

HYBRIDITY AND ELEMENTARY ITALIAN LANGUAGE COURSES A LEAP OF FAITH?

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I. INTRODUCTION

The primary reasons cited for implementing hybrid/blended¹ foreign language (FL) courses is to broaden accessibility, increase appeal, and/or reduce instructional cost. This economic motivation is supplemented by a genuine interest in identifying how new technologies that are being produced at a rapid pace by scholars, textbook publishers and technology companies can enhance FL learning and acquisition.² However, in the past this pressure by administrators and a general enthusiasm for technology resulted in the implementation of hybrid courses without significant research that demonstrated the effectiveness of the innovation, namely that the outcomes of these courses were the same as those in traditional, face-to-face (F2F) courses. In 2005, Neumeier (2005: 164) complained that “[t]he obvious lack of theoretical conceptualization, of a research agenda and of qualitative research on the one hand is contrasted by abundant application of this [blended learning] approach to teaching and learning languages on the other.” Three years later Goertler and Winke (2008: 252) echoed this sentiment when they stated, that “...while publications on the process of implementing hybrid or distance learning courses are scarce, the reality is that hybrid and distance learning courses are not. They are becoming more and more popular on college campuses, yet they are being developed in relative silence and isolation. We encourage language programs to document and publish their efforts to overhaul their curricula, so that we can all benefit from explicit descriptions of the benefits and challenges of doing so.” Indeed, Goertler and Winke (2008) describe the outcomes of a survey of 39 different language programs at Midwestern universities,

¹ Both terms are used interchangeably in this article.

² See Chapelle (2007a, 2009, 2010) who highlights the importance of applying SLA theory to the creation and evaluation of digital foreign language materials. See Thoms (2011, pp. 21-22) for a discussion of the research on how students process language and interact with technology, and Morales Rios & Ferreira Cabrera (2008) for guidelines on the development of CALL materials.

eight of which have hybrid (three) or distance courses (five), and state that the evaluation of these courses was not as extensive as they had hoped.

Young & Pettigrew (2012) provide a history of the early research on blended foreign language courses. Adir-Hauck, Willingham-McLain, and Youngs conducted the first research study on the effectiveness of blended learning at Carnegie Mellon University in 1997. They set out to evaluate the effectiveness of integrating technology into a second semester college-level French course and found “that students in the treatment group performed equally well as the control group in listening and speaking and better on reading and writing achievement measures” (Young & Pettigrew 2012, p. 93-93).

Arvan and Musumeci (2000) report on the results of courses taught through the Sloan Center for Asynchronous Learning Environments (SCALE) Efficiency Projects at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Of interest here is the elementary hybrid Spanish course in which face-to-face (F2F) time was reduced from four days/week in the classroom to two days and technology was used to provide instruction in vocabulary, grammar and reading. Class time focused entirely on the development of oral communication skills. Musumeci can be considered an early adopter of the hybrid format, as she developed the blended Spanish course in 1998 following a model she had developed for Italian in 1996.³ Whereas Musumeci reports that the instructors were satisfied with the blended course, appreciating in particular the elimination of routine grading and the responsibility of maintaining deadlines, she observes that there were basically two outcomes of the Spanish Project: the students in the hybrid course had significantly higher gain scores on the placement test compared to students in the conventional course format, and there was no statistically significant difference in course performance between the two groups, as measured by test scores and final grades. The NSD (no significant difference) phenomenon was common in early comparisons of online/hybrid and traditional instructional formats. What was very interesting for Arvan & Musumeci was that they were able to deliver in-

³ Italian served as the first entry into online materials as a low-risk precursor to the Spanish Project. By creating an online workbook (in Mallard) they knew that they had a robust platform and how to use it, and they knew where students and novice instructors were likely to have difficulty. They then scaled it up for the higher enrollments in Spanish and felt confident that it could deliver instruction in a Hybrid format, replacing F2F instruction for two classes per week, a 50% reduction. (Musumeci, personal communication).

struction to double (later reduced to 1-1/2 times) the number of students with no increase in instructional resources and no difference in learning outcomes.

Since these early studies and Neumeier’s (2005) observation regarding the need for research on blended foreign language courses, a number of empirical studies have compared blended courses with traditional, face-to-face (F2F) courses, such as Sanders (2005), Chenoweth et al. (2006), Blake (2007), Grgurović (2007), Blake et. al. (2008), Goertler and Winke (2008), O’Leary (2008), Thoms (2012), Grgurović, Chapell and Shelley (2013), that indicate equivalent learning outcomes. In addition, Thoms (2011, pp. 22-23) discusses other comparative studies from 2003-2008, again with equivalent outcomes. The consensus in the literature supports Thoms’ (2012) conclusion that “it is clear that there is little empirical evidence to date that indicates that students in a Hybrid L2 course will perform worse than students in a similar, F2F course. Nevertheless, more work is needed, especially as the nature of the technological tools used in all L2 courses continues to evolve” (2012, p. 182).

The research imperative continues to be pressing for at least two additional reasons. Thoms (2011, p. 23) laments that most studies focus on linguistic proficiency and that “few studies have examined how the use of technology in hybrid courses has affected students’ ability to understand FL cultural information.” Research needs to attend to the learning of culture as well as development of the four language skills. In addition, Goertler and Winke (2008) point out that many programs are in the process of normalizing technology in their courses but are not reporting on their experience in the professional literature. Descriptions of the challenges and successes of program overhauls are necessary as universities continue to move toward taking advantage of online learning.⁴ Goertler, Bollen and Gaff Jr (2012, p. 303) observe that teachers and administrators do not always have a sufficient understanding of technology-mediated instruction in order to lead the hybridization of the curriculum. Case studies and comparative research continue to be essential to support the development of effective blended courses, particularly since no two blended courses are the same. Blake (2011) observes

⁴ The necessity for continuous review and assessment of innovations in on-line course delivery is demonstrated by the unexpected dismal outcomes of California’s ‘all digital campus’. According to an article in the Hechinger report by Derousseau (2015) “the Online Instruction Pilot Project [in California] has become another expensive example of the ineffectiveness—so far, anyway—of once-vaunted plans to widen access to college degrees by making them available online, including in massive online open courses, known as MOOCs” (<http://hechingerreport.org/californias-multi-million-dollar-online-education-flop-is-another-blow-for-moocs/>).

that comparing research studies on different programs is comparing apples and oranges. Indeed, it is not possible to draw generalizations regarding the efficacy of blended programs when each has a different online component, a different number of class meetings, a different teaching methodology, as well as instructors of differing abilities and approaches, together with a different student demographic.

The present study contributes to the ongoing research on hybrid foreign language courses by comparing the outcomes and student attitudes of a hybrid second-semester Italian language course to those of the equivalent traditional F2F course at a large Midwestern American university, and is an example of how a careful comparative analysis may reveal unexpected disparities between a hybrid course and the equivalent F2F traditional course. In addition, this study, unlike some prior studies, includes a comparative analysis of cultural understanding. This analysis reveals how incorrect assumptions regarding learners’ abilities can place an unreasonable amount of the responsibility for processing and learning material in the L2 on students in hybrid courses, which leads to unsatisfactory outcomes.

This paper is organized as follows: section II provides a description of the Italian hybrid courses and how they differed from the conventional F2F course in this study, and section III explains the motivations for the department to create hybrid courses and the students’ motivations for taking the courses. This is followed, in section IV, by a discussion of the results of the comparative study and of the evaluations of the hybrid course, which revealed important disparities between the two course delivery systems that affected the outcome comparison. Accordingly, the section that follows describes the changes that were made to the hybrid course in order to achieve equivalency. Finally, the study concludes with Goertler and Winke’s (2008) advice for preparing successful blended courses and how this advice relates to the present study.

II. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE HYBRID AND F2F COURSES IN THIS STUDY

This study is a comparison between learner attitudes and outcomes in an F2F second semester Italian course that met four days/week and a hybrid course that met two days/week in class while students worked independently online two days/week. The hybrid course was offered in the second semester instead of the first, under the assumption that it would be beneficial for students to have some

Italian under their belt before beginning to work more independently. However, it was found that, despite having informed students of the amount of work they would be doing outside of class, some students had difficulty adjusting to the new format. See Section VI for a more detailed discussion.

Three groups participated in the study: one F2F course that met Tuesday-Friday with 20 participants in this study and two hybrid sections, one that met Wednesday/Friday with 14 participants in the study and one that met Tuesday/Thursday with 11 participants.⁵ The courses covered five chapters in an elementary Italian textbook, of which students had a paper copy and access to the e-book version. The grade break-down for both course types was the same: attendance and performance 15%, (five) quizzes 35%, final exam 15%, homework (assignments, video, compositions) 25%, and oral exam 10%. Students in all three groups also had access to the online materials that accompany the text on the Connect online platform. The instructor for all sections was a seasoned and talented lecturer who had been at this institution for 24 years at the time of this study and is familiar with the textbook and Connect. The instructor did not know which students in all sections were participating in the study and the analysis was carried out by the primary researcher.

It is understood that blended/hybrid courses are those that take place partially in an online environment and partially in a F2F environment. However, this vague definition allows for various realizations of the actual hybrid format. The hybrid course in this study was not typical of those described in the professional literature, in which students in the hybrid course participate in computer-mediated communication or create or edit audio or video files (Goertler, Bollen and Gaff Jr 2012, p. 299). Rather, like Gaff Jr’s hybrid Spanish courses described in Goertler, Bollen and Gaff Jr (2012, p. 306), the hybrid course in this study took the format of ‘self-study,’ that is, students in both the F2F and hybrid courses completed activities in the online platform, but the hybrid students covered material on their own that the students in the F2F course did in class, such as vocabulary presentations, inductive grammar presentation activities and in-

⁵ One student in the Tuesday/Thursday hybrid section is a highly motivated graduate student. His data were removed from the analyses because his results were significantly better than those of the undergraduates; in fact, they were nearly perfect. The F2F class had a total of 25 students enrolled and five opted not to participate in the study, the Wednesday/Friday hybrid had a total of 17 students enrolled and three opted not to participate, and the Tuesday/Thursday hybrid had a total of 17 students and six opted not to participate.

put/recognition activities of the new material. The hybrid students completed some additional online activities for each chapter that are provided on the Connect platform (a video activity, a discussion board activity, and grammar and vocabulary review games and activities) that the F2F students did not. On the other hand, in the F2F course there was time to do interactive activities that were not done, or were completed in less time, in the hybrid class, such as a song activity, learning to play an Italian card game, *Scopa*,⁶ and viewing and discussion of a movie clip. In addition, none of the listening or reading culture activities (which are explained in more detail in Section V) were done in the hybrid classroom; students completed them independently on-line. The goal was to free-up class time in the hybrid course for interactive, meaningful and purposeful language activities and the focus was on developing equivalent levels of language proficiency since it was believed that F2F class time could be used more efficiently to that end. As demonstrated below, the assumption that students could process the readings and videos without guidance was erroneous. Moreover, by moving these activities out of the classroom, significant opportunities for communicative, purposeful interaction were missed.

III. MOTIVATIONS

Department

Besides improving the quality and efficacy of instruction, Goertler, Bollen and Gaff Jr (2012, p. 298) cite additional, typical reasons for implementing hybrid language courses: space and financial savings for the institution, access to more (non-traditional) students, engaging the digital natives in a learning mode that they know, flexibility, articulation, logistical issues, and trends. Financial savings is a significant motivating factor for this institution, since the total number of students served by the hybrid courses is 34 whereas the F2F courses normally enroll 24-28 students, which means that two hybrid courses enroll 8-10 more students than a F2F course. Moreover, class sizes in the hybrid section are reduced, thus reducing the in-class student-teacher ratio. Accessing non-traditional students is not a factor, since the primary population of these language courses is residential, college-age students wishing to satisfy the language requirement. Finally, there were no articulation or logistical issues satisfied by hybridity.

⁶ Students in the F2F course spent two days on *Scopa* whereas in the hybrid course they spent one.

A prime, motivating factor is the ‘online trend’ in foreign language instruction that has been growing, in part, due to the changing student population. Our students (digital natives) have grown up with technology and are so technologically skilled that they need or expect a different learning environment (Prensky 2005, 2006). Given this technological agility, a focus of this study is whether students would be able to learn grammar, vocabulary and culture on their own online so that class time could be used more effectively for communicative interaction.

Another significant motivating factor is creating more flexibility for students who have increasingly busy schedules that possibly include one or more of the following: a job, an internship, extracurricular activities, and/or an overload of courses in order to graduate early or earn multiple majors or minors. If certain types of work can be completed outside the classroom with no effect on progress in the language sequence, new options that provide students with more flexibility in scheduling must be investigated. The next section explores whether students share the same motivations as the department.

Students

Before enrolling in either the conventional or hybrid section, students in each section of the preceding course, Italian 1101, received a flier in class and by email that described their enrollment options for the next course in the language sequence. The flier explained that the hybrid course is designed for students who are self-motivated, have exceptional time-management skills, and can study and learn grammar concepts without the guidance of an instructor. It stated that grammar concepts are not necessarily explicitly presented in class (unless students have questions), instead class time is primarily spent focusing on listening and speaking skills, and it warned that this course is not easier, less work, or less of a time commitment than the conventional F2F course. It explicitly stated: “Do *NOT* take this course for these reasons. This course is in every way the equivalent of the Traditional Italian 1102.”⁷

⁷ It is essential that students understand completely the amount of work to be completed outside of class before enrolling. We recently offered a first-semester hybrid course that was not yet described in the course catalogue as such, so students who were attracted to the reduced schedule found out on the first day of class that it was a hybrid and the amount of work it involved. At that point students were reluctant to switch to a different section despite knowing the workload involved and, unlike the students in the hybrid courses in this study, several students dropped the class well before the midpoint and several did not pass. All courses are now in the course catalogue. See Blake

On the first day of class, students in the hybrid sections were asked to complete a questionnaire that asked why they had chosen to take the hybrid course and gave the following options. The results of their responses are shown in Table 1.

- a. It was the only course that fit in my schedule.
- b. I have no problem studying and learning grammar concepts without the guidance of an instructor.
- c. I did not want to attend my Italian class four days/week.
- d. I am self-motivated and have good time-management skills.
- e. I figured it would be less work.
- f. I figured it would make my schedule more flexible.
- g. I thought it would be easier.
- h. I like working with technology in my courses.
- i. Other:

Table 1: Why students took the hybrid course. *One student did not respond because she reported not knowing she had enrolled in a hybrid course. **One student did not respond.

	Hybrid W/F* 14 students	Hybrid T/TH** 10 students	Totals 24 students
a	8	7	15 (62.5%)
b	5	3	8 (33.3%)
c	4	4	8 (33.3%)
d	7	3	10 (41.7%)
e	0	0	0
f	10	7	17 (70.8%)
g	0	0	0
h	3	1	4 (16.7%)
i	0	0	0

The results fell primarily into two categories: scheduling and students’ self-assessed ability to work independently. The results for questions (a) and (f) and possibly (c) (62.5%, 70.8% and 33.3% respectively) revealed that students’ prima-

(2012) for a discussion of learner differences and whether hybrid courses are the right fit for every student, and Stracke (2007) for insight into why students drop hybrid courses.

ry concern was with their schedule – with the course fitting into their schedule or making their class schedule more flexible. On the other hand, the results for questions (b) and (d) (33.3% and 41.7%) demonstrated that a portion of students were happy to be in the course because they felt confident in their time management skills and their ability to learn certain aspects of the material without the guidance of an instructor. Perhaps not surprisingly given the forewarning, no students reported taking the course because they thought it would be less work (e) or easier (g).⁸

Based on the information gathered from the questionnaire, it appears that the motivations for hybrid courses by the department and the students align well; both identify the need/desire for flexibility and although few highlighted their interest in technology, many were confident in their ability to complete aspects of the course on their own.

The next section presents the data from the comparative study which explores whether self-selected students who were well-informed about the expectations were as successful in the hybrid course as those enrolled in the F2F course in their development of their language skills and their understanding of culture.

IV. THE COMPARATIVE STUDY

Course, quiz and exam results

In order to ensure that ability levels across all sections were the same, all students in the study completed a twenty-six-point pretest that tested vocabulary, adjective agreement and verb conjugations in the present indicative. These elements were chosen because they are the two basic structures learned and reviewed repeatedly in the prior course. Moreover, since time was limited for the pretest, testing these elements was a reasonably easy and quick way to assess the acquisition of basic features of the language. In addition, their grades from the preceding, first-semester, course were compared. The hybrid and F2F groups were not different in terms of pre-test scores ($t(35.472) = -0.5884$, $p = 0.56$) or 1101 grades ($t(39.496) = -0.5041$, $p = 0.617$), the means and standard deviations of which are displayed in Tables 2 and 3.

⁸ Goertler, Bollen and Gaff Jr (2012) also found scheduling to be a significant motivator for taking a hybrid course. They polled students who had opted to take a hybrid Spanish course rather than a traditional F2F course; the majority (70%) preferred to come to class three days/week instead of five and 51% said it was easier to fit a three day/week class into their schedule.

2. Pre-test scores: Mean and standard deviation

Method	Mean	SD
Hybrid	9.520000	4.779470
Traditional	10.500000	6.100043

3. 1101 Grades: Mean and standard deviation

Method	Mean	SD
Hybrid	0.90181818	0.06514719
Traditional	0.91100000	0.05270574

At the end of the courses, no significant difference between the final grades of the F2F and the hybrid students were found (independent t-test; $t(42.035) = -1.2892$, $p = 0.2044$), nor was there any difference between the final grades of the two sections of the hybrid class (independent t-test; $t(21.61) = -0.2249$, $p = 0.8242$). The means and standard deviations are shown in Tables 4 and 5.

4. Final scores; hybrid vs traditional: Mean and standard deviation

Method	Mean	SD
Hybrid	87.153846	8.112668
Traditional	89.650000	4.934039

5. Final scores; hybrid TR section vs hybrid WF section: Mean and standard deviation

Section	Mean	SD
TR	86.727273	8.307718
WF	87.466667	8.245056

Yet had the inquiry stopped here, significant information would have been missed. In fact, a detailed analysis of separate components of the course revealed statistically significant differences between the two groups on vocabulary retention and cultural knowledge, which were assessed on the chapter quizzes, and oral skills, which were assessed by the final oral exams.⁹

⁹ As noted above, the grade break-down for both course types was the same: attendance and performance 15%, (five) quizzes 35%, final exam 15%, homework (assignments, video, compositions) 25%, and oral exam 10%. Course grades were not significantly different between the two groups because overall quiz scores did not differ between the two groups (c.f. endnote 12) and oral performance is only 10% of the final course grade. Attendance/participation, final exam grades, and homework were not part of the assessment in this study.

The four quizzes were divided into sections that tested vocabulary, grammar and cultural information (worth 10, 15 and 5 points respectively), so the grades for each of these sections on all quizzes were compared.¹⁰ Data regarding performance on the first quiz of the course (chapter 6) were excluded because in the first few weeks of the course there were some problems with technology and, after the first quiz, the number of points awarded for the culture section was reduced from ten to five.¹¹ A sample quiz is presented in Appendix A.

The analysis is three-way repeated-measures ANOVA with quiz type and quiz number as a within-subjects factor and instructional method as a between-subjects factor. The two hybrid sections did not differ in overall quiz scores (independent t-test; $t(281.996) = -0.5908$, $p = 0.5551$) so the results of the two hybrid sections are merged in the comparison with the F2F section. The hybrid group appears to have performed just as well as the F2F group on overall quiz grades. Their averages are slightly lower, but it is entirely possible that the difference is due to chance rather than any real factor.¹² In fact, the analysis was repeated using a different statistical method -- mixed-effects linear regression -- to be sure that the results were robust. This analysis confirmed that there were no differences between the hybrid and F2F groups.¹³ Moreover, overall, students were better at the vocabulary section than any other section (post-hoc t-test; $t(435.863) = 2.9934$, $p = 0.002916$) regardless of delivery method.

Once again, had the analysis stopped here, significant information would have been missed. Indeed, an interaction effect was found between quiz section type and course delivery method ($F(2) = 14.73$, $p = 0.000003$). Post-hoc t-tests (with bonferonni correction for multiple comparisons) reveal that the students in the hybrid group did less well on the culture section ($p = 0.0001552$) and the vocabulary section ($p = 0.03283$) than the students in the F2F group. The mean

¹⁰ Five additional points on the quizzes were dedicated to *strategie di comunicazione* (communication strategies), which were not part of this analysis.

¹¹ The points were reduced in this section because several questions focused on details that we did not feel were significant for an overall understanding of the cultural concepts being tested.

¹² The fact that 15 points of the quiz were dedicated to a section testing grammar structures that showed no disparity and that five points of the quizzes were not part of this study may account for the fact that the difference between overall quiz grades among the two groups were not significantly different.

¹³ Specific details on this model: linear mixed-effects regression model with quiz number, quiz type, instructional method, and all possible two- and three-way interactions as fixed effects. A maximal random effect structure was used: a random intercept for student and random slopes for quiz number and quiz type.

scores in the hybrid group were: culture: 70.1% and vocabulary: 79.1%, whereas in the F2F group they were: culture: 83.1% and vocabulary: 84.8%.

Differences were also found in oral performance, but not in writing ability. The final oral exam during the last week of the semester was an eight-minute dialogue performed by two students in front of the instructor (not the class). Students were given two topics to practice in advance, only one of which was randomly selected at the exam. Composition scores were taken from two essays on the final exam, each 75 words and worth 20 points. There were two graders for the oral and written exams, the instructor of the course and an external evaluator who is an experienced lecturer who had been teaching at this institution for ten years and had taught this second semester course repeatedly over the years. Both used the same rubric to score the oral exams and the essays. The grades submitted by both evaluators were compared and there was no significant difference between them; the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) between the grades submitted by the two evaluators is 0.9957.¹⁴

In terms of exam results, the F2F group scored statistically significantly higher grades on the oral exam than the hybrid group (independent t-test; $t(76.296) = -2.1254$, $p = 0.03679$), with the F2F group's mean at 91.3% compared to the hybrid group's 88.4%. However, there was no significant difference between the two groups for scores on compositions (independent t-test; $t(181.995) = -1.5972$, $p = 0.1119$).

The next section presents the results of the post-course evaluations that were completed by the instructor and the students, which will provide for a more insightful discussion of the test results.

Evaluations

Instructor and learner attitudes were measured according to responses on a variety of evaluation forms. Prior to teaching the course, the instructor completed a questionnaire in which she stated that she expected the hybrid courses to be more enjoyable because she enjoys production activities and that she expected to have more time to explore cultural aspects and do ‘fun’ games, such as Win Lose or Draw, the Wacky Fashion Show, Bingo, Truth or Dare, Jeopardy, or Trivia. She predicted that the hybrid courses may take longer to set up in the beginning,

¹⁴ This values ranges from 0, which indicates no relationship, to 1, which indicates 100% agreement. The score for these evaluators is very high, indicating that the grades they gave were very similar.

but that making lesson plans would be easier. In terms of outcomes, she expected students’ knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and culture as well as writing skills to be the same across hybrid and conventional sections. However, she predicted that the speaking skills of students in the F2F course would be better.

At the end of the course, the instructor reported that she found the hybrid course enjoyable because of the concentration on production, but less enjoyable because there was no time to do games because it was her first time teaching a hybrid and she was concerned about covering all the material. She found that the time commitment was more or less the same as that of a traditional course, but that teaching two hybrids required more time to grade quizzes (since there were more students in the hybrid course), but less time in terms of lesson preparation (since both hybrids have the same lesson plan). She lamented not having had enough time to present vocabulary and culture in the hybrid classes, and found the F2F class more fun to teach because there was more time to do games and, as a result, a closer bond developed between her and the students.¹⁵

At the end of the course, students in all sections completed a university standard evaluation and a departmental evaluation. The on-line university evaluation had a low response rate, so those results are not discussed here. From the departmental evaluation two questions are of interest. Students were asked whether, on a scale from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree), the course measured students’ learning fairly and if it was a success over all. The results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Departmental evaluation results

This course:	Hybrid 1 (14 students)	Hybrid 2 (14 students)	F2F (23 students)
measured students’ learning fairly.	4.43	4.14	4.48
as a success over all.	4.29	4.00	4.35

Finally, the students in the hybrid sections completed an additional survey that explored students’ reactions to the course and whether they think that they achieved the same level of knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and culture, and

¹⁵ This stronger bond may have also been due to the fact that the F2F students interacted with each other four class periods/week instead of two, as in the hybrid sections.

the same speaking skills and writing skills as they would have in a F2F course. The results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Students’ self-report on the development of their language skills.

Vocabulary	88%
Grammar and vocabulary ¹⁶	80%
Culture	63% (one student did not respond)
Speaking	72%
Writing	80%

Overall, students were satisfied with the course. When asked to describe their level of satisfaction with the hybrid format, on a scale from 1-5 with 5 being the highest, 72% of the students gave the course a 4. When asked if they would take a hybrid course again, only three of 25 students said that they would not; 88% reported that they would.¹⁷ In terms of language skills, students clearly perceived deficits in the development of their speaking skills and their understanding of culture that were reflected in the results of the study.

V. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS AND SUBSEQUENT CHANGES TO THE HYBRID COURSE

The analyses produced results that are essential for understanding how hybrid courses are best constructed in this Italian program at this large Midwestern university. If only overall quiz scores and final course grades had been compared, the shortcomings of the hybrid course would not have been identified, and we would have thought that expectations had been met for essentially equivalent outcomes in both course formats.

The students’ responses in Table 7 (which show that students were least confident in their knowledge of culture) and the instructor’s post-course evaluation reveal that they all noticed that culture had not been covered adequately in the hybrid format. Indeed, the quiz results confirm this observation. Moreover, the instructor knew that vocabulary instruction had suffered in the hybrid course, an observation that was also confirmed by the data. In addition, the instructor had

¹⁶ The evaluation had an unfortunate error. Instead of asking about students’ knowledge of grammar, the item asked for their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary.

¹⁷ Students in the following, third-semester, course were asked if they would recommend a hybrid Italian language course to their friends. All of the students who had taken the preceding hybrid course (11/11) said that they would. Of the students who were taking a hybrid course for the first time, 5/7 said that they would.

expected hybrid students’ oral skills to be less developed than those of the F2F students, and this was borne out by the data as well as students’ self-reports in Table 7, which show comparatively less confidence in their speaking skills.

In order to rectify these differences between the F2F and hybrid courses, significant changes were made to the format of the hybrid course.

1) Quizzes were moved on-line and are now given in a proctored testing center in order to allow more time to practice vocabulary in class. This also provides additional time to practice for the oral exam in class and means less grading time for the instructor.

2) We examined how culture was incorporated into both course formats in order to rectify the divergent outcomes. Culture questions on the quizzes were drawn from three sources:

- a culture lecture. At the end of each chapter, students are exposed to discourse-length language in a presentation on a cultural topic. Instructors are given detailed notes on the content as well as a power point with images. The presentation is also available on video in Connect, where it is delivered by a native speaker with the support of the same images. (The shortest video is 287 words and the longest is 466 words.) The presentation is followed by a comprehension activity and an expansion activity. Additional activities on the culture topic appear in the on-line workbook (Connect).
- a reading. At the end of each chapter, students are exposed to discourse-length language in a reading on a cultural topic. The reading is accompanied by appropriate pre-, during-, post reading activities as well as discussion questions. An additional reading accompanied by learning strategies and activities is available on the on-line workbook (Connect).
- the language practice activities throughout the chapter that deal with cultural issues. Each chapter includes a selection of three types of activities that focus on the vocabulary or a specific structure of the chapter as well as a culture topic: culture, the regions of Italy, and cultural comparisons.¹⁸ These concepts are practiced in the online workbook (Connect) as well.

¹⁸ The culture and regions activities focus primarily on products and practices, whereas cultural comparisons activities are designed to draw students’ attention to Italians’ perspectives on their society and culture and guide students to compare them to their own.

Students in both groups received instructions on their syllabi about how to watch videos and read extended texts in Italian. This information is reproduced in Appendix B. Table 8 displays how these activities were covered in and out of class in both types of courses.

Table 8. A comparison of the manner in which listening, reading and culture activities were covered in the F2F and hybrid courses.

	F2F	hybrid
Culture lecture	Students watched the video at home and content was discussed in class. Comprehension activities were completed in class.	Completed online. No follow-up class discussion.
Reading	All activities and the reading completed in class.	Completed online. No follow-up class discussion.
Culture activities	All activities were done in class.	Some activities were done in class.

The comparison provided in Table 8 indicates that quiz performance on culture is most likely related to how the material was covered (or not) in class. In order to cover all the material in a reduced amount of time in the hybrid course, it was decided that the culture lecture and reading sections would be covered exclusively online, with the idea that if students followed the instructions for how to watch videos and read extended texts in Italian (shown in Appendix B) they would be successful. It turns out that this assumption was erroneous; the participating students (and probably most elementary language students) need more guidance and face-to-face interaction in order to extract information from extended written and spoken narratives. Moreover, students missed opportunities to interact meaningfully and purposefully during the pre- and post-reading/viewing activities. In response to these results, the culture presentation is now delivered and discussed in class. In addition, reading is covered in class and the culture language practice activities are assigned for homework on Connect whether they are completed in class or not. It is likely that incorporation of content into the classroom will have a positive impact on overall language proficiency, as demonstrated by the plethora of research on the importance of comprehensible input for L2 acquisition (cf. Krashen, S. 1982; Carroll, S. 2001; Lee, J. & Benati, A. 2007; VanPatten, B. 1996, to name a few) and on Content-Based Instruction (cf.

Brinton, D. M., Snow, M. A., & Wesche, M. B. 1989; Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. 1997; Snow M. A. 2001, to name a few).

3) The disparity in oral performance, which, due to the reduced contact time, was foreseen by the instructor, indicates that modifications to the course are necessary. We are currently piloting computer-mediated communication in the form of skype-like blackboard activities that are provided in Connect. Goertler, Bollen, Gaff Jr (2012, pp. 315-316) find that students are able to engage with low-tech hybrid materials such as textbook-based self-study and online workbook activities, but their inquiry found that they are not readily prepared to engage in higher-tech activities such as podcasting, virtual realities, video-conferencing, and working with sound files. Moreover, some instructors do not have the time or the expertise to create their own technology-based activities. With improvements in online textbook ancillaries that are student- and teacher-friendly, it is relatively easy to incorporate these features into a hybrid course.

VI. Concluding remarks on creating Hybrid courses

There are significant issues that must be taken into consideration before setting up a hybrid course. Following their review of six program overhauls, Goertler and Winke (2008) offer suggestions for preparing successful blended courses.¹⁹ They highlight:

- 1) the need to spend a sufficient amount of time testing and implementing the hybrid course. At this Midwestern university we are still tweaking and modifying the hybrid format, and expect to carry out a follow-up study to ensure that equivalency between hybrid and F2F delivery systems has been achieved once we feel satisfied with the course. Although we are confident that the changes we are making will have positive effects, this study has demonstrated that impressions can be misleading and that detailed analyses are necessary to confirm outcomes. Indeed, comparisons between overall course grades or even quiz or exam grades may not reveal significant differences or the complete picture, depending on how the percentage values of tested categories are distributed. Rather, each factor must be investigated in isolation. Quizzes and exams that measure each feature separately facilitate this analysis. This study has also shown that no matter how many research studies are produced that compare F2F and hybrid courses, each program must do their own comparative study to

¹⁹ See Neumeier (2005) and Stracke (2007) for additional, insightful suggestions.

verify the efficacy of their hybrid format. It is an ethical imperative to know that students using both delivery methods are receiving the same education;

- 2) having the funding in place to support the plan. Funding was not necessary to create the course or carry out this study. The language director and her assistant created the course using the materials provided with the textbook, which significantly reduced preparation time. The study was conducted by carefully collecting data and seeking support for the data analysis from a graduate student from the Linguistics Department with a strong background in statistics;
- 3) having experienced instructors teach the course because they don't have to learn to teach while they are learning to navigate the online environment. In this Italian hybrid course the activities are the same communicative, interactive activities that are covered in the F2F course, so instructors who have taught the latter can easily teach the former. However, for a discussion of instructors' experiences teaching hybrid courses, see Comas-Quinn (2011) and Gleason (2013);
- 4) making sure that online materials are pedagogically appropriate and not driven by technology. They suggest that material developers who are trained in designing materials online be hired. We were confident in the technology provided with the textbook we used. However, for those who would like to evaluate their online materials, studies such as Chapelle (2007b) that explore how to do so are relevant and useful;
- 5) making sure that the logistics of the course are well-defined and that the curriculum is flexible. Indeed, these are features of all successful courses;
- 6) making technical training and support available to instructors and students. Goertler and Winke (2008) note that instructors should not have to give technical support because this distracts from teaching. Reliable technical support was offered by the textbook company that published the text in this study. In addition, the assistant to the language director and instructor for the courses in this study was well-versed in the Connect platform;
- 7) ensuring that students understand when they sign up for the course that they have to stay caught up.²⁰ The hybrid course has a strict absence policy. Student are allowed two absences, after which each additional unexcused absence results in the loss of the participation points for those days and a deduction of 8% from the overall final grade. This policy helps ensure that motivated students enroll in the course. The automatic deadlines for completion of on-line homework also keeps students on task;

²⁰ For suggestions for how to make students independent learners, see Young, Jesusita and Pettigrew (2012).

8) conducting evaluations, surveys and interviews of teachers and students that are created specifically for hybrid courses (Rubio & Thoms 2012) in order to trace the impact of online course components on language development. Well-crafted, consistent and continuous assessment constitutes the cornerstone of all successful courses and programs.

This study brought to light additional considerations. Comments by the students regarding the amount of time spent doing work outside of the classroom indicated that despite our best efforts to explain the workload, students found it difficult to adjust to the new course format after they had already taken a F2F (first-semester) language course. The following semester (Spring 2014), when the same students took third-semester hybrid Italian, student complaints regarding the amount of time spent on the course outside of the class diminished significantly. In future, the hybrid courses will begin in the first semester and continue throughout the sequence. Moreover, after enrolling in the course, but before the first day of class, all students will be sent a questionnaire that indicates whether they are a good match for a hybrid course. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix C.²¹

The instructor of the course reported that it is essential that every moment of class time be utilized for interactive activities. The comparative results demonstrated that students in the hybrid section who studied the grammar on their own before coming to class performed just as well as students in the traditional course who had inductive grammar presentations and brief grammar explanations in class, which should be welcome news for instructors who are hesitant to assign grammar presentations as homework. Moreover, since one instructor will be teaching a total of 34 students in two hybrid courses instead of 24-28 in one F2F course, it is essential that the instructor’s work load outside of class not be increased. For this reason (and to increase time for oral activities), quizzes have been moved on-line for automatic grading and are taken in a proctored location.

²¹ The questionnaire presumes that success in a hybrid course relates to students’ comfort-level with technology, level of motivation, and grades in previous language classes. Although grades in previous language classes appears to indicate that the ‘best’ students are well-suited to hybrid courses, which may not be the case (i.e. less able or timid students may flourish in an on-line class since they are able to review the materials as much as they like and work without fear of embarrassment), it can also be another measure of motivation, and for this reason was included on the questionnaire.

A limitation of this study is that the students in the conventional format had access to all the online materials that the students in the hybrid format did and they had two additional days in class, which leads one to expect that the F2F group should perform significantly better on all measures, not just culture, vocabulary, and speaking. This result is significant for L2 teaching/learning because it suggests that certain features of L2 courses may require less face-to-face interaction than others for learning to take place. That is, students appear to be able to process grammar rules as well as develop writing skills outside of the classroom, whereas F2F discussion and interaction appear to be necessary to develop understanding of culture and learn structures and vocabulary (as well as, of course, develop and refine speaking skills).

Another limitation is that I did not explore the implications of the fact that students were surprised by the amount of work in the hybrid course, compared to their first semester F2F course, despite the warnings. This may be related to how much time students expect to devote to language courses outside of class in the conventional format. A future study will investigate the amount of time students spend outside of class and online in each format.

As educators, we have a responsibility to our students to provide engaging and effective courses regardless of the course delivery method. There is significant research to date that indicates the equivalent (if not better) outcomes of hybrid foreign language courses compared to traditional, F2F courses. However, this study demonstrates that equivalency at every institution, in every language, and with any textbook cannot be assumed. The onus is on the educator to ensure that equivalency is achieved.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A


STRATEGIE DI COMUNICAZIONE (*Communication strategies*)

Cosa si dice? Abbina le frasi alle risposte giuste. Usa ogni risposta una sola volta. Attenzione! C'è una risposta in più. (5 punti) What does one say? Match the statements to the correct responses. Use each response only one time. Attention: there is one extra response.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Tanti auguri!
<i>Many best wishes!</i> | a. No, mi dispiace. È già occupato.
<i>No, I'm sorry. It's already taken.</i> |
| 2. Le piacerebbe andare al ristorante?
<i>Would you (form.) like to go to a restaurant?</i> | b. Sì, grazie. Mi piace mangiare a casa.
<i>Yes, thanks. I like to eat at home.</i> |
| 3. Non mi va di camminare. Prendiamo l'autobus?
<i>I don't feel like walking. Shall we take the bus?</i> | c. Che pigra! Dai, andiamo a piedi!
<i>Lazy bones! Come on, let's walk!</i> |
| 4. Posso prendere questo posto (seat)?
<i>Can I take this seat?</i> | d. In bocca al lupo!
<i>Good luck!</i> |
| 5. Domani ho un esame.
<i>Tomorrow I have an exam.</i> | e. Grazie! Oggi compio 21 anni!
<i>Thanks! Today I turn 21!</i> |
| | f. Sì, grazie. Va bene la cucina indiana?
<i>Yes, thanks. How about Indian food?</i> |

LESSICO (*Vocabulary*)

LE FESTE (*Holidays*)

 *Parte prima. Ascolta le descrizioni e scrivi la festa italiana che associ ad ogni attività. (4 punti) Part one. Listen to the descriptions and write the Italian holiday that you associate with each activity.*

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Parte seconda. Scrivi due cose o attività che gli Italiani associano ad ogni festa. (6 punti) Part two, write two things or activities that Italians associate with each holiday.

1. San Silvestro *New Year's eve* _____
2. la Pasqua *Easter* _____
3. la Vigilia *Christmas eve* _____

STRUTTURE (Grammar)

A. *I verbi reciproci.* Scegli la forma appropriata del verbo. (4 punti) *Reciprocal verbs. Choose the appropriate form of the verb.*

1. Mia cugina e mia sorella sono molto amiche e si chiamano / chiamano tutti i giorni.
My cousin and my sister are close friends and they call each other / call every day.
2. Quando i miei genitori si vedono, si abbracciano / abbracciano sempre.
When my parents see each other, they always hug each other / hug.
3. Mia madre si abbraccia / abbraccia sempre il mio fratellino quando lui torna a casa da scuola.
My mother always hugs herself / hugs my little brother when he comes home from school.
4. Io e mio fratello ci amiamo/amiamo il cinema e spesso guardiamo un film il venerdì sera.
My brother and I love each other / love the cinema and often we watch a film Friday night.

B. *Tanti amici.* Completa le frasi con il verbo appropriato al *passato prossimo*. *Attenzione! C'è un verbo in più.* (4 punti) *Many friends. Complete the statements with the appropriate verb in the present perfect. Attention! This is one extra verb.*

Divertirsi incontrarsi lasciarsi svegliarsi truccarsi
to have fun to meet to leave to wake up to put on makeup

1. Roberto ed i suoi amici _____ in piazza alle 10.00 ieri sera.
Roberto and his friends _____ in the square at 10:00 last night.
2. Ieri Luisa è andata ad una festa. Lei _____ gli occhi e le labbra in modo appariscente (*gaudy*).
Yesterday Luisa went to a party. She _____ her eyes and lips gaudily.
3. Marisa e Nico non sono più insieme. Sabato scorso loro _____.
Marisa and Nico are not together anymore. Last Saturday they _____.
4. Stamattina mio fratello era in ritardo. Lui _____ alle 10.00!
This morning my brother was late. He _____ at 10:00!

C. *Gli articoli.* Completa il dialogo con la forma giusta dell'articolo indeterminativo (*un, una, eccetera*) o determinativo (*il, la, eccetera*). (3 punti)
Articles. Complete the dialogue with the correct form of the indefinite or definite article.

FIORELLA: Ho visto _____ signora Barbaresi ieri sera. *I saw _____ Mrs. Barbaresi yesterday evening.*

MANUELE: Ah, sì? Dove? *Oh yes? Where?*

FIGURELLA: Al cinema Ariston. Sono andata con _____ amico a vedere _____ nuovo film di Benigni. Bellissimo! *Cinema Ariston. I went with _____ friend to see _____ new film by Benigni. It was great!*

D. *Le preposizioni.* Completa le frasi con *in* o *a*. Usa la preposizione con l'articolo se è necessario. (4 punti) *Prepositions. Complete the statements with in or a. Use the preposition with the article if necessary.*

1. Oggi vado a casa _____ macchina. *Today I go home _____ car.*
2. Mia madre lavora _____ banca. *My mother works _____ bank.*
3. Mia zia lavora _____ ospedale. *My aunt works _____ hospital.*
4. Domani io e i miei amici andiamo _____ mare. *Tomorrow my friends and I are going _____ seaside.*

Cultura Culture

Scegli la risposta corretta. (5 punti) *Choose the correct answer.*

1. Per festeggiare Carnevale gli italiani _____. *To celebrate carnival Italians _____.*
a. aprono le uova di cioccolato b. indossano le maschere c. fanno una gita in campagna
open chocolate eggs wear masks take a trip to the country
2. La Festa della donna si festeggia _____. *The Day of the Woman is celebrated _____.*
a. il 6 gennaio b. l'8 marzo c. il 24 dicembre
January 6 March 8 December 24
3. La Notte dei musei tutti i musei sono _____ dalle 20.00 alle 2.00.
During the "Night of museums" all museums are _____ from 10 to 2.
a. aperti b. gratuiti c. a e b
open free a and b
4. Il Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali fa promozioni per incoraggiare (encourage) gli italiani a _____. *The Minister for cultural heritage and activities does promotions to encourage Italians to _____.*
a. visitare i musei b. festeggiare la festa di San Valentino c. diventare cittadini
visit museums celebrate Saint Valentines become citizens
5. Le bomboniere contengono _____. *Wedding/baptism/etc. souvenirs contain _____.*
a. biscotti b. confetti c. cioccolato
cookies confections chocolate

APPENDIX B

A special note about all video activities. There are a variety of activities that require you to watch a video and answer comprehension questions (*Strategie, Grammatica dal vivo, Il blog di..., Ascoltiamo*). Here are some tips for completing these activities: 1) Do NOT think that you have to understand every word in the video. Have a look at the comprehension questions and then listen for the gist. 2) Expect to watch videos a MINIMUM of three times, but you will most likely have to watch more to be able to respond to the questions. 3) Watch the first time to get a sense of what is being talked about. The next times you watch, stop the video at strategic points and replay what you watched to focus on difficult segments. 4) Don't get stressed. The videos are fun and interesting if you don't worry about understanding every word.

A special note about all reading activities. There are a variety of activities that ask you to read extended text in Italian and answer comprehension questions (*Leggiamo!* and *Retro*). Here are some tips for completing these activities: 1) Do NOT think that you have to understand every word in the reading. Have a look at the comprehension questions and then read for the gist. 2) Read the first time through just to get the gist. When you read the second and third time, read a short section at a time and make sure you understand the main idea before moving on to the next segment. 3) Expect to read the texts a MINIMUM of three times, but you will most likely need to read more times to be able to answer the questions. 4) Don't get stressed. The readings are fun and interesting if you don't worry about understanding every word.

APPENDIX C

Is a hybrid course right for you?

Often students enroll in a hybrid course, which requires a lot of independent work done on-line and coming to class prepared for the material to be covered, even though it is not the best environment for their learning style. The following questions will help you reflect on whether this is the right course for you.

A. When I think of other college students, I can use a computer...

1. much better than most of them
2. better than most of them
3. not as well as most of them
4. most can use it better than I can

B. Which of these statements describe you? Check all that apply:

1. I can learn grammar topics easily on my own by studying the textbook.
2. I often procrastinate.
3. I am an auditory learner – I need to hear material in order to learn it
4. I am organized and self-motivated.
5. I am comfortable with technology.
6. I like to have grammar explained to me.
7. I speak another language (other than English).
8. I usually miss more than two classes/semester.
9. I get my class work done before I go out with friends.

C. Have you ever taken a language course before?

Yes ____ No ____

If yes, how did you do?

1. Well (A or A-)
2. Fair (B+ or B)
3. Average (B- or C)
4. Poorly (D or F)

If you selected one or more of the following options, this course is most likely not a good fit for you: A3, A4, B2, B3, B6, B8, C3, C4. To increase your chances of success, we suggest that you take a language class that meets four days/week.