

Graduate Student Perspectives on Linguistic and Cultural Growth in Online Language Courses

Leah Fonder-Solano, *The University of Southern Mississippi*
Joanne Burnett, *The University of Southern Mississippi*

Abstract

In this study, 64 master's students and program graduates in French, Spanish, and TESOL evaluated their online experiences in two areas in which learning effectiveness is often questioned in online settings: linguistic proficiency and cultural knowledge. This study was informed by national data documenting attitudes toward online learning, existing studies of online language learning and a faculty commitment to program review. It used three different data sources, including an anonymous questionnaire with open-ended comments, interviews, and content analysis of final portfolio reflections. The overwhelming majority of questionnaire participants reported improvements in proficiency, cultural knowledge, and cross-cultural awareness. They also reported interacting in the target language with peers and instructors, as well as feeling part of a language learning community. Individual comments from final portfolios, interview data,

Leah Fonder-Solano (Ph.D. University of Arizona) is an Associate Professor of Spanish at The University of Southern Mississippi. She teaches both undergraduate and graduate levels of Spanish with specializations in conversation, Hispanic film, Latin American civilization, and literature. Her publications include *En tu medio* (2017), an intermediate Spanish textbook and academic articles on Spanish language education, online education, the Uruguayan author Cristina Peri Rossi, and Latin American film.

Joanne Burnett (Ph.D. Pennsylvania State University) is an Associate Professor of French and Second Language Acquisition at The University of Southern Mississippi. She teaches all levels of French in addition to courses in Francophone civilization, popular culture, and contemporary literature as well as graduate courses in teaching methodologies, second language acquisition, and sociolinguistics. She has published on teaching literature, classroom management, technology in language education, and the Belgian pop music sensation Stromae.

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and the open response section of the questionnaire contextualize and elucidate these findings.

Introduction

(Hall & Knox, 2009). Even those who may have general knowledge about online learning may distrust the format or conflate very different online learning contexts and populations (e.g., MOOCs vs. small-group academic courses (Ko & Rossen, 2017). In fact, *Inside Higher Ed* (2014) published a national Gallup poll showing that only 33% of faculty believe that online courses can produce learning outcomes equivalent to those in-class; 83% of faculty respondents rate student interaction in online courses as inferior to that of classroom-based courses; and faculty in humanities (including foreign or second language instructors) are generally the most skeptical; 54% view online courses negatively.

Profession-wide, it is accepted that learning takes place in face-to-face instruction. In online contexts, however, poll results such as these *Inside Higher Ed* survey responses show that many still question whether meaningful learning can or does take place online without regard for academic context, instructor qualifications, program level, or course set-up. Indeed, during several years of teaching graduate language courses online, the authors¹ commonly encountered both pointed and subtle critiques of online instruction particular to language learning, e.g., that online courses could not provide high-quality language or cultural development. These concerns regarding online learning did not match our experiences over a decade of combined administration and online instruction, nor did it reflect the experiences typically described in graduating students' final program reflections, such as the following comment:

As far as improving my knowledge of the Spanish language, I can definitely say that I was pushed and challenged academically in this area. It was so exciting to have opportunities to improve my knowledge as well as being taught with different tools like: service learning, watching films in the target language, and reading literature. It's not to say that I didn't already do some of these things before, but I expanded upon them to reveal the next level of learning a language. (Final Portfolio)

As faculty in a well-established online Master of Arts in the Teaching of Languages program with concentrations in Spanish, French, and TESOL, the authors decided to conduct a program review to gauge the experiences and perspectives of actual online language students and program graduates regarding their linguistic and cultural growth. This review identified commonly-voiced critiques that could be attributed to online programs in general and to online language teacher education in particular. For the purposes of this article, we explore

Online learning organized through learning management systems has been present in higher education for almost two decades. Nevertheless, uncertainty persists about its appropriateness and even how or whether it works, particularly in the field of language learning where relatively few studies have been conducted.

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only those categories associated with language learning: improvement in the four skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), interaction with peers and instructors, improvement in cultural knowledge and cross-cultural awareness, and participation in a community of language learners.

This research adds to the literature because most of the studies (and positions) regarding online language learning to date address only lower-level learners in undergraduate populations (Hauk & Stickler, 2006; O'Dowd, 2011; Russell & Curtis, 2013). In their review of language education programs via distance learning, Hall and Knox (2009) call for more empirical studies that are both quantitative and qualitative in nature, grounded by the data, and triangulated by more than one data source such as interviews, self-reported data, observation, or teacher collaboration. They also encourage a focus on languages other than English as a second language. We believe our study meets these requirements, as it uses a triangulated approach to look at language learning and language teacher education online. It offers insight from an anonymous questionnaire, student interviews, and content analysis of final program reflections.

Program context and instructional history

While the master's program at The University of Southern Mississippi has always offered classes on campus, in 2008 an online option for year-round study replaced a summer intensive model. Since that time, the majority of master's students have enrolled exclusively online, with a small number (9-12) of on-campus students and graduate teaching assistants taking a mix of traditional and online courses. Students may enroll in Fall, Spring, or Summer sessions and take one or two courses online per session; for this reason, there are no traditional student cohorts except for on-campus teaching assistants. Online students are typically practicing teachers who take five to six semesters to complete the degree. Graduate students in the program are required to take five core linguistics and education classes (second language teaching methods, applied linguistics, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics and culture, and a second/foreign language practicum completed in a school setting), along with five classes in their language emphasis and one elective of their choice. As a final program assessment, they are required to create a professional portfolio that includes an open-ended reflection on their experience in the program.

All the core courses in the program are taught by full-time tenured/tenure-track faculty members who are content specialists in fields such as language acquisition, applied linguistics, and teacher education. These faculty members teach the language emphasis courses along with two other area specialists in literature and culture studies.

Review of pertinent literature

Despite skepticism, online learning will continue to form part of higher education in every field of study and continues to grow both at the researcher's own institution and nationwide. During the period of our study, Allen and Seaman (2008) found that over 20% of US college students were taking at least one course online. In 2010 they documented a 21% annual growth rate for online enrollments,

compared to only a 2% growth rate in college enrollments overall. By 2012, online enrollments had grown to comprise 33.5% of all undergraduate enrollments nationwide (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Studies cite economic, institutional, and administrative pressures (Allen & Seaman, 2010) as well as demand from time-pressed students for convenience, flexibility, and ease of access (Burnett & Fonder-Solano, 2016; Murphy, 2002; Russell & Curtis, 2013) as contributing factors to this explosive growth. Not surprisingly, the bulk of these reports reflect lower-level, undergraduate populations with multiple sections and large enrollments. But online courses are offered at every level, including upper-level courses for the major and graduate programs—particularly in graduate degrees that cater to working adults, such as ubiquitous online MBA or TESOL programs. Because online instruction represents the single largest growth area in higher education and is constantly evolving in terms of tools and functionality, it is imperative to study how online learning takes place in different contexts and with different student populations. With regard to language study, however, research on higher-level language learning and language teacher education is scant.

Language learning online

Studies that have explored online language learning have highlighted the difficulties of documenting the effectiveness of this format in language acquisition. In 2015 the *Modern Language Journal* devoted a special issue to proficiency outcomes in online language courses, exploring issues such as the challenges of evaluating proficiency (Blake, 2015; Rubio 2015), student outcomes and measures for success (Lin & Warschauer, 2015; Van Deusen-Scholl, 2015), and standards for program accountability in student outcomes (Doughty, 2015). Some researchers, like Doughty, lamented the lack of research using quantifiable, objective measures to support claims of online effectiveness (particularly for commercial products such as *Rosetta Stone* or *Pimsleur*). Blake (2015), however, explains that for many studies of online language learning, research using so-called “objective” measures may not be either possible or desirable. In particular, he makes the case that using the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) to assess proficiency outcomes is inherently “messy,” with complicating factors such as different instructors, different course set-ups, different levels, different curricula, different class formats, and even different standards for proficiency: “After all, seeking out comparative student outcomes between in situ and online language courses might constitute a reasonable exercise if the profession actually knew how to measure rigorously, or even define, language proficiency in a scientific manner” (p. 409).

The authors agree with this assessment: for an online graduate program in which students do not all take the same courses, do not complete the program within the same time frame, and would not be expected to make measurable language proficiency gains within the scope of a single semester or academic year², the ACTFL OPI would not yield meaningful

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data. The most important conclusion drawn by these researchers is that context matters. For example, the unproven claims of software publishers like *Rosetta Stone* or *Pimsleur* are not equivalent to studies of what happens in an academic environment, and studies of lower-level online language classes may not be relevant to graduate language learners who, though they may already have a strong foundation in the target language and culture, still need to maintain and improve their language skills to remain viable in the profession.

Online classroom interaction and community

One of the main critiques of the online format is a perceived lack of student interaction between peers and between students and the instructor. This may be due to conflation of different online learning contexts (e.g., MOOCs vs. small-scale academic courses) or simply to confusion about how interaction can and does take place in an online environment. O'Dowd (2007) argues that the online format may actually provide advantages over in-class learning, including the opportunity to interact with peers and native speakers beyond the time constraints of the traditional classroom, to use a wider variety of communication tools, to save and print interaction transcripts, and to interact with authentic media and materials. Some research suggests that learning outcomes and student satisfaction in language courses may depend less on course format than they do on class size (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Orellana, 2006; Russell & Curtis, 2013), with smaller enrollments permitting both student-to-student and student-to-teacher interaction. Because these studies addressed lower-level language courses in which students often enroll simply to fulfill a language requirement for their degree with little intrinsic motivation, this finding might be even more apt with regard to a self-selecting graduate population of practicing teachers. Online language classroom communities may be defined as groups whose members share a common interest, passion, or professional concern for what they do and learn how to improve in this mutual interest by frequent interaction (Khalsa, 2012). These communities of practice can enhance student motivation, engagement, and connection to the language learning content when “instructors integrate small and large group discussion to facilitate team-based projects” (Khalsa, 2012, p. 84-5). Hall and Knox (2009) find that while many researchers laud the sense of collaboration and community created by online discussion, others openly question whether such discussions create—or even have the ability to create—a meaningful online community that goes beyond completing required interactive tasks to foster reflective learning and meaningful social connections. Putz and Arnold (2001), for example, argue that a community of practice must be small enough for learners to get acquainted, share an understanding of purpose and conduct, and facilitate the incorporation of new members into the group. According to van Weert and Pilot (2003), a community of practice must be linked to problem-based learning and team-based cooperative learning. This social networking aspect of online language learning, while lauded, is rarely addressed in academic studies; most investigations are short-term (a single semester or course) and look only at non-majors. Because

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our study does involve a population of people who share a concern or passion for language teaching, it adds to the body of literature regarding whether a community of learners can be created online and the conditions in which this might take place.

Learning culture online

Development of cultural knowledge is another area that is less studied in online language learning contexts, with most studies again addressing basic language learners. With regard to teaching target-language culture with online tools and materials, most studies laud the advantages of online technology for in-depth cultural learning, even in the context of traditional classroom instruction. Several researchers (Allen, 2004; Levet & Waryn, 2006) find that the teaching of culture is most effective when students discover the target culture for themselves, rather than having information presented as a series of facts. Online instruction allows students to interact directly with authentic materials, sources, and native speakers via audio and video resources without the time constraints of the traditional classroom. Bush (2007) notes that online resources make it easier for teachers to find and integrate culturally authentic materials, and that these, in turn, make teaching cultural awareness more motivating and effective. A number of researchers highlight the benefits of online technologies which provide authentic and real-time communication, such as professional networking, in an interactive environment that facilitates the teaching of culture (Lee, 2009; Moore, 2006). Dema and Moeller (2012) conclude that inquiry-based learning with digital media results in, “a rich and meaningful environment in which students interact with authentic data and build their own understanding of a foreign culture’s products, practices, and perspectives” (p.75). This is particularly important in the context of a graduate population like ours of sophisticated language learners who have an extensive background in the target language and culture. Students who have advanced language skills, are native speakers, or are practicing language teachers still need to develop in-depth cultural knowledge and cross-cultural awareness. For this reason, it is well-worth exploring whether online students felt that they had made gains in this area and the kinds of experiences they highlight in developing this awareness.

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Our study adds to the discussion of linguistic development, classroom interaction, and cultural knowledge in online contexts by examining the experiences of a group of high-level learners throughout an entire online curriculum, with program graduates experiencing different courses, instructors, and course formats. No program—much less one offered entirely online—can or should take positive student evaluations for granted; student views of their own learning and student feedback about a program of study are valuable, both from a program review standpoint and from a research perspective. A strength of our study is the different data sources that inform our results: the anonymous survey is supported by open-ended comments, unsolicited comments from final program reflections,

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and focus group interviews. As Hauck and Stickler (2006) note, online language learning is perceived nationally as being “second-best” compared to face-to-face formats, with online language learning relegated to “peripheral status” for many researchers. No one questions whether learning takes place in traditional formats, but learner gains of any kind are questioned in online courses (Rovai & Barnum, 2003). Our study uses learner self-assessments to address online language learning because we value the experiences of our students and we believe their level of professional sophistication makes them better equipped than undergraduate basic language students to address their own progress thoughtfully. Thus, our research adds to the body of literature because it studies online learning from actual online language learners.

Research Questions

- How do graduate language students assess their linguistic development in online courses?
- How do graduate language students assess their development of cross-cultural awareness and cultural knowledge in online courses?
- How do graduate language students assess their target-language classroom interactions with peers and instructors in online courses?
- Do graduate language students in online courses feel part of a language-learning community?

Research methodology

Questionnaire

Since the goal of the study was to see if common critiques of online learning were reflected in the experiences of our own graduate students, we developed a twenty-five item questionnaire (see Appendix A) using *Qualtrics* to examine seven areas of language teaching in which learning effectiveness is commonly questioned in online settings. The themes we addressed were linguistic development, cultural development, interaction, learning community, professional development, academic rigor, and online technology issues. This article will focus specifically on linguistic and cultural development, as the other topics were addressed in a separate article (Burnett & Fonder-Solano, 2016).

The questionnaire was developed over a period of three months using models from the literature in language education. Before being sent to potential respondents, it was reviewed by two departmental faculty members with academic training in language education. All of the statements pertained specifically to experiences with online language learning. The questionnaire also included questions about respondents' current employment, geographic location, language of the home and high school, and program language emphasis, as well as why they chose to take an online program. Participants who had not completed at least one online course were redirected out of the questionnaire. Research participants rated their agreement or disagreement on a Likert scale of 1–5 with statements such as, “My L2 oral proficiency improved,” “My cultural knowledge improved,” or

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“I felt part of a community of language learners.” At the end of the questionnaire, students were given an open comment space to make additional remarks about their course or program experience.

The questions pertaining to linguistic development excluded native speakers (e.g., English speakers studying TESOL, or Spanish speakers completing the Spanish concentration) to allow only the responses of L2 learners. For this reason, although there were 64 total survey participants, statements regarding L2 development have a maximum of 51 responses. Because even native speakers can still gain new cultural insights, all 64 respondents were included in questions about cultural knowledge and cross-cultural awareness. Thirty-seven participants also provided open-ended feedback.

After a test mail-out to determine which e-mail addresses were still active, the questionnaire was e-mailed to two different groups: the “current students” e-mail list, which contained 145 names, and 46 alumni who had graduated between 2008 and 2012. The questionnaire was also posted to the departmental *Facebook* group. Once the questionnaire was distributed, we waited one month before printing out the results. There were 64 total participants. This gave us approximately a 34% overall response rate. Of these, 40% were alumni and 60% were current students.

Student Interviews and Final Reflections

To supplement the questionnaire data, we compiled graduating students’ final program reflections from the same time period (2008-2013), coded them for online-only versus mixed in-class and online students, analyzed them for the themes addressed in the survey, and used the reflections that spoke to these issues for further content analysis. These final reflections form a standard component of all graduating students’ final portfolio assessment. Students are asked to write a five- to seven-page final reflection that relates their graduate coursework as a whole to their development as language teaching professionals. In these reflections, students are not prompted to write about any particular issue. Sixteen student responses totaling ninety pages from these final reflective papers were selected for in-depth analysis of comments relevant to the themes under study. These data from program completers provided important context for the questionnaire responses because most survey participants had not yet graduated. Another source of data triangulation came from a one-hour interview with graduate teaching assistants in 2014 who took both online and on-campus classes (Appendix B). Once transcribed, this interview totaled twenty-nine pages.

Data Analysis

Once the authors agreed upon the themes that would guide the study, each researcher took a data set to analyze and code for the themes mentioned above. The same process was followed for final portfolio reflections, the focus group interview, and the open responses on the questionnaire. Each researcher took a set of transcripts from all of the qualitative data and parsed student comments into the seven thematic categories cited above, which were then listed in separate columns on a spreadsheet. The authors then cross-checked each other’s work to

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ensure that there was agreement on where each comment should be categorized. Finally, the researchers consulted syllabi from language emphasis courses since 2008 regarding specific course requirements, policies, and written expectations.

Results

Study participants

The data, including questionnaire responses, final reflections, and interviews, do not so much reflect students' experience with one particular class or instructor as they do the online format of instruction throughout a series of language courses. Moreover, study participants were all experienced language learners, as evidenced by stringent program admission requirements: a university major in the target language, a score of Advanced-Low on the ACTFL OPI, or acceptable TOEFL scores. Thus, this population of graduate students and alumni provided the opportunity to gather feedback from a relatively sophisticated audience of language learners. Because study participants were either practicing language teachers or teachers-in-training, they were better equipped than most to analyze and interpret their online language study. In addition to their experiences as language students, they were also able to frame their self-appraisals through the theoretical lens of their language education core coursework, their experiences abroad, their portfolio reflections, and/or their day-to-day engagement as language professionals.

Questionnaire participants described themselves as follows: 82% were employed in the field of language teaching; 25% of survey respondents either studied abroad with the program or planned to do so; 40% had completed the master's degree; 32% took classes both in-person and online; 73% took six or more courses online; 65% were in the Spanish emphasis; 31% were in the TESOL emphasis; and 25% were in the French emphasis.

Linguistic Development

Linguistic development is assessed through questions regarding overall proficiency and gains in each of the four skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing), with all questions referring specifically to online coursework. Questions about target-language interactions with peers and instructors as well as whether students felt part of a language-learning community were also included in this category because they relate to language acquisition. To simplify interpretation, the sections and tables combine the number of responses for "agree" and "strongly agree" and for "disagree" and "strongly disagree." The mean score is also provided in each table (See Table 1 on the next page).

Linguistic development: Four skills

When asked about overall proficiency, 88% (45/51) of questionnaire participants reported they had in fact improved; none disagreed. In final portfolio reflections, online students generally expressed satisfaction with their linguistic development: "My Spanish has improved; my comfort with the language in reading and writing and speaking are all measurably better. Additionally, and perhaps more

Table 1. Linguistic Development Online

Survey Statement	Agree/ Strongly Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree	Mean	Total Respondents
My L2 oral proficiency improved.	33 (65%)	12 (24%)	6 (12%)	3.73	51
My L2 listening comprehension improved.	33 (65%)	13 (25%)	5 (10%)	3.76	51
My L2 writing skills improved.	47 (92%)	4 (8%)	0 (0%)	4.39	51
My L2 reading proficiency improved.	48 (94%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)	4.37	51
My overall L2 language proficiency improved.	45 (88%)	6 (12%)	0 (0%)	4.20	51
I interacted with my online peers in the language of my concentration	42 (82%)	3 (6%)	6 (12%)	4.06	51
I interacted with my instructor in the language of my concentration	42 (82%)	5 (10%)	4 (8%)	4.12	51
I felt part of a language learning community	42 (82%)	5 (10%)	4 (8%)	4.00	51

importantly, I am more engaged with the language now than I was before I began my study” (Final Portfolio). Broken down by skill area, the highest mean was in writing, at 4.39 (n=51) and the lowest was in oral proficiency, at 3.73. In speaking and listening, 65% (33/51) agreed that their oral and listening proficiency had improved while 12% and 10% respectively disagreed. In these same skill areas, a number of students neither agreed nor disagreed (24% and 25%, respectively). However, survey respondents rated writing and reading as the skills that showed greatest development: 94% and 92% respectively indicated that their writing and reading skills had improved; none disagreed.

These results for online reading and writing improvement may seem somewhat predictable given the academic requirements of graduate study:

Various classes expanded my ability to read incredibly challenging fiction. To be quite frank, I could hardly understand anything we had to

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read at first. What this situation required, then, was an incredible amount of patience and dedication. As a result, I greatly expanded my vocabulary and the type of Spanish literature that I was capable of reading and comprehending. (Final Portfolio)

Not only do online courses include extensive reading and writing assignments, but students must also read to access and navigate the course (course shells are set up in the target language), read course e-mails, read and write discussion board posts, and decode written instructor feedback.

In fact, when responding to the portion of the questionnaire that asked about online tools, students recalled engaging with a wide variety of online interactive tools and resources geared toward all four skills, often in combination. These included the discussion board (100%), live chats (91%), blogs (20%), voice recordings (47%), online resources (86%), library resources (80%), online media (64%), course videos (63%), e-books (48%), and required course texts (89%), which according to syllabi included novels, anthologies, and collections of poetry or stories, poetry, as well as academic or theoretical texts (See Burnett & Fonder-Solano, 2016). The tool with the highest percentage of reported usage was the discussion board, a reading and writing-focused forum. Live chats, an interactive medium for listening and speaking, was the second most-cited tool. Reading materials such as course texts also received high rates of reported usage.

With regard to speaking and listening skills, student open-ended comments from the questionnaire likewise tended to bear out an interactive course dynamic, with some preferring the oral chats to written discussion board assignments: “I really did enjoy my online classes, but felt that many of the required online discussion posts were unnecessary. I preferred a more active approach to sharing thoughts and opinions which was accomplished during the online chats” (Questionnaire Open Response). Others cited the opportunity to improve oral skills as a key feature of chat sessions: “The chat sessions were beneficial, especially when there were clearly-stated objectives. I was able to improve my Spanish [though] my speaking was already strong” (Questionnaire Open Response). Some students viewed these oral interactions as key to their own professional development: “Because I am not a native speaker, it is essential that I practice speaking Spanish a lot so that I don’t start to forget pieces of it. These classes ensured that I continued to use the language in an academic setting, reinforcing what I had already been learning” (Final Portfolio). With regard to listening, most students also expressed satisfaction. One student reports: “Another course, SPA 641 *La Fonología del Español* [Spanish Phonology], involved an in-depth study of Spanish phonology that improved my own language production, my awareness of phonological variation in Spanish-speaking countries, and my understanding of specific phonological challenges that English-speaking learners of Spanish face” (Final Portfolio).

However, speaking and listening had the highest number of respondents who disagreed (12% and 10%, respectively) that they had improved in the skill. Open-ended comments reveal that some negative responses may be due to dissatisfaction with assignment set-up or even their peers. One student highlights

the inconvenience of synchronous chats, given the program's student population of full-time teachers located in time zones around the globe: "Although the chat sessions are beneficial to the program, it seems that alternate chat schedules could be made for teachers studying from abroad" (Questionnaire Open Response). Another felt that chats could easily "veer off-course" when not managed well by the professor. Another declared chats "a waste of time" because her peers were not prepared (Questionnaire Open Response). Because live chat sessions are the only synchronous program requirement, this type of frustration may explain, in part, lower "agree" scores as well as higher numbers of "neither agree nor disagree" responses to oral/aural improvement.

Another explanation may be that students often related improvements in speaking and listening to affective concerns such as apprehension about engaging with a specific skill or medium. For example, some online assignments took them into the community and outside of their comfort zone:

My Spanish in the United States course took me out into the community with a service-learning project. One of the pitfalls of teaching elementary Spanish is that it is possible to speak Spanish only to children and avoid adults entirely. This service-learning project put me out in the community, speaking with parents and professionals. It stretched my language, but mostly my confidence. I feel much more comfortable now in speaking to adults in a variety of settings. (Final Portfolio)

This student clearly believed that this experience impacted her oral skills; she expresses that improvement in terms of confidence and willingness to seek out similar experiences in the future. It is important to keep in mind that this real-world experience stemmed from an online course requirement, as online learning may not often be associated with authentic community interaction. In terms of listening, students also describe linguistic gains in terms of "comfort":

Prior to these courses, I had always viewed French media as something that was a step beyond my comfort level, as I found it difficult to follow the rapid rate of speech. Through watching a large selection of films and learning new tools to access French subtitles online, I felt my own level of comfort grow. (Final Portfolio)

Overall, program completers expressed satisfaction with these experiences. Live chat discussions, for example, were cited as opportunities to "interact with native Spanish speakers," "delve deeper into topics of personal interest," and develop "more accurate and fluent use of the target language while teaching" (Final Portfolios). Even students who had minor complaints about chat sessions (e.g., that chat sessions were at inconvenient times or that other students' oral skills were insufficient) nevertheless reported that these required extensive participation in the target language.

Linguistic development: Interaction with peers and instructors

In terms of the interactions that support linguistic development, 82% (42/51) reported interacting with both peers and instructors in the target language, while

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8% did not; 10% neither agreed nor disagreed. This response, while defying conventional wisdom, nevertheless aligned with researcher expectations, given program policies and course syllabi which typically require significant discussion board and chat participation. In fact, 77% (49/64) of all survey respondents indicated that their interactions with online peers were productive; an even higher percentage (88%, 56/64) reported productive interaction with faculty (Burnett & Fonder-Solano, 2016).

Even some teaching assistants, who are based on campus, expressed initial qualms regarding the quality of classroom interaction in an online setting:

I was actually hesitant about taking an online class because I was thinking that I would rather sit down at the front of the classroom, see the professor's face and be able to interact like that. But [once in chat], with the interaction part, you talk more in the online class because you are put in a group. In the classroom, it might not necessarily happen like that. (TA Focus Group)

In fact, most students indicated a positive experience with peer interactions online:

I will say this, in terms of building a community of learners through these online courses, I think one of the best things that we did online was actually just different grouping strategies. You had to speak to the person you were assigned, so it was, "Hi, you are? Oh! That's nice, my name is... and what did you think about this?" So it was nice to actually get to share ideas in that respect, because you weren't getting the same opinions over and over again from the same person. (TA Focus Group)

In their final portfolio reflections, many students also gave favorable reviews of their instructors' teaching style and course feedback: "[My instructors] made me feel that my progress and growth were of primary importance. I was encouraged by the positive feedback and comments on evaluations that further increased my motivation to improve my language and my teaching skills" (Final Portfolio). As might be expected, however, not all comments were glowing endorsements; several students stressed the need for clear expectations, strong organization, and timely evaluation: "It took me a while to get used to the self-discipline online courses require. In an online class, there was a bit of a lag time to receive responses to questions and thoughts. This was a struggle for me because I am one who wants immediate responses to my questions. I had to be patient and really take advantage of chat times" (Final Portfolio). Notably, students did not cite the online course format as impeding their interaction with the instructor. As seen in the preceding quote, students were primarily concerned with the frequency and quality of instructor feedback.

Linguistic development: Language learning community

With regard to feeling part of a community, 82% (42/51) of respondents felt that they were part of a community specifically of language learners, 10% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 8% did not feel connected to a larger online community. As may be seen in any learning context, a few students simply did

not wish to interact with others or pursue online friendships with classmates. As one student wrote, “I am an independent learner, which is why I chose the online program, so all I really needed was some feedback from professors to guide me.” (Questionnaire Open Response) But student discomfort with social interaction is hardly exclusive to the online environment. Even in traditional settings some students choose not to engage with peers either inside or outside of class for a variety of reasons, depending on their own perceived needs at a particular time. For example, one teaching assistant (who took courses both in-class and online) noted that because she already had close-knit, supportive relationships within the small group of on-campus TAs, she was less interested in making friends with an online peer until the context of that relationship changed:

I could say, “Hey, I commented on your discussion board post,” but I just didn’t feel the same relationship with some of the other people in my online classes. There was one girl that I didn’t even know who she was until we all went to Spain together. And she recognized me because I always had my video on whenever we talked [in the online chat]. I ended up liking her a lot. (TA Focus Group)

But as may be seen by the survey results, most students did choose to engage with their classmates and felt part of a language learning community. Essentially, the respondents who indicated that they felt part of a community were those who valued such interactions. For some, the relationships they developed with their peers and colleagues were often cited as one of the most rewarding and enduring aspects of the program. One student claimed to have found, “support and idea sources through the partnerships I have cultivated.” (Final Portfolio). Another stated that, “the thing I appreciate most from my entire experience are the friendships I have developed with fellow language teachers across the country” (Final Portfolio). A third student agreed: “One of the greatest advantages to studying in this program is the ability to interact with students around the globe” (Final Portfolio).

Some students lived in areas of geographic or cultural isolation (from rural Alaska to ESL teachers in Saudi Arabia). These participants often had no access to native speakers of the target language or to people who shared their own cultural background. Others were struggling language teachers in small communities who had no colleagues in their field with whom they could share teaching ideas or concerns. But many simply bonded over the experience of making it through a very challenging course together or taking several courses together throughout their program of study. Overall, student comments expressed appreciation for the opportunity to “connect on a personal level,” “form lasting friendships,” “practice language skills with people struggling just like me,” “get input from a diverse crowd,” and work with others who “share their passion” (Final Portfolio). Unlike basic language courses, which form the basis for most studies of online language instruction, these graduate students were not taking courses simply to fulfill a requirement. Their shared vocation as language teachers, their shared experience of taking the same courses, and their shared enthusiasm for learning the language clearly increased their motivation to bond with each other as a community of language learners.

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Cultural development

We defined cultural development in two ways: improvement in cultural knowledge and cross-cultural awareness (See Table 2). When asked about their cultural development online, 84% (54/64) of respondents felt that their cultural knowledge improved while 6% disagreed and 6% neither agreed nor disagreed. 81% (52/64) reported that their cross-cultural awareness had improved, whereas 8% felt it had not and 8% neither agreed nor disagreed. In the open comment section of the questionnaire and in final portfolios, no student expressed dissatisfaction regarding cultural learning. Rather, the overwhelming majority of respondents felt that they were able to engage meaningfully with different aspects of the target culture in an online environment. This is important, given that students enter the program with a high level of language and target culture experience: 20% were native speakers, some had studied or lived abroad (including 17% who reported studying abroad while enrolled in the program), and many had a target-language undergraduate major.

Table 2. Cultural Development Online

Survey Statement	Agree/ Strongly Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree	Mean	Total Respondents
My cultural knowledge improved.	54 (84%)	4 (6%)	4 (6%)	4.31*	64
My cross-cultural awareness improved.	52 (81%)	5 (8%)	5 (8%)	4.28**	64

*2 participants answered “not applicable”

**2 participants answered “not applicable”

The fact that this population reported engaging in new and challenging ways with the history, popular culture, news, film, literature, and communities of the target culture speaks to the opportunities online courses can provide for continued cultural growth. One student noted, “I learned the importance of incorporating cultural activities in the classroom and how to do it successfully. The [graduate program] allowed me to experiment with different topics and ideas that I originally would not have tried, such as art units discussing Frida and Diego Rivera, the Kuna Indians, and *molas* of Panama, and Fernando Botero and his strange artwork” (Final Portfolio). With regard to history and civilization, another student adds, “In SPA 637: *La Presencia Hispana en la Costa del Golfo* [Hispanic Presence on the Gulf Coast], I was surprised by how much Spanish influence there has been in the Gulf Coast region of the United States. I read about indigenous tribes I had never heard of and learned so much more about Spanish explorers than I had been taught in the past. I realized for the first time how precious little I know about Spanish history and culture.” (Portfolio Reflection).

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A review of course offerings can also provide insight into the types of experiences these students may have had. Typical French, Spanish, and TESOL language emphasis courses taught both in-class and online include Francophone/Spanish/Latin American Civilization, Readings in American Cultural Studies, Sociolinguistics and Socio-cultural Perspectives in Language, Topics in French/Spanish Literature (e.g., Novels of the Dirty War, Young Adult literature), France and the Media, French/Spanish in the Americas, Topics in Culture (e.g., Marie Antoinette and the Revolution, French Cuisine, Afro-Caribbean Culture), Francophone or Hispanic Film, and History of the French/Spanish Language. Moreover, study abroad experiences in France, Mexico, or Spain enhanced many students' graduate education overall. Fully 25% (16/64) of survey respondents either studied abroad with the program or planned to do so. These students enriched their cultural knowledge through an array of opportunities such as big-C excursions to museums or archeological sites or little-c cultural engagement with popular culture and daily life. Finally, community-based research and community-service learning enhanced the depth of students' cultural learning in many courses. One student commented:

This course allowed me to be more involved in the local Hispanic community; as a service-learning project, I volunteered at St. Francis House, a local non-profit organization that aids those in need in the community, including a number of Hispanics. I also completed an interview with a Spanish-speaking friend and designed lessons for my classes based on the interview. I learned that I can use my own interactions with the Spanish-speaking community to create authentic lessons for my classrooms. (Final Portfolio)

Because our students saw themselves not only as language learners but also as language teachers, several students viewed the cultural knowledge that they gained through these courses as professionally transformative: "Through the [graduate program], I have transformed my classroom from one which focused on grammar and the textbook to one that focuses on content and the world" (Final Portfolio). Others gave very specific, detailed information on how the culture they learned in online graduate courses affected both their linguistic competence and their teaching ability:

Learning the history of French civilization has helped me to feel more comfortable including Francophone history in my lesson plans. From discussion of ancient Gaul to bringing in reading on the Acadian diaspora to the ongoing struggle France faces with immigration, I feel much more capable sharing French culture with students and have since been including more and more in my units. (Final Portfolio)

In fact, several final portfolio reflections highlighted the program's unique cultural opportunities such as the community service-learning project in the *Hispanics in the US* course:

In this class I developed a video on Westside community art. Murals I documented were painted by a locally famous muralist who, without the

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support of my professor, I probably would never have had the courage to interview. This class provided a profoundly personal experience of Hispanics in the US for me as I focused intensely on my very own neighborhood's history and the people who created it. (Final Portfolio)

These comments stress not only personal gains in cultural knowledge and cross-cultural awareness, but also the importance of this increased cultural knowledge and awareness to their development as language teachers.

Discussion and conclusion

In terms of our research questions, student data regarding proficiency gains, cultural knowledge, cross-cultural awareness, classroom interaction, and feeling part of a language learning community provide a strong, yet nuanced counterpoint to the pervasive skepticism surrounding language learning online. At least for this population of graduate students, participants reported overall that their linguistic (88%) n=51 and cultural competence improved (84%) n=64 and that these courses fostered peer interactions in the target language (82%) n=51 and allowed for friendships and support as part of a language learning community (82%) n=51.

The fact that students almost universally report improvement in overall L2 proficiency is a remarkable outcome, particularly when no student disagreed. One might laud these outcomes in any master's program, but this level of perceived gains in language proficiency would not necessarily be expected of an online master's program. Even the lowest reported skill-area gains (65% in speaking and listening) show that most students report improvement. The fact that these numbers lag behind reported progress in reading and writing may reflect the prevalence of assignments and tools that reinforce those particular skills. The lower perceived improvement for oral/aural skills, as well as the larger group that replied "neither agree nor disagree" may also reflect student ambivalence regarding chat assignments, evolving technology for aural/oral communication, or even willingness to communicate. Certainly, as the technology for online group oral interaction and listening has improved and the platforms have changed, these tools have been more widely incorporated in our courses (e.g., Collaborate Classroom, Big Blue Button, Google Chat).

As seen in the comments regarding classroom interaction, supportive peer communication can and did fulfill social needs of online learners as well as foster linguistic improvement. Most online students reported active participation in the target language with peers, particularly in discussion board forums and live chats. As shown in our results, respondents not only felt part of a community of learners, but specifically felt part of a community of language learners that often interacted in the target language. This becomes quite meaningful when one considers that students do not move through our program in cohorts. Comments from final

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portfolios elucidate these findings by showing how important these relationships were to provide a sounding board, friendship, ideas for language teaching, and to share their passion for the language and culture.

Study Limitations

Since the program has only been fully online since 2008, to obtain a meaningful number of respondents, our study included a mixed population of students with online experience: some studied exclusively online, some mixed online and in-class experiences, and some studied abroad as well as taking online courses. The researchers mitigated these differences by how we coded the data for different population groups. Although all students were directed to respond specifically based on online experiences, this relatively small, mixed population did not lend itself easily to statistical analysis. It also addressed a single institution, whose results may not be generalizable. We also recognize that because the questionnaire was not piloted, it could benefit from some revision. However, the authors did get input from faculty colleagues regarding the wording of survey questions prior to implementation.

Conclusion

Encouragingly, this group of online graduate students reported positive experiences, rebutting common critiques of online learning. This result might be expected from highly motivated students who self-select into an online master's program, but it does not negate the fact that they report meaningful learning and positive experiences overall. When reputable national surveys report faculty skepticism regarding the quality, classroom interaction, and learning outcomes of online courses, it is not widely understood that individual courses or programs might present a different picture.

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The focus must be on creating a whole, comprehensive program of study, regardless of format, with ample opportunities for students to engage in the target language, connect with target-language communities, and interact directly with authentic materials. Some features the authors view as fundamental for creating a successful online language program include providing courses rich in cultural context, an online environment that supports language acquisition (with course shell, syllabi, and assignments all in the target language), both synchronous and asynchronous peer interaction, regular feedback from both peers and instructors, and opportunities to feel part of a community of practice. By soliciting and highlighting student perspectives with regard to their own linguistic and cultural learning, as well as their interactions with professors and peers, this study offers insight into how an online program with high levels of student satisfaction can succeed.

Endnotes

1. Both authors have administrative experience as department chair and graduate director. Fonder-Solano has taught five or more graduate Spanish courses

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online over the past decade; Burnett has taught an average of two online graduate courses in French and language education per year during this time.

2. Unlike novice learners, advanced-level students are unlikely to make dramatic gains in proficiency during the course of a single university semester (Liskin-Gasparro, 1982; Moeller, 2013).

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APPENDIX A

ONLINE LEARNING QUESTIONNAIRE (See Burnett & Fonder-Solano, 2016)

MATL Program The University of Southern Mississippi

1. How did you find out about the MATL degree? (**choose all that apply**)
 - Internet search
 - Referral
 - Advertisement
 - Familiarity with The University of Southern Mississippi
2. I chose the MATL program because of: (**choose all that apply**)
 - its flexibility
 - its accessibility
 - its affordability
 - its program emphasis in teaching
 - its online program
 - the language concentrations offered
 - the possibility of getting 18 graduate hours in a language emphasis
 - my familiarity with The University of Southern Mississippi
3. Are you currently employed in the field of language teaching?
 - Yes
 - No (skip to question 5)
4. If yes, in what type of educational environment do you work? (**choose all that apply**)
 - Elementary school
 - Middle School
 - High school
 - Community College
 - College/University
 - Public
 - Private
 - International Baccalaureate
 - Advanced Placement
 - Bilingual education
 - Immersion program
5. What was the primary language of your childhood household?
 - Spanish
 - English

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- French
 - Another language
6. What was the language of your high school education?
- Spanish
 - English
 - French
 - Another language
7. I enrolled in the MATL program with an emphasis or emphases in (**choose all that apply**)
- TESOL
 - French
 - Spanish
8. Did you study abroad with the MATL program?
- Yes
 - No
 - Not yet but I plan to
9. What is your age group?
- 21-30
 - 31-40
 - 41-49
 - 50+
10. What is your current geographical location?
- International
 - Northeastern United States
 - Northwestern United States
 - Midwest/Central United States
 - Southeastern United States
 - Southwestern United States
11. Have you completed the MATL degree?
- Yes
 - Not yet
12. If you completed the degree please choose an option:
- I graduated before 2002
 - I graduated between 2002-2005
 - I graduated between 2006-2009
 - I graduated between 2010-2014
 - I have not yet completed the degree
13. If you have not yet completed the degree how many MATL courses have you taken?
- 1-2
 - 3-5
 - 6-10

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- I completed the MATL degree

14. I have taken courses in the MATL:

- Exclusively online
 Exclusively in-class
 Online and in-class

The following statements will all relate to your experience taking online classes in the MATL program.

15. My online MATL courses included: (choose all that apply)

- Listening assignments
 Reading assignments
 Writing assignments
 Speaking assignments

16. Select the tools that were used in your online classes (choose all that apply).

- Discussion board
 Live Chat
 Videos
 Blogs
 Journals
 E-book/s
 Electronic articles
 Links to online resources
 Links to library resources
 Voice recordings
 Links to online media resources (television, radio, newspapers)
 Textbook/s

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Thinking back on your experience taking online course in the MATL program, rate the following on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being STRONGLY DISAGREE and 5 being STRONGLY AGREE).

My knowledge of the field of language teaching improved.

I gained knowledge of professional organizations in the field of language teaching.

My ability to conduct research improved.

My knowledge of teaching techniques and strategies improved.

I have more teaching ideas and activities.

INTERACTION ONLINE

On a scale of 1 to 5 rate the following statements (1 being STRONGLY DISAGREE and 5 being STRONGLY AGREE).

I interacted with my online peers.

My interaction with online peers was productive.

I interacted with my instructor online.

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My interaction with my instructor online was productive.
Live chats were beneficial to my learning.
Discussion board assignments were beneficial to my learning.

LANGUAGE LEARNING COMMUNITY ONLINE

On a scale of 1 to 5 rate the following statements (1 being STRONGLY DISAGREE and 5 being STRONGLY AGREE).

I was part of a community of learners.
The online community was beneficial to my overall student learning experience.

ACADEMIC RIGOR ONLINE

On a scale of 1 to 5 rate the following statements (1 being STRONGLY DISAGREE and 5 being STRONGLY AGREE).

My online course/s were academically rigorous.
My academic writing skills improved.
My knowledge of research in my field improved.

TECHNOLOGY ISSUES ONLINE

On a scale of 1 to 5 rate the following statements (1 being STRONGLY DISAGREE and 5 being STRONGLY AGREE).

I was able to access all components of the online course/s.
I was able to interact effectively in the online format.
My questions and concerns about accessing different components of the course/s were addressed.
My questions and concerns about the technology were addressed.

LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT ONLINE

Thinking back on your experience taking online courses in the MATL program, rate the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being STRONGLY DISAGREE and 5 being STRONGLY AGREE).

My cultural knowledge improved.
My cross-cultural awareness improved.

Please respond ONLY to the following if the language of your concentration is your second language (L2) and you have taken online classes in your L2.

My L2 oral proficiency improved.
My L2 listening comprehension improved.
My L2 writing skills improved.
My L2 reading proficiency improved.
My overall L2 language proficiency improved.
I interacted with my online peers in the language of my concentration.
I interacted with my instructor in the language of my concentration.
I felt part of a language learning community.

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If you have thoughts about your experiences with online instruction and foreign language learning, please feel free to share them here.

Appendix B

Focused Interview Questions for Teaching Assistants (See Burnett & Fonder-Solano, 2016)

1. Tell us about your experiences with online learning and the MATL program.
2. How would you describe your experiences in foreign language classes online?
3. How would you describe your experiences taking core courses online?
4. Before taking a course online did you have any preconceived notions about what online learning would be like?
5. Have your ideas about online learning changed with more experience?
6. Did you find the courses online rigorous? In what ways? Or if not why not?
7. What if any were your concerns about language proficiency in an online context? What activities online do you think assisted you most with your L2? Were there activities that you thought were more worthwhile than others?
8. Can you describe the types of activities that you did in your L2 online that were beneficial to your linguistic improvement? Did you do a lot more writing in your L2 than you were used to? What did you think about the discussion board work? What did you think about using Live chat in an L2? Is there an activity type that you wish was included and was not?
9. Could you describe what the interaction with your peers online was like? Was it important to you to get to know them or to interact with them in the online environment? What course activities contributed to such interaction? Did you find the chats beneficial to your learning?
10. How did the technology enhance or impede your ability to learn? Were there aspects of the course that you found difficult or frustrating due to the technology? How were these issues resolved?
11. Did your instructors interact with you regularly online? If so in what ways? If not what happened? How would you like your instructor to interact with you online?
12. In your experience, why do you think that people question how it is possible to learn a second language online? Have you ever had someone ask you this question? What would you say to critics of online learning?
13. Since you took classes both online and in-class how would you compare the experiences? What would you say to an incoming MATL TA next year about your experiences with the online coursework?
14. What advice would you give about taking a class online? What would you say to prospective language students considering an online program?