acceptable power for a typical effect size found in L2 research where a within-subjects design is used. Because the median effect size for this type of research has been found to be large according to Cohen's (1988) conventions (see Plonsky & Oswald, 2014, for a review and discussion of effect sizes found in primary studies and meta-analyses from the L2 research field), an effect size corresponding to the threshold for a large effect size (*d* = 0.80) was used (*d* = 0.80 was also the observed effect size in the present study). The analysis was two-tailed and the significance level was set to 0.05. Power of 0.87 was found, which is sufficient power according to the norm of greater than or equal to 0.80 (Ellis, 2010); therefore this sample size would be considered appropriate for this study.

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Appendix
Example questions from the pretest-posttest (assessment tests)

Type (1): Students chose the correct forms of subordinate verbs in fill-in-the-blank
         questions

Es necesario que _____ esta prueba en una hora.
     a. completemos
     b. completamos
     c. completar
     d. completaremos

Translation:
     It is necessary that _____ this test in an hour.

(Correct choice: a. *completemos* [we complete])

Type (2a): Students chose the correct translations for sentences focusing on sentence
         connectors

We left early so you wouldn't have to wait.
     a. Salimos temprano pues no tuvieras que esperar.
     b. Salimos temprano para que no tendrías que esperar.
     c. Salimos temprano para que no tuvieras que esperar.
     d. Salimos temprano porque no tuviste que esperar.

(Correct choice: c. *Salimos temprano para que no tuvieras que esperar.*)

Type (2b): Students chose the correct translations for sentences focusing on relative
         pronouns and syntactical forms of relative clauses

There is nothing you have to worry about.
     a. No hay nada que te tengas que preocupar.
     b. No hay nada lo que te tengas que preocupar.
     c. No hay nada de lo que te tengas que preocupar.
     d. No hay nada lo que te tengas que preocupar de.

(Correct choice: c. *No hay nada de lo que te tengas que preocupar.*)