ONLINE EDUCATION AS A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE TO
TRADITIONAL FACE-TO-FACE SETTING

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in
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my family: my loving wife Amber and my three angels – Bella, Luca and Seljia! You are the reason I could do this and you are my inspiration every moment I live and aspire to do anything! Your unconditional love and support kept me going when I wanted to stop and gave me hope when I was down! 
Va multumesc si va iubesc din toata inima!

To my family in Romania and Spain, I dedicate this work to you all as a token of gratitude for all the beautiful things you have given and taught me all through the years!
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I also want to thank Steve and Diane for their support and words of encouragement when I hit some rough spots along the way. You were always there for my family and me when we needed help. Thank you!

To all my friends here in Chico that are my support group whenever I need them, thank you! Knowing that so many wonderful people surround me only motivates me to reach my full potential so I can return the favor when needed!
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ABSTRACT

ONLINE EDUCATION AS A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE TO TRADITIONAL FACE-TO-FACE SETTING

by

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Master of Arts in Teaching International Languages

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As a high school foreign language teacher in California, I am a first-hand witness to the rapid transformation the traditional teaching environment is undergoing. After experiencing classroom size increases, certified and classified staff reductions, lay-offs, lack of adequate budgeting for classroom resources I had become a little disillusioned with my job and the support I received as an educator. My desire to change things and to develop professionally as a language teacher gave birth to the idea for my dissertation.

The current project is a compilation of five lessons intended for use in a virtual environment at a high school level. The lessons are adapted from a traditional curriculum and designed to meet the needs of students that attend classes online.
The project idea was born as a reaction to the many changes that occurred in the educational system in California in the last six years. It also draws on personal experiences as a teacher of foreign languages in a virtual classroom in New Zealand and California for the past five years. I was first introduced to virtual teaching when I taught in New Zealand five years ago. I had the opportunity to explore online teaching and curriculum adaptation to fit the needs of students that were physically separated from the main campus that offered courses they were interested in taking. I continued my virtual experience in California, where I taught Spanish and French on-line for the Glenn County Office of Education for two years.

By now, everybody is familiar with the educational climate in California: cuts in high school elective classes, the increase of student numbers in a traditional classroom, fewer classified staff to support the teachers, more gadgets and technological advancements (online games, mobile phones and tablets, social networking websites) to distract the students from focusing on learning. The material presented in this paper is targeted towards high school districts that are looking for a viable alternative to alleviate a little of the burden they are feeling right now. It can be adapted for any foreign language and it is designed to do three main things:

1. Offer a glimpse into what the virtual classroom settings have to offer to students

2. Expose the pros and cons of virtual education in an attempt to create an alternative to the traditional educational settings
3. Help raise more awareness about the important role that culture and language play in interpersonal and intercultural understanding.

Each of the lessons presented in this project is designed to meet all the classic components of language study: speaking, writing, reading, listening, and comprehension so that students remain interested and motivated to study Spanish on their own. Traditional worksheets and vocabulary exercises are combined with cultural projects and oral presentations that allow students to be immersed in the targeted culture and acquire the much-needed understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity that exist in the Hispanic world.

To sum up, the present project will address differences and similarities between face-to-face (F2F) and online environments, effectiveness of online classes, pros and cons of virtual education as well as the role of virtual education in education reform.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

The changes in California’s educational environment are triggered by various reasons, two of which stand out: the economic hardships that hit the state and the entire country, and the social and demographical developments experienced by our society. The education in California is heavily impacted by the latest developments; more and more certified and classified staff members of school districts are laid-off due to budget crisis, and this consequently leads to an increased number of students per classroom; subsequently an increasing number of schools are placed in program improvement due to poor scores on standardized testing. There is a lot of discontent in education right now, and teachers as well as parents and students are looking for options that will provide the best education for everyone. The good news is that today traditional schooling is not the only option that can be used to provide students with quality, equitable education.

Online teaching can prove to be a viable option and can help alleviate at least two aspects of education that are impacted right now: student motivation and performance levels, as well as the constantly increasing number of students per classroom. Online teaching can prove to be a healthy alternative providing universal education to anyone since, to a certain extent, it bypasses geographical and economical barriers, as well as background, and ability levels of students. According to Arora (2009)
1. The overall number of K-12 students engaged in online courses during 2007-2008 is estimated at 1.03 million, a 47% increase from 2005-2006 (The Sloan Consortium).
2. Online learning is currently used by 4% of K-12 students, and this number is expected to grow to 15% by 2011 (“America's Digital Schools,” 2006).
3. Forty-four states have significant supplemental online learning programs, significant full-time programs (in which students take most or all of their courses online), or both.
4. As of January 2007, there are 173 virtual charter schools serving 92,235 students in 18 states.
5. Fifty-seven percent of public secondary schools in the U.S. provide students access to online learning.
6. Seventy-two percent of school districts with distance education programs planned to expand online offerings in the coming year. (“A Few Fast Facts,” para. 2)

The goal of this project is to inquire into an alternative to a traditional classroom where instruction happens synchronously but has no restrictions as far as location, time of class, or materials used for class. The only logistical aspect that needs to be considered by institutions and students is the presence of equipment: computers, servers, Internet connection. Many times a traditional classroom possesses many barriers for the learning process: students are too tired in the morning, curriculum is too boring and/or not engaging enough for the demands of this high-tech generation of students, teachers that are burned out and just go through the motions without considerations to the students’ academic needs.

This project was inspired by my teaching experience in New Zealand where online teaching and distance learning have been a necessity from the very beginning due to geographical demands of the country. It is meant to cast a new light on the possibilities that virtual teaching can have for the students, teachers and all the other parties involved in the process.
Significance of the Project

Why advocate for online language classes at the high school level? What can a virtual class, where teachers and students hardly see each other face to face, possibly offer that a traditional class will not provide through human contact and close proximity to the students? As a teacher, I have noticed that the student population today is very different from when I was in high school. I am a young teacher and I am becoming more and more aware that there is a generational gap between how students used to learn and how they learn today. Technology has a great impact on students’ lives today and is an intrinsic part of their lives. From mobile phones (that today are more common than a Walkman used to be when I was in high school) to iPod and iPad, from video games to texting, the way students stay connected has changed dramatically!

As a teacher, I need to not only be aware of how my students stay in touch and what interests them, but also have access to technology and the same means of communication if I want to make my subject interesting to them. This project’s intention is to address the multiple possibilities a virtual classroom can have in trying to achieve higher student participation, commitment and improved performance during class time. In today’s educational environment, educators are looking for the best way to serve their students, and I strongly believe that virtual classes can be a viable option especially for the committed, self-motivated students that do not really need the direction and supervision of a teacher to stay on track with their work and not fall behind in credits. Moreover, these students can definitely benefit from the flexibility the virtual classroom offers, since they are usually involved in extra-curricular activities as well. Another use
of virtual classes can be “to assist advanced or remedial students, rural students lacking access to regular schools and urban students with safety concern” (Revenaugh, 2006).

More and more institutions around the country are starting to offer on-line courses as a supplement to their curriculum, while some are even starting to offer some courses exclusively on-line. This new trend can be explained by the impact that social changes and technological progress have on the online teaching/learning environment. Pastore and Carr-Chellman (2009) mention this impact in their article “Motivations for Residential Students to Participate in Online Courses.” They cite the work of Rich (2001) and Tastle, White, and Shackleton (2005) contending that online teaching has become a popular alternative to traditional face-to-face classroom environments. Reasons for this increase in popularity include course flexibility and access, global widespread access to the Internet, and the ability to track, grade, and monitor student progress (p. 11)

The present paper is an attempt to show other educators, schools, and school districts that a virtual classroom is easy to implement, engaging and academically viable. Although designed for high school, lessons can be changed to help any learners that have basic technological knowledge and can be, if correctly implemented for the adequate class level, an easy way to learn a foreign language and enhance the student capability to use language and technology both in an academic and social environment.

Purpose of the Project

Globalization, maximization of output and effectiveness are terms that define and drive our society today. The educational system is conditioned by the same descriptors and constitutes a good environment for alternatives to a status quo that proves to be challenging for the growing student population of our state. Today many factors
overload the educational system: lack of money, personnel reduction due to budget limitations, increasing number of students, change in demographics and students’ needs. In this precarious educational environment, although 44 states have begun implementing supplemental online learning programs, high schools are still relatively tentative about trying virtual teaching as an alternative. Most of the virtual teaching is done at the elementary and tertiary levels, with colleges and universities leading the innovative trend of knocking down physical, social, and financial barriers imposed by the traditional teaching. Revenaugh mentions this in his article “K-8 Virtual Schools: A Glimpse into the Future”:

Although online university courses have become commonplace, and high school students barely bat an eye at the notion of supplementing their schedule with an online calculus or PE class, students in full-time virtual public elementary and middle school programs are still on the frontier. (p. 1)

This project is aimed towards the secondary educational institutions and has one main goal: to raise awareness about a viable alternative that can alleviate pressure and offer options that can, at times, substitute or supplement traditional classes to better and more thoroughly serve the needs of the student population.

The technological advances made by our society already influence our students, so it will only be natural for high schools to explore the virtual world of education to make curriculum more appealing for the students. Another important factor is advocating for virtual teaching to address needs expressed by students with disabilities, students that do not fit in, and busy students that cannot be limited by location proximity. In his article “K-8 Virtual Schools: A glimpse Into the Future,” Revenaugh (2006) talks about the students that are already taking advantage of the current virtual classes offered
by some districts across the nation. He mentions students that are physically challenged that can benefit from the comfort of their home and care they receive, student-athletes that are dedicated to make it professionally so are looking for venues that offer time and flexibility, and students that have location concerns and need more than a home-schooling kit to satisfy their demands.

Presently, all the above mentioned student populations, and many more that find the campus life and traditional face-to-face instruction unsuitable, are offered the alternative of online learning by high schools in most states of the country. Although present in most of the states, online classes are not fully integrated in the high school curriculum and are not, yet, considered a serious alternative to traditional education. I believe that being aware of the opportunity of virtual teaching, knowing its advantages and disadvantages, and becoming familiar with the demands and requirements of a successful virtual classroom will help stakeholders consider on-line teaching as a viable alternative.

The virtual environment will also help teachers revitalized their careers and professional development. It will present a new challenge as far as content presentation and it will help them develop and refine aspects of their profession that might not be challenged enough in the traditional setting. For example, as mentioned by Siedlaczek (2004), the virtual environment will demand that teachers learn to communicate effectively in writing since the personal, face-to-face communication is lacking in online classes.
Scope of the Project

Virtual courses offered as early as high school can benefit many segments of the student population. According to Nedeva and Dimova (2010), e-learning can supplement the face-to-face experience by introducing “individualized instruction, which printed media cannot provide” (p. 21). Curriculum for virtual classes is almost nonexistent and not regarded as a serious alternative to alleviate some of the stresses experienced in traditional educational settings. Many students have expressed interest in piloting a virtual classroom, especially in their senior year when they are busy with the graduation requirements.

My hope is that this project will provide an insight into additional educational venues available to schools and resources that will help high schools begin considering on-line teaching as an option to the face-to-face classroom offered on campus. The compilation of lessons and resources of this project can be a starting point of exploring an avenue so far considered “distance education was previously viewed as an inferior form of education” (Connolly et al., 2005, as cited by Kirtman, 2009, p. 2). The paper can be used as a resource: a concise, well-organized analysis that addresses the issue of alternative mediums of teaching foreign language in high schools. It will save the high schools the daunting task of looking for the research already done, comparing the two methods of instructions, presenting the pros and cons of choosing one over the other. It will be available to any schools that want to start the process of actively looking for ways to implement a new pedagogy that will serve, in some cases better serve, segments of their student population that are missed under the current way of instruction delivery.
Limitations of the Project

The project is intended to offer an alternative, a viable one, to the traditional language classroom curriculum and it comes with its limitations. Both face-to-face and online classes maintain similarities as far as curriculum design, educational goals and course objectives. What online learning needs to address in order to meet the needs of students that are pursuing classes is a redesign of the roles of participants, the way knowledge is evaluated and the methods used to teach content. Sudzina and Sudzina (2003) also mention the curriculum elements that are shared by the two mediums of education: “course organization, content, assignments, accountability, and relevance” (p. 1). The main differences that stand out in comparing the two methods are: a) the lack of the social environment that a virtual class experiences, and b) the teacher’s challenge to monitor students in a virtual environment.

A challenge posed to the administrators will be to evaluate if the teacher is doing a good job teaching the course. Since the settings are different—the interaction with students, the assessment, the feedback, etc.—the administrators will have a harder time adopting criteria to determine the competency of the teacher in the subject matter. Competency in the traditional classroom environment does not translate into competency in a virtual classroom, due to the specificity of the environment and factors that influence the effectiveness of the class: the student motivation, the teacher’s technological skills and willingness to evolve with the technical changes that impact on-line delivery of material. Both administrators and teachers need to be very clear about the criteria that need to be used in order for the online learning experience to be a good one. One good example of how an online learning should be assessed is given by the *Rubric for Online*
Instruction developed by the staff at California State University Chico. The document is a collaborative effort of 13 faculty, 4 staff, 2 administrators, and 1 student from different departments of the school. The final product clearly incorporates criteria and categories that allow the teacher/administrator to accurately and effectively assess the level of learning each student demonstrates in an online class.

The product was presented to the California State University Chico community and the online courses offered. The results were more than encouraging, and, since its completion in 2003, the rubric has been adopted by various institutions of high education around the world. An example of the rubric is included in this paper in the Appendix section.

Schools will have to invest in teacher training, one-time acquisition of materials necessary to implement the virtual delivery of the subject matter, maintenance (although minimal, an IT professional, department or program needs to be in charge of maintaining the computers, servers, software and other infrastructure needed). A decisive factor will also be the teachers’ willingness to give up the familiar and already mastered environment of a face-to-face classroom to embark on a journey that will be more challenging. It is already a proven fact that there are “unique competencies required of online teachers” (Cyrs, 1997, as cited in Oliver, Osborne, & Brady, 2009, p. 25). In their article “What are secondary students’ expectations for teachers in virtual school environments?” Oliver et al. (2009) mention that, unlike traditional classroom teachers, for online teachers at least three categories of online competency are critical: learning to manage online learning environments, prepare content for online learning environments, and
leverage online tools for desirable strategies such as peer-to-peer communication. (p. 25)

Selection of students can also be one of the limitations that are met in implementing the virtual classes. Student population awareness is crucial in making the decision to offer online classes. The virtual classes are targeting self-motivated students that can benefit from the flexibility and adaptability of such an environment. It can be too challenging for students that are not tech savvy and too dull for students that have a rich technological background. In the article “A Comparison of Student Achievement and Satisfaction on an Online Versus a Traditional Face-to-Face Statistics Class,” Summers, Waigandt, and Whittaker (2005) reaffirm that “since the interaction between the student and the technology becomes a critical factor when learning content online, a lack of computer knowledge may in fact hinder an online student” (p. 236).

The same article mentions the importance of student self-regulation and the danger of attrition in the case of students that find the online courses too challenging. The academic, cognitive, and technological development of the students is crucial for the success of the project. To this, we need to add the willingness of the teacher to take a leap of faith and trust the success of a highly volatile environment such as virtual education.

Definitions of Terms

To help people interested in online teaching, Dr. Morten Flate Paulsen (2003) compiled all of the following terms associated with virtual education in his book *Online Education and Learning Management Systems: Global E-learning in a Scandinavian Perspective*. He is Professor of Online Education at the Norwegian School of Information
Technology (NITH) and Director of Development at NKI Distance Education in Norway. Here is how he defines important terms associated with online education:

**Assessment**

The general term used for measuring students’ performance on a course against the aims and objectives of that course. In online education, it could be useful to distinguish between self-assessment, computer-based assessment, peer assessment, and tutor assessment. All four categories could be used for both formative and summative assessment” (Paulsen, 2003, p. 34).

**Asynchronous Communication**

Communication where the message is stored until the receivers find it convenient to retrieve it. E-mail and computer conferencing are examples of asynchronous communication” (Paulsen, 2003, p. 34).

**Summative Assessment**

The assessment intending to determine a student’s level of performance on the course: questions and assignments, the grades or scores of which are used in determining the student’s course result” (Paulsen, 2003, p. 35).

**Synchronous Communication**

Real-time communication such as for example online chatting and video-conferencing” (Paulsen, 2003, p. 34).

**Teaching Method**

A way of organizing people for learning. The teaching methods included here are one-online, one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many” (Paulsen, 2003, p. 34).
Teaching Technique

A way of accomplishing teaching objectives. According to how the techniques prescribe student interaction with learning resources, the techniques are classified as one-online techniques, one-to-one techniques, one-to-many techniques, and many-to-many techniques” (Paulsen, 2003, p. 34).
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A Background of Virtual Teaching

Finding alternatives to traditional face-to-face teaching is not a novelty for the educational system. From its very beginnings, teaching has been looking for alternatives to reach the student populations that have struggled to adapt to the campus life and all its requirements. Whether because of distance, cognitive or developmental challenges, busy schedules due to extracurricular activities; bullying; or many other challenges; students have always encountered obstacles that hindered them from performing at optimal parameters. Catering to these student populations has taken various shapes throughout history, each of them reflecting the technological advances of the era. Today’s online learning is the descendant of various forms of distant learning that, according to Majdalany and Guiney,

appeared as a concept in the 19th century and was characterized as a correspondence course. It resurfaced as the open universities of the 1970s and then as the videotape, broadcast satellite, and cable productions of the 1980s. (as cited in Halawi, Pires, & McCarthy, 2009, p. 375)

As an advanced form of distant education, online teaching is choosing to do the same thing as its predecessors: bypass time, distance, and physical environments barriers in order to reach various student populations. Delivery methods have evolved from mailing booklets and worksheets back and forth from teachers to students, to radio
and video classes, and, later, satellite broadcasting. Today, according to Halawi et al. (2009), distance education “refers to the use of audio, video, and computer videoconferencing technologies as delivery modes” (p. 375). The technological advancements that brought about the computers and the internet changed the face of distance learning forever. Today’s technological advances eliminated the barriers of time, as far as the delivery and receiving of pedagogical material are concerned, while adding the possibility of face-to-face interaction between students and teachers separated by many miles. The new discoveries eliminated the time constraint (only radio communication had permitted simultaneous interaction between the teacher and the students), while doing away with the physical barriers that a student had to accommodate. As mentioned by Kartha “online learning ignores hindrances such as time and distance and attempts to make this type of education as conducive to learning as a traditional classroom does” (Kartha, 2006, as cited in Halawi et al., 2009 p. 374).

Beginning with the 20th century, and continuing into the 21st century, virtual education is emerging as an alternative to traditional teaching that tries to reach students who deal with challenges posed by face-to-face education. Revenaugh (2006) talks about this in his article “K-8 Virtual Schools: A Glimpse into the Future” when he takes a closer look at the reasons families consider adopting virtual teaching as an alternative to educating their children:

Families choose virtual schooling for a wide variety of reasons. Some students are significantly ahead or behind their peers; others have learning disabilities or physical health issues. Some students were “bully magnets” at their traditional schools; others were the bullies. Families in isolated rural areas may turn to virtual schools because of transportation issues, whereas families in core urban areas may go to virtual school for their children’s safety. Young actors, athletes, and musicians may choose a virtual school for the scheduling flexibility it offers.
Students who simply need more personal attention in their education program often find virtual schools a good fit. (p. 2)

No one can tell what direction virtual learning will go in the future. What is certain is that more and more students find that it meets their needs. Currently, the scope of virtual education and institutions that are offering it is very wide. To some extent, online teaching has penetrated every strata of the educational system, from elementary schools to universities, and it is continuing to grow and gain acceptance. Still, high schools across the nation lag behind in online classes that could offer their students more options to efficiently complete graduation requirements. Most of the virtual education is conducted at the junior college and university level, a fact presented by Archambault and Crippen (2009) in their article “K-12 Distance Educators at Work: Who’s Teaching Online Across the United States” when they present the finding of a national survey regarding virtual schools:

In a national survey of 2,305 public school districts in the 50 states and District of Columbia, Setzer, and Lewis (2005) found that during the 2002-2003 school year, approximately one third of public school districts (36%) had students enrolled in online distance educational courses. (p. 365)

The article also talks about the direction in which online education is heading as a response to the students developing new appreciation for the time and place they choose to go to school and how that will satisfy their needs. To give readers a peek into what might be the future of virtual learning, Archambault and Crippen present two articles. These articles, they feel, are putting together a compelling image of the transformation of online teaching: Picciano and Seaman’s (2007) “K-12 Online Learning: A 2008 Follow-up of the Survey of U.S. Schools District Administrators” and Setzer and Lewis’ (2005) “Distance Education Courses for Public Elementary and Secondary School
Students: 2002-03.” Both articles present indicative data that online teaching is an
established alternative to traditional educational settings, and will continue to develop
and transform the learning of many students in the U.S.: An estimated 600,000 – 700,000 K-12 public school students were engaged in
online learning in 2005-2006, and this figure increased to approximately 1,030,000
students during the 2007-2008 school year (Picciano & Seaman, 2007, 2009 qtd. in
Archambault & Crippen 365). This represents a 47% increase in enrollments in two
years, and these figures are expected to increase as more school districts explore the
potential advantages of offering online classes, including addressing growing
student populations, dealing with the challenges of limited space, scheduling
conflicts, failed courses, and meeting the needs of specific groups of students by
allowing them to take courses for credit recovery or Advanced Placement, and/or
courses that are beyond a limited geographical area (Setzer & Lewis, 2005, as cited

Perceptions and Myths About
Online Education

What really is virtual teaching? Does the public really know what virtual
teaching is and what it is supposed to accomplish? There are many preconceived ideas
regarding what virtual teaching is, how it works, and what it is designed to accomplish.
Although the literature that explores various myths about virtual teaching is not
extensive, a few authors tried to find out various opinions that already exist concerning
online teaching.

First, it is worth mentioning that virtual teaching bears more than one name. The article “An Evaluation of E-Learning on the Basis of Bloom’s Taxonomy: An
Exploratory Study” by Halawi et al. (2009) mentions to the readers that E-learning is
known as “distance education, distributed learning, online education, and Web learning”
(p. 375). Each of the names mentioned above will evoke a certain idea people share about
the virtual teaching environment and its attributes. A few myths and preconceived ideas stand out when talking about virtual education.

The first important preconceived idea is that virtual education must be easier than traditional face-to-face education. Because online teaching has no physical constraints (since the student does not have to go to school) there is a consensus among teachers that this type of schooling is less serious or demanding. According to Li and Akins, student and teachers make the same mistake: “They know that you do not need to go to school, or be at a certain place at a certain time; hence they assume that one can cruise through the teaching and learning process” (Li & Akins, 2005, as cited in Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009). The lack of a physical place to meet daily and interact with an instructor face-to-face is treacherous for some students. It can create the false image that virtual/online education is less structured, lacks urgency, and does not hold the student responsible in the same way as a traditional school would. Oliver et al. (2009) note this in their article “What are secondary students’ expectations in virtual school environments?” when they discover that “Students were surprised when they encountered regular due dates and collaborative activities” (p. 26).

Another important misconception about virtual teaching is that the quality of teaching is, somehow, lower in distance learning than in traditional venues. Perhaps this is related to the fact that when dealing with online classes it is hard to quantify the time a student spends in contact with the material taught. Kirtman (2009) talks about this important aspect of virtual education in her article “Online Versus in-Class Courses: An Examination of Differences in Learning Outcomes.” She proceeds to acknowledge that while the presence in a physical classroom ensures the exposure to the material for the
duration of the class, an online class lacks this certainty. The time spent by a student “in
class” is actually measured in hits and not in real time. The author’s conclusion is that
“someone who entered the site (hits) more than someone who did not may have spent
more time working with the course material” (p. 112).

This is a valid point if we take into consideration all the aspects of virtual
teaching that are very different in comparison with regular education. The students have a
lot of flexibility regarding where and when they are taking the class, the teachers cannot
monitor the classroom the same way he does in a face-to-face environment, providing
feedback regarding class material is done slightly different in a virtual class. On top of
these, there is the matter of accountability, both for teachers and students. Assessing
whether or not a teacher is doing a good job in an online class is still a “new territory” for
administrators and invested shareholders, as opposed to, let us say, observing a classroom
lesson being taught in a traditional setting.

Pastore and Carr-Chellman (2009) tackle this interesting subject in their
article “Motivation for residential students to participate in online courses” where they
discover that “online classroom environment is just as effective at promoting student
achievement as the traditional face-to-face” (Lim, 2005, as cited in Pastore & Carr-
Chellman, 2009, p. 12). The participants in the authors’ study were undergraduate
students who were enrolled in online classes through Penn State’s World Campus Online.
The student sample included 56% of full-time students, 74% that were at least 26 years
old, and 70% had taken online courses before.

Results of the study address a few important aspects and misconceptions of
virtual teaching:
1. Students and instructors perceive online learning to be just as effective (Liaw, Huang, & Chen, 2007).
2. Student engagement in the online classroom increases student satisfaction and their perception of success (Gilbert, Morton, & Rowley, 2007).
3. This asynchronous environment gives students a chance to reflect on their discussions and gain valuable insight into the class, which cannot be done in synchronous face-to-face discussion (Browne, 2003). (as cited in Patore & Carr-Chellman, 2009, p. 12)

In conclusion, of their research, Pastore and Carr-Chellman (2009) mention about the motivations of students that enroll in online education: “findings in our study suggest that the majority of students feel that online courses are fairly similar to face-to-face courses in terms of rigor, workload, and time spent working in and out of class, which is inline with curriculum research” (p. 20).

Pros and Cons of Using Virtual Teaching

Choosing the right method of schooling is an important decision both students and families have to make. Traditional education does meet the needs of many students but it does not for all students. As shown in the previous sections of this literature review, many students need an alternate form of education in order to perform to optimal parameters. “At least 12 U.S. states offer full-time virtual schools to students from kindergarten through eighth grade, to assist advanced or remedial students, rural students lacking access to regular schools, and urban students with safety concerns, among others” (Revenaugh, 2005, as cited in Oliver et al., 2009, p. 24).

In deciding what venue is best suited for a student that does not fit in the traditional educational environment, one needs to balance the pros and cons about online teaching. Ultimately, it is up to all stakeholders involved in the process—students, teachers, parents, administrators—to take a close look at what best meets their needs. All
this section attempts to do is present positive and negative aspects of online teaching as encountered in the literature read.

The fact that people involved in the educational system are looking for various options to meet the needs of students that underperform in the traditional system is a positive thing in and of itself. The literature supporting virtual teaching discovers many aspects that recommend it as a viable alternative to the traditional system. This section will focus on three benefits that appear with prevalence in all articles read. These three aspects of online teaching appear to be decisive in choosing online teaching over face-to-face, traditional education.

The main argument for virtual teaching is the flexibility it offers for the students. The article “Motivations for residential students to participate in online courses” quotes Gebhardt saying, “when students participate in online courses they can access it at their convenience, in a setting of their choice, because they have instant access to all of their course materials” (as cited in Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009, p. 14).

Studying online allows the students to bypass barriers that may conflict with their lifestyle or educational needs. The need to disregard time, place and space is mentioned by Siedlaczek (2004), who comments that “teaching and learning online presents two key differences as compared to a face-to-face classroom: participants do not meet in a physical space to interact with one another or with course material” (p. 2). She also mentions that “interaction changes, at this stage, from being primarily verbal to being primarily written” (p. 2), but this issue will be addressed in the chapter that observes the difference in methodologies employed in a traditional class versus an online one.
By eliminating the above mentioned constrains the students can focus more on the quality of their learning and have their lives affected as little as possible. Participating in class discussions, doing homework, and meeting and collaborating with classmates can occur from anywhere and at any time. Muneeza (2010) refers to this aspect in her article “Moving from face-to-face to online teaching” mentioning that: “Online instructors can teach from anywhere in the world as long as they have an internet connection. There is no class time missed due to illness, educational conferences, public holidays or even natural disasters” (p. 3).

In cases like these, virtual teaching becomes a very appealing alternative to student populations that have to meet their educational requirements outside the traditional system. Since the tertiary level remains the most important educational segment in the U.S. that employs online teaching, O’Malley and McCraw conducted a survey among university undergraduate and graduate level students (as cited in Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009, p. 14). The survey found that “students liked online courses because they believed they saved time, gained flexibility, were able to enroll in more courses, and earn the same or better grade in the online version versus the face-to-face” (O’Malley and McCraw, 1999, as cited in Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009, p. 14).

Siedlaczek (2004) found that most of the teachers felt that there were more similarities than differences in teaching in the two environments, with the main difference being the change from F2F verbal interactions involving body language to online written interactions, and the fundamental reliance on technology in the online environment. (p. 1)

The second important aspect of online teaching is that it creates an environment conducive for the students to produce quality work. The way online classes
are structured allows for a deeper connection between the students’ responses to the task set forth by the instructor. There is continuous contact among students (via email, chat rooms, phone, etc.) which maintains their focus on the task for a longer time. This, of course, is conditioned by the level of dedication and commitment that the students bring to the class. Due to the logistical set-up and dynamic of the online class, there is a shift in the roles teachers and students have in the learning/teaching process. As noted by Siedlaczek (2004), shifting the control from the teacher to student urges the learner to increase self-awareness and the sense of responsibility during class.

Muneeza (2010), in turn, observes that the manner in which students address the task—mainly written responses—enables them to “produce a deeper level of thinking and understanding of the course material vs. face-to-face” (p. 3). She also notices, in the same article, that “in such an environment, the quality of student contributions are more refined as they have more time to mull concepts over as they write prior to posting” (p. 3). In such an environment students deepen their understanding of class material, and become unaffected by the pace at which others learn. Freed from peer pressure and inhibitions, students in an online class can be selective with the time they dedicate to various concepts they try to assimilate. Kirtman (2009) quotes an online student saying that “with an online class I have been able to focus more on the information of the class and less in the stuff that has nothing to do with the class” (p. 110).

Muneeza (2010) is not the only one to mention the benefits of online teaching in relation to the quality of student work. In researching literature for their article “Motivations for Residential Students to Participate in Online Courses,” Pastore and Carr-Chellman (2009), bring to the fore convincing data that the asynchronous
environment of virtual classes is beneficial for the student learning. First, they quote Browne saying, “the asynchronous environment gives students a chance to reflect on their discussions and gain valuable insight into the class, which cannot be done in synchronous face-to-face discussion” (Browne, 2003, as cited in Pastore and Carr-Chellman, 2009, p. 12). Nedeva and Dimova (2010) debate the idea that online learning enriches the student’s experience as well. They call attention to the fact that e-learning can be “self-placed” where advanced learners are allowed to speed through or bypass instructions that is redundant while novices slow their own progress through content, eliminating frustrations with themselves, their fellow learners, and the course they are taking. (pp. 21-22)

Moreover, Rovai states “the course flexibility and asynchronous environment helps contributes to a sense of community that promotes reflection and learning” (Rovai, 2001, as cited in Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009, p. 12). Creating an academic environment that promotes effective learning is viewed as one of the most important and challenging tasks that an online teacher is facing. From the very beginning, an online teacher needs to create a welcoming environment for all students, an environment that compensates for the lack of human interaction of an online class. Siedlaczek (2004) emphasizes the role of the learning educational environment when she adds that “without such an environment present from the very beginning of an online course, students will not be willing to interact with one another in the way that leads to meaningful discussion and therefore learning online” (p. 3). Despain (2003) shows his support for the importance of the learning environment in the online environment. In his article “Achievement and Attrition Rate Differences Between Traditional and Internet-Based
Beginning Spanish Course” Despain mentions that the early logistical setup of a virtual classroom is vital for the success of the class. He suggests that “the initial meeting and testing sessions need should be utilized to learn student names, faces, and voices” (2003, p. 253).

Finally, the third argument made is that a virtual environment eliminates several inhibitions that otherwise might hinder a student’s performance: intimidating teachers, proximity to obnoxious classmates, and the pressure to talk in front of the entire class. This helps the students that have different learning and interactional styles and cannot fit in the traditional learning setting. According to Siedlaczek (2004), one of the strengths of online learning environment is that it enables the presentation of the same course material in a variety of ways using different media in order to reach different learning styles:

The online environment creates the possibility of presenting the same course material in a variety of ways using different media. So the same concept could be described in text, illustrated with a graphic, explained in a sound file, demonstrates in an interactive exercise, and displayed in a short video segment (p. 7).

In order for online learning to become an environment where everyone feels welcomed and at ease, there needs to change in the teaching methodology that teachers employ when teaching virtually. All the advantages of different media used online have to be carefully taken into account in order to provide the best support for learning. Siedlaczek (2004) mentions Schrum and Berge (1997) who talk about” the need to adapt the educational and evaluation process from F2F setting so that they are effective in the online setting” (p. 6). The same Berge (1998) is quoted to have found that online learning proposes a shift in roles, with the teacher moving from a mainly content expert role to
that of “a facilitator, consultant, and resource person” (as cited in Siedlaczek, 2004, p. 7) in order to give the student more freedom.

To summarize arguments pro online education, Dede (1989) identifies its strengths as follows: “distance learning is a strategy educational institutions are initially using to overcome inadequacies of local sources for meeting learners’ needs” (as cited in Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009, p. 12).

At the opposite spectrum of thinking about online learning, we find the voices that argue against educating students in the virtual environment. Two important cases against online teaching emerge from the articles reviewed for this section.

The most concerning issue is the potential lack of social interaction between teacher and students, and among students participating in the virtual course. Due to its logistical setup and nature of presenting the content of the course, the online class targets students that are intrinsically motivated and do not miss the social interaction very much. Sudzina and Sudzina (2003) duly note this in their article: “Learning on-line also can be challenging for students who are used to more traditional methods and find that on-line courses require additional discipline, time, effort, and technology skills to satisfy course requirements” (p. 5).

Lack of physical proximity makes teaching online challenging for teachers. As Siedlaczek (2004) points out “the lack of body language and visual cues online was one of the main challenges noted by the teachers” (p. 8). She goes on to add that teachers were also concerned about the inability to “read the reactions from students about whether explanations or descriptions of the course material were making sense were an important concern” (2004, p. 8). To supplement the lack of visual feedback experienced
in class, an online teacher needs to make sure that they assess differently than in a traditional, face-to-face classroom. In the virtual environment, teachers need to ensure that their assessments check for more than mere understanding, or, as Siedlaczek (2004) put it “more than basic absorption of facts, rather a deeper understanding of the course material” (p. 7). Making sure that the student takes more responsibility for his/her learning is crucial in an online class since the understanding of the content presented in class is equated with assignment completion. The teacher trusts that his/her students understand the material by the rate to homework completion: more assignments completed should translate into clear understanding of the content. Self-driven students that have a well-established self-regulating system developed thrive in this environment since they can optimize their time and work efficiently towards completion of course requirements.

Following the same idea, Rovai Ponton, Wighting, and Baker (2007), mention that “online students are generally self-motivated individuals who are mature, disciplined and self-regulated” (ac cited in Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009, p. 21). The concern regarding the lack of social interaction among students is justified by two trains of thought. The first one relates to the students’ inability to feel as a part of collective process of learning. Garrison et al. mention this challenge when they define “social presence as the ability of the participants within the online learning community to project their personal characteristics into the community and present themselves as real people” (as cited in Muneeza, 2010, p. 1). Garrison et al. goes further into detail and explains why students in online courses feel isolated and uncomfortable when trying to put out their best efforts during class:
The connection and feeling of being part of a learning community is somewhat lacking in online education and it is not unusual for an online student to feel isolated. Creating a sense of social presence creates a level of comfort and enhances interactions between students and instructors. (as cited in Muneeza, 2010, p. 1)

The second refers to the quality of learning displayed by students that feel isolated in relation to classmates. When a student feels isolated from the social atmosphere that a class is supposed to create, he may experience a decrease in the quality of learning. The main reason for this, according to Mykota and Duncan, is the fact that “the primary function of social presence is cognitive learning” (as cited in Muneeza, 2010, p. 1). Many disregard the correlation between social environment and the quality of learning, but not Mykota and Duncan:

When students perceive their experience as enjoyable, satisfying, and personally and professionally fulfilling, they tend to interact more, which results in enhanced learning. When the online environment is lacking social presence, the participants see it as impersonal, and, in turn, the amount of information that is shared with others decreases. (as cited in Muneeza, 2010, p. 1).

Expectations Related to Online Teaching

Once a student makes the decision to commit to online learning there is another important aspect to consider, what is there to be expected of a virtual class? Given the fact that online teaching is still a way to deliver education to students, expectations are going to relate to aspects of pedagogy: content, standards, delivery efficiency, results, and accountability. Oliver et al. (2009) mention that “students who were so new to online learning often expressed expectations for course structures that represented the model of education they knew best, or face-to-face instruction” (p. 40).

Face-to-face and online teaching are different and yet very similar since they are conditioned by the same traits that define education. Both of them need to display
certain elements of pedagogy that are essential to the teaching process: standards, content matter, assignments that need to demonstrate learning, course organization, teacher and student accountability, and relevance. In the virtual environment, it is essential that both teacher and student adapt to the requirements of an online class and modify the traditional “template” of a classroom in order to be successful. The physical distance between instructor and students predetermines the way in which both parts involved are going to behave in the learning process. What the teachers need to do in order to ensure a successful teaching environment will be closely described in the next section. This section is going to take into consideration what students expect from a virtual classroom.

Among the numerous expectations students have of the classroom and the teachers, some are fundamental to student mentality when thinking of online teaching. The consensus exists that virtual classrooms have come a long way since online learning has emerged as an educational tool. The difference between the pioneer classes and the classes we have today is very a significant one, considering that in its early days the online courses were nothing more than “compilations of class notes and assignments that mirrored those found in traditional classrooms” (Sudzina & Sudzina, 2003, p. 4). The technological progress allowed for changes that enabled online classes to become a social, interactive, stimulating educational environment of today. The progress brought along higher expectations from the students enrolled in the online courses.

Today, students expect the teacher to have a more active role in the class. It is no longer satisfying for the students to know that the teacher is there only in case he needs to moderate. Oliver et al. (2009) found that “students recommend their teachers post content presentations in an audio or visual format” (p. 32). Another important note
raised by the students was that they expect online classes to be more than just attachments that will create the impression of teaching, when in fact they are nothing but senseless work assigned randomly by the instructor. Busyness does not help the learning process since, or as a student eloquently put it, “most students are worried about completing their assignments by Friday instead of actually learning the material” (Oliver et al., 2009, p. 36).

This is a very normal occurrence in the online environment since teachers that try their hand at virtual education tend to carry their traditional teaching methods into the new class. Teachers with a style centered on lecturing had the hardest time adapting to the online teaching because of the transition from spoken communication to writing communication. It demanded that they become more efficient in providing clearer explanations and improve their ability to communicate in writing. Summers et al. (2005), observe a tendency among teachers trying online teaching to “adopt curriculum to fit technology rather than choosing the technology to fit curriculum” (p. 234). Summers et al. (2005) quotes Sharpe and Hawkins (1998) who acknowledged that “technology must serve the subject matter and not the other way around” (p. 28).

Related to the previous concern about busy work, the relevance of the material presented dictated the level of commitment that students bring to class. If the work assigned does not relate to their interests or day-to-day lives, students are bound to lose interest and, with losing interest, the quality of student output will diminish accordingly. Summers et al. (2005) focus on this aspect as well and, in their article quote Gillespie (1998) who suggests that online learning “should be designed to help learners develop higher level thinking skills and evaluate their own understanding, mediated by sharing
Lastly, due to the virtual component of the educational process, students expect the teachers to communicate effectively with them. Fast responses are expected when it comes to clarifications, grading, homework, projects, etc. Lowes (2005) reflects this aspect of online teaching, when she quotes a student’s experience in class: “The time lag between posts and responses makes group work difficult” (p. 16). Summers et al. (2005) also found students of online classes to be dissatisfied with the communication between teacher and student. The authors mention that students felt that their questions took a while to be answered and they could not benefit from the instructor’s expertise in person. Another point made by the same authors was that students could not gauge very well the level of enthusiasm or interest in student learning that the teacher brought to the class. All these are hard to convey virtually while they organically happen in the traditional environment during class time or office hours.

**Pedagogy/Methodology of a Successful Virtual Classroom**

As debated in the previous section, teachers have a crucial role in making online teaching a memorable experience for the students that are opting to try a virtual learning experience. Since the educational environment of online learning is not defined by physical proximity, it is challenging, especially for administrators, to quantify the success an online course has. However, a few characteristics have to exist in order for the online class to be successful. Since an online class is designed to teach a subject matter just like a face-to-face class, the educational principles followed by traditional education
need to be present in the virtual environment. Sudzina and Sudzina (2003) mention these principles very early in their article “Insights into Successfully Teaching with Cases On-Line: The View from Both Sides of the ‘Net.’” When they are trying to establish the parameters of a successful online class, both authors agree that “several other factors need to be taken into consideration to ensure success, including: course organization, technology skills, case selection and content, assignments, accountability, and relevance” (2003, p. 1). Other researchers expand on this idea and add valuable insights into elements necessary for an online course to be successful. Young states “quality online courses adapt to student needs, provide meaningful examples, motivate students, and consist of instructors who express concern for student learning” (as cited in Fish & Wickersham, 2009, p. 281). Speaking about the same essential requirements, Dykman and Davis address the logistical steps necessary in creating an online class, and mention that detailed organization and planning is the first step in teaching online (as cited in Fish & Wickersham, 2009, p. 281). Furthermore, they describe the importance of a solid performance from the get-go:

Components to planning online courses include developing course objectives, identifying reading material and assignments, determining interaction options and clarifying student expectations. Learners are more likely to focus more on learning and benefit (Zsohar & Smith, 2008) when online courses are carefully planned through clear expectations and guidelines. (as cited in Fish & Wickersham, 2009, p. 281)

Evaluating all the aspects that constitute features of a successful online class, an important fact emerges, that teachers require more time in preparing the functionality of the class. This is normal, taking into account the fact that an online instructor needs to find a way of bypass and account for all of the teaching experiences that virtual
environments lack: physical proximity to students, ability to offer instant feedback and assistance when needed, etc. Muneeza (2010) attests to this process in her article by mentioning Visser’s study about online courses developmental process:

The instructor must start preparing for an online course long before the course starts. This requires hours of in front of a computer screen typing every instruction that can be verbally communicated in a face-to-face setting with minimal effort. (9) This is because every aspect of the course must be carefully organized with explicit and detailed instructions (p. 2).

Siedlaczek (2004) concurs with above mentioned points of view and adds that online implementation of a class will inadvertently run into one of the following challenges: course design on terms of content; assessment; interactivity; approach to teaching the course; and how to better support his/her students. Once the course is set up, the instructor needs to focus on narrowing down the strategies he/she is going to employ in order to ensure the success of the class. The instructor also needs to reassess the role he/she will play in the class. Siedlaczek talks about a shift in the instructor’s contribution to the learning process and quotes Davie (1998) and Harasim (1987) who assert that “after the initial set-up, online teachers should allow their presence to fade into the background in order to encourage students to develop dialogue using their own voices” (as cited in Siedlaczek, 2004, p. 3).

A successful class, not only an online one but also a traditional one, is one in which the teacher manages to capture the interest of his/her students. McMillan (2001) suggests that teachers “gain students attention by helping them overcome fear and anxiety and by motivating them with a positive learning climate that is supportive of a deep and meaningful comprehension” (as cited in Summers et al., 2005, p. 239). From the array of pedagogical techniques a teacher can use to deliver his instruction, three emerge as vital
components of a successful online course: modeling, scaffolding, and coaching. All three components help online teachers with one of the main challenges encountered in a virtual set-up: engaging all learning styles students bring to class. Siedlaczek (2004) recognizes that students in an online class have “different learning styles, different comfort in communicating through writing, different levels of technological experience, and different levels of self-direction” (p. 5).

Talking about modeling, Boling et al. (2001) refer to Collins to describe the interaction between an expert that will perform the task and the students that “observe and build a conceptual model of the processes that are required to accomplish the task” (p. 4). Peer modeling is also mentioned because the setup of the online course is very conducive to students observing the work posted by other classmates. In the same article, Dennen acknowledges, “peer modeling exists when learners observe and follow strategies used by others who are working on similar tasks” (as cited in Boling et al., 2001, p. 5).

Coaching students is closely related to modeling, the main difference being that the instructors moves from an active role of performing the task to a mere intermediary. Dennen defines coaching as “monitoring of students’ activities and assisting and supporting them when necessary” (as cited in Boling et al., 2001, p. 6). Although coaching sounds like an easy task in a face-to-face environment, it is not the case with coaching in a virtual course. In order to compensate for the lack of communication opportunities that he/she possesses in the class, the online teacher needs to be able to resort to a variety of modalities that will allow monitoring, assisting and supporting. Knight testifies that coaching in a virtual class needs instructors to have the
ability to “empathize, listen, and build relationships and trust” (as cited in Boling et al., 2001, p. 6). He also continues expanding this idea by saying that:

To accomplish this, the instructor made use of a variety of modes to communicate with students. Depending on the type of coaching that as required, the instructor used video tapes, screencasts, or emails to convey feedback and/or support (as cited in Boling et al., 2001, p. 6).

Last, but not least, scaffolding is employed by online instructors to allow students to contextualize their learning and be aware of the goals they set in the learning process. Although teachers retreat from a central figure of the class to a supporting one in order to allow the students to “find their footing” in the virtual environment, it does not mean they stop supporting their students. Teachers, according to Siedlaczek (2004), continue to provide scaffolding by remaining “critical in clarifying any misunderstandings, brings discussion back in track, signaling transition between topics, encouraging participation, and providing frequent feedback” (p. 4). As Collins refers to it, scaffolding is “the support the teacher provides to help students carry out a task” (as cited in Boling et al., 2001, p. 5). It is not enough for students to be shown how to do something; it is also crucial that they have the necessary support to understand the concept they are trying to master in achieving their academic task. Scaffolding is important because it urges the students to recycle previously acquired knowledge about the subject matter. Boling et al. (2001) bring in the research of Walton and Archer, who acknowledge that:

instructional modules in the course were sequenced progressively, building upon knowledge and skills that were provided by the other. The subsequent modules provided knowledge and skills to further deepen this understanding, thereby scaffolding student learning (p. 5).
Collins summarizes very well the teaching philosophy needed in order to have a successful online class. He understands the fact that the online teacher needs to modify his teaching philosophy in order to be effective. This requires a varied arsenal of means of instruction and teaching styles from which the teacher can choose in order to deliver the lesson. For Collins, the ultimate goal of teaching in a virtual environment is “encouraging learner autonomy not only in carrying out expert solving processes, but also in defining or formulating the problems to be solved” (as cited in Boling et al., 2001, p. 2).

Apart from providing guidance, support, and coaching as essential elements of online learning process, a teacher needs to recognize the specific nature of language instruction and how it translates to the virtual environment. Gocer (2010) quotes Oxford (1990) and his taxonomy of language learning strategies as a defining map for delivering language content: “memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies” (p. 198). Gocer also brings in Wong (2005) and his take on the importance of language learning strategies:

With the metacognitive category were those strategies which involve knowing about learning and controlling learning through planning, monitoring and evaluating learning activity, cognitive strategies include those strategies involving manipulation or transformation of the material to be learned, while social/affective strategies mainly involve the learner in communicative interaction with another person, for example, collaboration with peers and teachers in the learning process. (as cited in Gocer, 2010, pp. 246-252).

Gocer (2010) brings forward the importance of a classroom environment that involves all students, regardless of the style of learning. Online classes start with an important handicap: the physical setting of a classroom that can be turned into an invaluable resource by a good language teacher. Using the space of a classroom to
display samples of student work, posters and information about targeted language and culture, creates a tangible resource specific only to traditional education. An online teacher can compensate for the lack of physical classroom by “conducting the activities of acquiring and developing language skills in an environment in which students who interact with each other are active” (2010, p.199). By maintaining the students active in the process of language acquisition the teachers keeps students at the center of attention and allows them to become active learners and interactive participants in the learning process. The same aspect is mentioned by Spanos, Hansen, and Daines (2001) when they talk about the importance of making online activities engaging so that students benefit the most: “electronic assignments enhance student learning simply by doing what they were designed to do: promote conversation and interaction, thereby providing valuable short-term feedback about day-to-day learning and the teaching process” (p. 323).

The student’s interest needs to constantly be stimulated in order for the material to become relevant. Students are more likely to learn when the material studied relates to their personal interests and passions. Finding significance in what they learn will ensure they remain an active element of the teaching/learning process that develops in the virtual environment. As one student mentioned in Spanos et al. (2001) testifies: “This is the first time in three years of study when I felt my acquiring knowledge was the most important objective in a class” (p. 323).

Once the teacher determines the appropriate methodology, he/she needs to tackle a new set of challenges. Gocer (2010) claims they are sub-problems inherent to language teaching and poses them as questions that need to drive the language instruction
in an online environment. Gocer is asking the following questions in his quest to offer an insight into the methodology used in a foreign language class:

Do the teachers use modern strategies, methods, and techniques in the learning and teaching process? Are the educational and social environments appropriate for the development of the language skills? What kind of a feature do the foreign language lessons show in terms of features such as interest, desire, asking questions, talking, participating in the discussions, taking responsibility, etc.? (p. 200)

In his article “A Qualitative Research on the Teaching Strategies and Class Applications of the High School Teachers Who Teach English in Turkey as a Foreign Language,” Gocer (2010) discovers that teachers have various preferences as far as curriculum alignment, methodology employed and approaches they take towards teaching a foreign language. Some focus on grammar, some adopt the constructivist approach, while others choose the eclectic method to deliver the content materials. Regardless of the method/approach used by different teachers, they all make sure to implement in their daily lessons elements that ensure a good understanding of the targeted language such as “auditory-lingual, auditory-visual, interactive, question and answer, role play, play work, etc. in the framework of these approaches” (p. 209).

An important difference between online and face-to-face classroom is mentioned by Gocer (2010) in the section of his article dedicated to classroom activities and the use of language. The author notes that in a traditional classroom “a sufficient time is allocated to the reading, listening, speaking, and writing activities with the help of texts, and in order to improve the vocabulary of the students, application activities are carried out related to word, word group, idiom” (p. 215).

Although there is no set formula as far as the best methodologies, approaches and curriculum to be used in a foreign language classroom, Gocer’s (2010) article does
conclude with an extensive list of insights for language teachers. First, it mentions the benefic aspect of not becoming specialized in one language skill per say. Rather, the author suggests, all lessons should “relate to the reading, listening, speaking, and writing language skills along with the grammar language field” (p. 217).

Second, teachers should look to determine the proficiency levels of their students using “different measurement and assessment methods” (Gocer, 2010, p. 217). Gocer (2010) believes that teachers should use “besides the quiz, classical written exam and post-subject tests” a process that is “implemented in order to determine the class performance and general performances of the students” (p. 217). Third, Gocer encourages teachers not to discount the trivial aspects of language teaching that can make or break the success of a class:

The physical features of the class, the sitting pattern of the students, social aspect of the classroom environment, the communication of the teachers with the students, the frequency of questions asked by the students, their efforts to use the language by means of describing their ideas and suggestions are all realized in democratic atmosphere. (p. 217)

The Role of Virtual Teaching in High School/Educational Reform

Online teaching continues to make a strong bid for alternatives to the current means of classroom instruction. Naturally, there are some opinions that argue for the benefits it has for education, and some other that point out its shortcomings. No matter on which side of the fence you find yourself, one thing is clear about online teaching: it has a great impact on the current educational system. The impact online education has today is noticeable not only in sheer number of students that prefer it to the face-to-face alternative but also in the number of solutions online teaching has to offer to various
overstimulated aspects of traditional teaching. The appeal virtual learning presents consists in the services it provides to all those involved in education, and the fact that it delivers these services whenever and wherever traditional education fails to do so.

The most important aspect of online education that attracts more and more students is that it meets the needs of various groups of students that cannot adapt to traditional schooling. The virtual environment offers Advance Placement and college-level courses, it diminishes time conflicts students might have with their schedules, and allows students that are losing credits to get back on track by helping with credit recovery.

Overall, online teaching is becoming a very reliable and likable alternative not only by the students that are benefiting from the advantages of not being locked into a set schedule, or limited by the physical location of a campus. From an administrative point of view as well, online teaching is greatly changing the educational panorama. By offering online courses, administrators are starting to enjoy increasing graduation rates among their students. Supplementing the traditional face-to-face classes with virtual ones, the administrators can help students recover lost credits and thereby they avoid losing students. Balfanz and Legters observe that this phenomenon is very popular among schools, especially urban ones:

What is particularly interesting is that urban high schools, which historically have the lowest graduation rates of any school in the country, appear to be embracing online credit recovery as a basic part of their academic offerings. (as cited in Picciano et al., 2012, p. 6)

The specific elements of online teaching allow it to be a potential catalyst for the reform the educational system seems to need. It will help alleviate many problems
that are tied to budgeting: transportation, course offerings, materials, staffing. In other words, eloquently put by Christensen et al. and paraphrased by Picciano et al. (2012) online teaching becomes:

an integral part of high school reform specifically by allowing high schools to customize instruction and to differentiate course offerings to meet a wide variety of student needs. . . . This supports strongly the concept promulgated by Christensen, Horn, and Johnson of the role that online technology can play in differentiating instruction and providing more choices for high school administrators in developing their academic programs. (p. 9)

Summary

Online teaching is just another piece of the puzzle called education. As it stands right now, the puzzle pieces are scattered all over the place and nobody seems to be able to put them back together. Money is tighter than ever, cuts are being made everywhere, there are more and more teachers leaving education to find more secure jobs, while the number of students in classes continues to increase. It seems that education these days requires everyone involved in the process to do more with less resources.

The present paper does not offer a solution; it merely sheds light on an interesting alternative that proves, at least until now, to have some answers to the many question marks education poses to its shareholders. It seems that the current educational environment is ready for an alternative to share the responsibility of satisfying the needs of students. I hope that this project will allow any interested parties to start paying attention to what online teaching can offer. It should provide a good starting point and plenty of resources that may help identify solutions for various needs that, perhaps until now, were a challenge for traditional education.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Project Design

This paper was meant to explore options that exist outside the traditional classroom, options meant to sustain, compliment, and support a suffering educational system crippled by a declining economy, and an ever changing social and demographical climate. It was mainly inspired by personal experience in both traditional and online classes. From what I experienced, I found that my online experiences helped me alleviate some of the problems I experienced in the traditional classroom while giving me an insight into the different approaches needed to implement the same curriculum into two different learning environments. I often found myself drawing parallels and analyzing how I dealt differently with various concepts of language instruction based in the environment used to teach the concept.

Gathering data for my research was not an easy task since high schools do not really offer online classes to their students. The present high school educational environment limited my data gathering procedures to data mining and surveying. Since I have taught virtual language classes for Glenn County Office of Education, I was in the position to ask my students about their experience in my classes. At the end of each semester, I gave my students a small, informal survey with questions regarding their experience as well as my teaching. The small number of students, five to twelve students
in a class, made it easy to tally and synthesize their answers. Their answers, suggestions, and comments introduced me for the first time to concepts like teacher role transition, curriculum adaptation to reflect the realities of a virtual environment, the necessity of redesign traditional methodology in order to meet the needs of my students’ learning styles. Their comments shed light in my strengths as well as my weaknesses as a teacher. The surveys helped me correct aspects of my teaching that allowed me to become a better professional. I start paying more attention to how I manage my time for each activity in class, how many handouts I give out, or how relevant my assessments are to what I teach.

In order to gather data about my topic I conducted extensive searches using Chico State University’s library search engines. I was able to retrieve pertaining information about aspects of online/traditional classroom settings I needed to develop my paper. The challenge I encountered was in selecting the adequate materials that would best construct the vision I had of the topic chosen for my project. At the same time, the election process helped me: I had to become very clear as far as choosing which aspects of the subject matter I would keep and which I eliminate.

Analyzing the data was a very interesting process and challenging at the same time. I was forced to carefully choose the “scopes” through which I was to analyze the data collected. Being such a current topic, online teaching has complex ramifications not only into the administrative world of education, but also into the technical realm of language instructions. Analyzing and synthesizing the material researched took me on a wild journey that started with me analyzing my role as an educator and pedagogue, my impact in the life of my students, and the goals I set for myself in my career.
The entire process of writing this project was very benefic for me as a teacher and as an aspiring professional in education. I revisited concepts vital to my profession such as language acquisition principles and approaches to implementing various teaching strategies. I reviewed taxonomies of language learning strategies, definitions of learning environments and students’ learning styles. Best of all, I had the chance to take a realistic look at where I am in my teaching career. For this reason alone I am grateful that I had the opportunity to write this paper even if, at times, it has been the hardest thing I had to do in my seven years of graduate career!

Project Format

The lesson attached is inspired from a traditional Spanish curriculum. It is adapted to fit the needs of an online course and provide detailed instructions, virtual resources, and structure that allows for a painless integration. The lesson includes the elements of traditional lesson planning: objectives, activities, applications, evaluations, standard integration.

The lesson is designed for a 56 minutes class period but can easily be modified to meet the requirements of a block schedule as well. It explores basic grammatical concepts as well as cultural aspects of the targeted language that allow for contextualization of the linguistic elements taught. Activities utilized in the lesson involve, but are not limited to, note-taking, web searches, reading, listening to voice recordings, use of PowerPoint presentations, chat rooms. The evaluations provided by the lesson can be online quizzes, projects designed using PowerPoint, written responses to various prompts.
Rationale

The project was designed to serve as a starting point for a potential online curriculum that will meet the needs of students studying Spanish (or any other foreign language for that matter) at a high school level. It was developed keeping in mind all the components of language acquisition and administrative requirements of any high school: accessibility, curriculum integration, and Foreign Language standards alignment.

Logistically, it will help teachers and administrators understand the main differences between methodology, approach and curriculum implementation of face-to-face versus online language classes. The students targeted for this project are high school students, regardless of their Spanish proficiency level. It will challenge the students to develop linguistic awareness, and gain a new insight into their own learning process as it relates to the requirements of a virtual environment. At the same time, they will understand their role in the global community of the 21st century since the online environment where they learn the languages will eliminate the physical barriers that surround them.

I hope that my paper will offer the students the opportunity to realize they can enjoy studying any foreign language in a new way. They can access the course anywhere they want, at a time that is flexible and allows for changes to best fit their needs. At the same time, it will provide them with a learning environment characterized by structure and accountability. This will allow them to develop deeper cognitive skills and better understand their own learning styles and develop new insight into language acquisition.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
ONLINE LESSON SAMPLE

Online lesson - ¿Mi familia?

   a. Lesson page
   b. Example of activity module and quiz
   c. Example of homework with PDF document link
   d. Summative audio exam
RUBRIC FOR ONLINE INSTRUCTION

Lesson page screen – description and modules

[Image of lesson page]

Chico

My family - Mi familia

Teacher: Tibi Marinescu
Grade Level 9-12
Spanish Level Beginning

Lesson Objectives:
- a. describe family members
- b. ask and tell ages
- c. talk about family members

Lesson Goals:
- a. students will be able to describe, in English, the importance of family in both U.S. and Hispanic culture
- b. students will be able to read and identify different family relationships
- c. students will be able to describe in Spanish, both in writing and orally, family members of their choice

Lesson Description:
This lesson is designed so that you will learn to talk about your families. Before diving into the new material, it will be necessary that you review some of the previously acquired knowledge. The verbs SER to be, TENER to have, as well as adjectives that describe physical and personality traits. After the grammatical review, you will be working with new vocabulary and grammatical structures. The new information will allow you to recognize family relationships and describe family members using several resources.

I will register the entire class to have access to the diluguestar.com website. This way, I will receive scores of all the quizzes you will take so I can monitor your progress and be aware of the areas of instruction that need reinforcement.

[Image of lesson page]

Family in the U.S.

Activity #2 - Review the verb TO BE = SER/ESTAR

Activity #3 - Review the adjectives

Activity #4 - Review likes and dislikes

Activity #5 - New Vocabulary and Text

Activity #6 - Homework
Example of module for an activity with quiz
Example of homework with PDF document link
Screenshot for summative exam – audio podcast
Assessment & Evaluation of Student Learning

Assessment & Evaluation of Student Learning contains five criteria in which a course can be deemed exemplary. These five criteria are shown below in the three rankings of baseline, effective, and exemplary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>Effective</th>
<th>Exemplary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Course has limited activities to assess student readiness for course content and mode of delivery.</td>
<td>A. Course has some activities to assess student readiness for course content and mode of delivery.</td>
<td>A. Course has multiple timely and appropriate activities to assess student readiness for course content and mode of delivery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Learning objectives, instructional and assessment activities are not closely aligned.</td>
<td>B. Learning objectives, instructional and assessment activities are somewhat aligned.</td>
<td>B. Learning objectives, instructional and assessment activities are closely aligned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Assessment strategies are used to measure content knowledge, attitudes and skills.</td>
<td>C. Ongoing strategies are used to measure content knowledge, attitudes and skills.</td>
<td>C. Ongoing multiple assessment strategies are used to measure content knowledge, attitudes and skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Opportunities for students to receive feedback about their own performance are infrequent and sporadic.</td>
<td>D. Opportunities for students to receive feedback about their own performance are provided.</td>
<td>D. Regular feedback about student performance is provided in a timely manner throughout the course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Students' self-assessments and/or peer feedback opportunities are limited or do not exist.</td>
<td>E. Students' self-assessments and/or peer feedback opportunities exist.</td>
<td>E. Students' self-assessments and peer feedback opportunities exist throughout the course.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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