“It helps me get closer to their writing experience” Classroom ethnography and the role of technology in third-year FL courses

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ABSTRACT
Research has shown a disjunction between language instruction at the lower and upper levels of foreign language (FL) study. Whereas lower-division courses focus on grammatical patterns, upper-level courses focus on specific content. The third-year writing course is in a unique position to help learners prepare for the types of learning that they will encounter in more advanced language use contexts. Using grounded classroom ethnography, this multiple case study of two classrooms chronicles how a collaborative partnership between an instructor and an applied linguist facilitated the integration of two types of technology into a third-year Spanish writing course at a North American University. Technology was carefully chosen based on pedagogical considerations and teacher goals. Students in these courses included a mixture of heritage and FL Spanish learners with a mean age of 21 years. Findings included four ways that technology played a role in third-year Spanish language learning, including as: (a) a way to alleviate their workloads, (b) a motivator, (c) a way to improve the quality and quantity of feedback students received in the course, and in some cases (d) antagonistic to language learning. Implications of classroom ethnography for research on blended learning are drawn.

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1. Introduction

A major challenge in higher education settings is a disconnect between a focus on form (e.g., reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary) at the lower levels and a focus on content1 (e.g., literature and culture) at the upper levels. While more and more first and second year courses are adopting a communicative approach in line with the Standards (ACTFL, 2006), third- and fourth-year courses have tended to use content-based instruction to focus on the analysis of texts of particular genres. Many scholars over the past three decades have documented this so-called language-content (or language-literature) gap as highly problematic (Byrnes, 2002; Harris-Schenz, 1993; Kern, 2002; Kraemer, 2008; Kramsch, 1998; Maxim, 2005; Schultz, 2002).

As Harris-Schenz (1993) explains, “students who have received As in the basic language sequence cannot understand why they are suddenly unable to function in the next level course, which is actually several levels beyond them” (p. 48). Third-year

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1 Content, as I am using it here, must be differentiated from content-based language teaching (CBLT). Whereas the goal of CBLT is to focus on incorporating both language and content, content (literature), as it is taught at the upper-levels of language study, often precludes a discussion of how language construes meaning.

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FL instruction carries the weighty responsibility (and unique opportunity) of helping prepare students for upper-level FL courses and advanced language use domains. Fortunately, technology may provide third-year FL teachers with valuable tools for helping learners to bridge the language-content gap. As blended language (BL) learning is becoming increasingly widespread in many US educational institutions, third-year FL teachers can harness technology to help bridge the divide between instruction at the lower and upper levels of language study. Blended courses, defined as those that include a face-to-face (f2f) instructional component as well as a technology-enhanced component, can be attractive options for third-year FL teachers due to their replacement of f2f time with online assignments (Blake, Wilson, Cetto, & Pardo-Ballester, 2008; Gleason, 2013a; Neumeier, 2005).

There is little to no research pertaining to technology use in third-year language learning. Brown, Bown, and Eggert (2009) argue that more energy needs to be spent on curriculum development “at the Intermediate/Advanced threshold and beyond, where matters of accuracy and consistency become increasingly critical for cogent communication” (p. 425). Specific questions as to exactly how third-year FL courses can best harness technology will help understand how different types of learners can effectively transition from the lower- to the upper-level language sequence. This study puts forth classroom ethnography for helping to throw light on how technology can be leveraged for curriculum development in third-year FL courses.

2. Writing development in blended environments

As with all decisions to incorporate technology into the classroom, most agree that pedagogy must drive technology and not the other way around (Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Tai, 2013; Wildner, 2000). Mishra and Koehler (2006), for example, argue that technology is not something that should be integrated for the sole purpose of using technology; rather, it needs to be integrated specifically with a teacher’s curricular objectives in mind. Many studies that use established theories as rationales for their design choices are pioneering in the field. The following section highlights research that has examined BL writing development in both the L1 and L2/FL.

In pondering the inevitable incorporation of technology into composition education, Gouge (2009) asserts, “we need to reflect what our current practices and choices to use or not to use specific technologies suggest about what we value in the classroom” (p. 343). To this end, the author cites ten principles taken from Taylor (2009) to help teachers make informed decisions about how technology can improve blended writing courses, including: (a) keep people first, (b) identify and build from program principles, and (c) start simple. Many different types of evidence can be gathered in order to help teachers implement these principles.

Over the past three decades, there has been a proliferation of research pertaining to how technology can best be harnessed to develop online and blended writing courses. Over two decades ago, studies in L1 writing began to examine the differences between online and f2f writing courses. In a comparison study, Mehlenbacher, Miller, Covington, and Larsen (1999) examined three writing courses, two of them web-based and another conventional f2f. The authors cited the difficulty of comparing online and f2f environments using surveys due to the complex web of interrelating factors present in two different instructional domains. Webb Boyd (2008) evaluated students’ perceptions of online and hybrid courses for aiding their writing development. Findings included students’ desire for interaction with faculty, dissatisfaction with the amount of interaction, confusion about the course expectations, and uncertainty about peer corrections of their essays.

Much of the evidence gathered to address technology and writing development in the first language has focused less on comparing traditional to web-based environments, and instead on the different aspects of technology-infused courses. A large vein of research, for example, has examined the role of collaborative writing activities in the composition classroom. Anderson-Inman, Knox-Quinn, and Tromba (1996) looked into the role of synchronous collaborative writing activities and the group paper. Extolling synchronous environments for their anonymity, increased participation, and support of reading and writing needs, the authors cited certain disadvantages of technology, including computer-breakdown, issues with long-distance technology coordination, and unclear standards for appropriate electronic communication. Over a decade later, research continues to explore collaborative writing environments. Kittle and Hicks (2009), for example discussed a new generation of collaborative writing instruction using tools such as blogs, wikis, online word processors, and social networking tools.

Wikis, mainly used for asynchronous collaborative writing, were also the focus of Lee’s (2010) study with elementary Spanish students. Results showed that wikis had a favorable impact on writing skills due to their ability to facilitate collaborative engagement. Myazoe and Anderson (2010) simultaneously tested the effects of forums, blogs, and wikis in an EFL blended course in Tokyo. Qualitative text analysis also showed that students made progress in their ability to differentiate among English writing styles.

Similar to a wiki but synchronous, web-based word processors like Etherpad and Google Docs possess the advantage of being able to work on the same document at the same time and viewing changes simultaneously occurring in the text. Google Docs is “a free, web-based word processor, spreadsheet, presentation, form and data storage service offered by Google” (Wikipedia, 2012). Yang (2010) described Google Docs as a powerful means for students to collaborate on various writing-centered projects. Many authors have heralded online word processors for enabling students in different locations to collaborate simultaneously but work independently (Brint & Raftery, 2011; Mansor, 2011; Montero-Fleta & Pérez-Sabater, 2012).

Another strand of research on blended writing, both in L1 and L2/FL research, surrounds the topic of feedback. In their treatment of oral feedback as an integral part of successful writing instruction, Krych-Appelbaum and Musial (2007)
compared students’ perceptions of interactive conversation as part of peer-writing review versus non-interactive feedback via email. Features of written feedback which were useful for students included reviewability and revisability, being able to go back to what they had written and look through the exact language to discover what they meant to say. Wolsey (2008) explored the relation of feedback to formative assessment in addition to students’ perceptions and use of feedback. Results included five recommendations to instructors regarding how to improve students’ online instructional experiences, including (a) valuable interaction with the instructor, (b) feedback that made use of questions for further inquiry, and (c) feedback embedded in their written documents rather than at the end of their essays. Guardado and Shi (2007) focused on the experiences of ESL students who provided online peer feedback. The authors gave suggestions about how to maximize online feedback including teacher intervention during f2f discussion. Roux-Rodriguez (2003) explored the impact of peer collaboration and feedback using computer-mediated writing revision in the Spanish FL classroom. Findings showed that the role of technology in giving peer feedback was not as important as feedback given f2f.

In sum, rapid and continuous advancements in technology make research on blended language learning an essential, albeit challenging venture. Third-year writing courses prepare students for upper-level coursework, where the incorporation of technology for literacy development can and should be a top priority (Lotherington & Ronda, 2014). Qualitative research offers a powerful means for understanding technology's role in such development. Matsuda, Canagarajah, Harklau, Hyland, and Warschauer (2003) herald qualitative methodologies for research on BL L2 writing: “it becomes increasingly difficult to unravel the nature of computer-mediated writing through short-term classroom based studies. Ethnographies, longitudinal case studies, and other forms of interpretive qualitative research are thus likely to emerge as principal means of exploring the relationship of technology to second language writing” (p. 165–166).

Classroom ethnography combined with discourse analysis provides us with tools to investigate how teachers and students co-construct educational practices and processes in L2/FL classrooms (Tsui, 2012). Although BL courses are becoming more and more common, scarce research has been carried out with third-year FL writing courses. What little research there is either (a) outdated (e.g., Brandes & Rettig, 1986) or (b) focuses less on technology and more on genre-specific strategies for L2 writing development (Brown et al., 2009). The review of these areas has pointed to a gap in the body of theoretically situated ethnographic classroom research on third-year FL courses. Specifically lacking are studies that examine the role of technology in third-year FL writing courses.

3. Methods

This section lays out the methodology for a study involving two technology-imbuied Spanish third-year writing and grammar courses. It includes (a) an overview of the study and research questions, (b) the methodological choices and justification, (c) the setting, participants, and collaboration between the teacher and researcher, (d) data collection and analysis, and (e) a discussion of the study’s trustworthiness.

3.1. An overview of the study and research question

This study reports on part of a larger research project that examined the role of technology, language learning tasks, and academic discourse development in third-year Spanish writing courses (Gleason, 2013b, 2014). In order to understand the ways in which technology played a role in these classrooms, the following overarching research question was posed: What role does technology—and the teacher’s and students’ attitudes about technology—play in teaching and learning in technology-infused third-year Spanish writing courses?

3.2. Methodological choices and justification

The present study draws on an interpretive epistemological position that warrants the use of the qualitative, grounded ethnographic methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews in conjunction with discourse analysis. Such a position is based on the premise that we can infer knowledge of the social world by observing and experiencing real-life situations. Ethnographic observation views the researcher as an interpreter of knowledge based on shared experience, someone who can facilitate the generation of data in specific social situations as they occur. More studies in the field of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) that view evidence as socially knowable by participating in or experiencing natural real-life classroom environments are greatly needed. They prioritize the generation of qualitative data by observing the interactions, actions, and behaviors of people as well as the way that such individuals interpret these and act on them (Mason, 1996).

Once conceptual categories were established using grounded ethnographic methods, they were investigated further using discourse analytic methods (Charmaz, 2006; Rampton, Roberts, Leung, & Harris, 2002) to understand how language helped construct and enact the social practices of the third-year language classroom. Discourse analysis was not imposed on the data from the beginning, but were rather used a posteriori to shed light on the interpersonal and ideational meanings in participants’ discourse (cf., Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). By remaining open during the coding of data, without forcing data into preexisting categories, a researcher can attend to the data on his or her own terms, allowing for the possibility of new conceptual categories to emerge. Accordingly, discourse analysis can be applied once conceptual categories are established in
order to understand the role of language in classroom social practices. With this in mind, it is argued that grounded ethnography and discourse analysis were advantageously applied in unison.

3.3. The setting, the participants, and the researcher’s role

3.3.1. Research sites and context

The observational data for this study were collected in two different sections of a third-year Spanish writing course as listed in Table 1. Both of these courses involved the teaching of Spanish as a FL with technology at a medium-sized North American university. Spanish Grammar and Composition (Spanish 301) was a course in Spanish written communication that emphasized the development of reading and writing skills necessary to comprehend, discuss, and produce authentic Spanish texts. The teacher and researcher collaborated to redesign the course to employ several technologies in a f2f mode. The sections each met f2f three times a week, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, for 50 min at a time.

3.3.1.1. Learning outcomes for the course. The learning outcomes for the course, as listed in the syllabus, consisted of the following: (a) to demonstrate ability to write coherently two types of essays: an expository composition and an argumentative paper in the target language, (b) to recognize, define, and use vocabulary related to texts and or writings, including transitional expressions and conjunctions, and (c) to demonstrate through written work reasonable control over several grammatical moods and verb tenses, including the indicative mood (present, preterit, imperfect, present perfect) and the subjunctive mood (present, imperfect, present perfect, adverbial clauses), as well as the use of the infinitive, ser and estar, object pronouns, relative pronouns, agreement of nouns and adjectives, spelling, and accents, and (d) to demonstrate an understanding of cultural values, beliefs, and ideologies of the Hispanic world.

3.3.1.2. Class format and dynamics. Over the course of the semester, students in Spanish 301 engaged in reading and listening, writing assignments (including two compositions), web-based homework, assessments such as online quizzes and exams, and class discussions. Class dynamics included a combination of collaborative work in pairs and small group for both grammar and composition activities as well as peer-editing workshops in the language laboratory. Tasks were designed with technology in mind in order to allow students to support each other in their writing and improve their editing skills.

3.3.2. Participants

The teacher of both sections of Spanish 301 was a key informant in the study. Born in Mexico, she was an Assistant Professor of Spanish, specializing in the literature of Equatorial Guinea. She had over 20 years of teaching experience and had taught the course five times before. I had known her for four years and had the pleasure of working with her on other projects, including the previous development of a web-based teaching unit for Spanish 301. The teacher was an excellent educator as evidenced by her exceedingly positive end-of semester course evaluations and high rapport with students. Many students confided in me during interviews that they greatly enjoyed her classes as well as her teaching style and thought of her as a skilled teacher and caring person.

Exactly 31 of the 44 students in the two sections of Spanish 301 agreed to participate in the study. All but one of these students were undergraduates, five of them were pursuing at a Spanish minor and three were pursuing a major. All spoke English as their first language and four were Spanish heritage speakers. Their ages ranged from 18 to 42 years old with an average age of 20 years. Among the 31 students who agreed to participate, nine of them became key informants for their willingness to be interviewed multiple times throughout the semester. These individuals agreed to participate in the study and signed an informed consent document. More information about these people is given in Table 2.

3.3.3. The researcher’s role

This section outlines my role as a researcher participant. After obtaining authorization for the study, I was able to establish a mutual relationship of trust and respect with the instructor of the Spanish 301 sections. This relationship is what enabled me to collect data in a way that was aligned with the overall goals of the teacher and the department. In the beginning of the semester, I signed a contract with the teacher, observed in Appendix A, to ensure our mutual understanding of my role in her classrooms.

My role, as an applied linguist helping a third-year Spanish teacher shape her course, made possible a unique and highly valuable teaching-research relationship. Although I was not directly involved in the creation of the tasks that the teacher planned and carried out, I was able to support the teacher by offering advice about the types of technology to help accomplish her goals. Helping the teacher gain knowledge and practice with various technological tools, we eventually decided to use two types of technology in the courses: Netsupport and Google Docs. During 10 pre-semester teacher interviews, which also served as moments to plan the curricular changes that the teacher had in mind, we brainstormed how technology might play

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Modes</th>
<th>Days/Week</th>
<th>Weeks</th>
<th>Min/Week</th>
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<tr>
<td>Spanish 301/1</td>
<td>f2f + online</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish 301/2</td>
<td>f2f + online</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
a beneficial role in these courses. These changes were based on specific goals and shortcomings that the teacher had experienced from having taught the course over several iterations.

Once the semester of data collection began, my presence in the course remained consistent; I attended class every day and became another student/teacher. I was able to attend all but three of the 50 classes that took place over the course of the semester. As such, I served as (a) an additional Spanish teacher in the classroom (e.g., students often asked me questions about language) as well as (b) a consistent source of scaffolding and technological support. During bi-weekly interviews throughout the semester, the teacher and I were able to discuss her goals for the course and make any necessary changes to technology use, assignments, and instructions.

On the first day of class, I introduced the study to the students and asked them to read and sign an informed consent document, which can be observed in Appendix B. This gave students the choice of different levels of participation. It was expected that by giving students flexibility, that they would feel more comfortable and informed about my research practices and presence within their classrooms.

### 3.4. Data collection and analysis

The data for the present study were collected in and surrounding two third-year blended Spanish writing courses. In this section, sampling, data collection, and analysis procedures will be described.

#### 3.4.1. Sampling

The present study employed both initial and theoretical sampling. For the initial sample of tasks and language, convenience sampling was used. Convenience sampling (or accidental or opportunity sampling) has been defined as sampling that is readily available and convenient given a population that is close at hand (De Veaux, Velleman, & Bock, 2012). After initial sampling using a convenience sample, theoretical sampling was carried out in order to fill out emerging categories. Charmaz (2006) explains an important difference between initial and theoretical sampling: “Initial sampling . . . is where you start whereas theoretical sampling directs you where to go” (p. 100). Consistent with grounded, interpretive methodologies, theoretical sampling was advantageous during the data collection and analysis cycle in order to fill out categories of codes and explore the legitimacy of those categories. This was especially relevant for determining the role of technology in the courses.

#### 3.4.2. Data collection procedures

Data collection procedures consisted of both online and in-class observations of the Spanish 301 blended courses, in-depth interviews with the teacher and key informants, and textual documents, including the teacher’s PowerPoint Presentations used for instruction. Table 3 outlines these procedures including the numbers of classes observed and interviews carried out.

#### 3.4.3. Observations

Over the course of the semester, 84 class observations were conducted over two class sections, 12 of which I taught as the teacher’s replacement while she was away at professional conferences. These in-class observations were audio taped using three audio recorders set up throughout the room. Audiovisual information from online tasks on Wednesdays and Fridays was captured using the online screen capturing software Jing™. One such image can be seen in Fig. 1. The foci of these observations remained open to all goings-on in the classroom and included specific aspects of the lessons such as: (a) interactions among students and between students and the teacher, (b) task types that the teacher chose to use as learning tools, and (c) feedback, both f2f and via online.

All audio archives from these classes were formatted into mp3 files and transcribed, totaling over 70 h of data. To supplement the recordings, I took detailed field notes during class observations, sketching the layout of the f2f classroom in order to capture information about how and which students worked together.

#### 3.4.4. Interviews

Adopting the definition of an interview as a social practice (Talmy, 2010), this study viewed interviews as having both a dual action and reflection component. These instances were opportunities for speakers to reflect upon both what they knew as well as what they did in the Spanish 301 classrooms. Interviews were theorized as a means for accessing and presenting
participants values, belief systems, perceptions, attitudes, and experiences. They were process-oriented and not only answered questions about the ‘what’ but also about the ‘how’.

Before the course began, 10 preliminary interview/planning sessions were conducted with the teacher from the Spanish 301 courses. These interviews were conducted during times when the teacher and researcher were mutually available starting eight weeks before the semester began. Eight bi-weekly interviews included reflections that occurred between the teacher and I during the semester while class was in session. The final two interviews took place after the course had ended and focused on the results of having implemented the new class format with technology. These interviews later served as the basis for understanding the implications of how technology had been integrated into the Spanish 301 courses. The ongoing interview protocol can be found in Appendix C.

After several weeks of in-class participation, I informally asked for volunteer students who would be willing to discuss their experiences in the blended Spanish 301 courses in an interview. This procedure was repeated throughout the semester with the nine key informants and was consistent with theoretical sampling procedures. The number and duration of interviews with is shown in Table 4. Interviews were designed to be open and unscripted. They focused mainly on what students found important about specific tasks, technology, and language learning in Spanish 301. A large difference can be seen in the lengths of the interviews mainly due to varying amounts of time that students had to elaborate on these areas.

3.4.5. Textual documents

Textual documents used in this study consisted of teacher PowerPoint Presentations (PPTs), assignment sheets used to guide students’ tasks in the f2f and online delivery modes, and end-of-semester student course evaluations. I used these documents to compare the ways in which content was presented to the students, the types of tasks that were carried out, and students’ reactions to the course in general.

3.5. Data analysis

Systematic coding practices are the trademark of grounded approaches to analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Coding consisted of initial coding of field notes, interview transcripts, and other textual documents. This was followed by focused coding, which enabled the initial selection of codes to be compared and tested against extensive data. This approach enabled the comparison of participants’ experiences, actions, and interpretations.

Observations allowed me to gather information about what types of technology were being used and how they were used. This led to a revision of interview protocol to meet the specific aspects that came out of the lessons. Student and teacher reflections about how technology was working to support—or in some cases undermine—learning allowed for the research question to be answered regarding the role of technology in the language classroom.

Rather than forcing data into predetermined categories, theoretical sampling gave me the flexibility to approach my data openly. In order to avoid forcing my own preexisting notions onto emerging categories, grounded ethnographic analysis emphasized reflexivity by encouraging me to construct conceptual categories from the patterns that I discovered in my data. Examples were chosen from the interview transcripts to support emerging theories surrounding the role of technology in the Spanish 301 classroom. By paying close attention to what students and the teacher said about technology use, several themes and sub-themes were constructed using student and teacher interview discourse in combination with class observations. As soon as a potential theme was identified, further examples were sought in order to fill out a category. A resultant example of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Field notes</th>
<th>Text documents</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish 301/1</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>√ PPTs, texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish 301/2</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>√ PPTs, texts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>70 h</td>
<td>~50 h</td>
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Table 3

The database.

Fig. 1. Screenshot of one writing task carried out in Google Docs.
theme construction is shown in Table 5, which illustrates how themes were constructed using theoretical sampling of class observation field notes in combination with participant reflections during in-depth interviews.

Hood describes theoretical sampling as what “allows you to tighten the corkscrew or the hermeneutic spiral so that you end up with a theory that perfectly matches your data” (Hood, as cited in Charmaz, 2006, p. 101). Theoretical sampling was undertaken later on in the semester, once middle theories had emerged from coded categories of observations, interviews, and documents. This accompanied a reevaluation of the IRB protocol in order to incorporate additional interview questions. Once having established a tentative category, theoretical sampling allowed me to follow my hunches about the data to elaborate and refine developing categories. At this point, I also asked specific key informants for additional interviews to engage in member checks in which I was able to talk more in detail with them about emerging themes.

### 3.6. Trustworthiness

The proposed study has maximized trustworthiness and credibility by carefully documenting all steps of the research process, from the preliminary details of data collection to the deep “thick” descriptions of linguistic data, analysis, and interpretation. Many strategies were used in order to increase the dependability of the study, including (a) prolonged engagement in the field, (b) data triangulation, (c) theoretical sampling, and (d) member checks. Prolonged engagement in the field included my daily observation in 42 out of the 50 class periods in a 16-week semester. Data triangulation (Creswell, 2007) included participant observation, in-depth interviews with key informants, and the analysis of textual documents including field notes, teaching materials, and student assignments. Theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a key component of grounded ethnographic research, helped me narrow and fill out categories of qualitative data based upon my interpretations of existing data. Finally, member checks, which involved discussion of emerging categories and themes with the participants of the study, helped increase the validity of my interpretations made on the basis of data analysis.

### 4. Results

The following section provides the results that serve as a basis for understanding the role that technology played in two sections of a third-year Spanish grammar and composition course. Two technological tools integrated for the first time

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Discourse examples (interviews)</th>
<th>Constructed theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Netsupport facilitates class viewing of individual student work.</td>
<td>Teacher: “They’re all making a really big effort, it’s something very positive that I’ve noticed with this change.” (Interview 10) Isla: “When she pulls up our documents on the board and in front of the class, I think that kind of pushed me to make it better because it’s going to be seen by the whole classroom, so you’re not performing to what you’re happy with your performing to what you’re happy with everyone else seeing.” (Interview 1) Kerry: “It doesn’t really make me feel uncomfortable, I think there’s always that fear, like ‘oh, I don’t know if mine’s right’ but I think that’s a good thing.” (Interview 1) Cerise: “So when she has people like that, she’ll pick on somebody and go over it, that’s helpful to know, seeing what they’re doing and I’m doing and then comparing the two and understanding not which one’s right and which one’s wrong, but seeing which fits better.” (Interview 2) Mary: “I like seeing other people’s examples, cuz it might be something I would write.” (Interview 1) Mike: “I think that’s really nice cuz instant feedback.” (Interview 1)</td>
<td>Technology serves to motivate students.</td>
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included: (a) the online grammar workbook with Netsupport and (b) Google Docs. Using NetSupport in unison with web-based tasks from the online grammar workbook, the teacher was able to take control of students’ screens, summoning up their work for correction or group examination. The use of Google Docs on writing days included a mixture of tasks including peer-to-peer and student-teacher collaborations. Participants’ views and experiences with these tools in the third-year writing course are summarized in Tables 6 and 7. Grounded ethnographic methods and discourse analysis facilitated the emergence of four main themes and nine sub-themes, which are summarized in Table 8.

4.1. To alleviate

As one of the main technologies used during the writing workshops, Google Docs allowed users to share documents and synchronously edit them together online. Four key informants stated that while at first they were critical of using Google Docs as a learning tool, they quickly grew accustomed to the role it played in their classroom experience. For example, one student said, “I used to think technology would interfere, I can keep my thoughts more complete now” (Craig, Interview 1). The idea that technology, and in particular Google Docs, permitted students to cover more content and to do more tasks in one class period was reiterated periodically throughout the semester. As Mary explained, “the computer corrects some of it so it just seems faster and more automatic, you can just do more in class” (Interview 1). Technology was a way for the teacher to maximize her energies. In order to address one of her main frustrations with the course, namely the tendency for students to fail to take her written suggestions on their rough drafts into account, the teacher hoped that technology would assist in her scaffolding of students’ writing practices. By using NetSupport to facilitate oral feedback on students’ grammar work and Google Docs for mediating this feedback, the teacher was able to personalize students’ experiences while at the same time reducing the amount of written corrections that she had to take home. Mary, when talking about NetSupport document sharing said, “it kinda gives you an idea of what you’re doing wrong too, so if you did the same thing that that person did, you’re like ‘oh this is how you do it,’ instead of her [the teacher] having to explain it to every person” (Interview 2).

4.2. To motivate

A second way that technology played a role in the Spanish 301 courses was as an incentive for students to do quality work and to keep them engaged. In the teacher’s view, technology caused a change in students’ behavior. Similar to using a document camera, Netsupport allowed the whole class to view each other’s work. Unlike a document camera, however, it provided the teacher the ability to access students’ computer screens and make changes to their work if necessary. While at first, students’ reactions to this public viewing of their screens were mixed (e.g., “that’s a little embarrassing” Craig, Interview 1; “I think that’s pretty cool” Caleb, Interview 1), after just a few weeks into the course NetSupport sharing seemed to become a common component of their classroom landscape. Mary, for example, stated, “I like seeing other people’s examples, cuz it might be something I would write” (Interview 1). As a motivating force in the classroom, technology positively pressured many students to do their best. In addition to the teacher’s belief that technology helped her become closer to students’ writing experiences, four key student informants established that the technology had helped them to stay engaged with the material. Statements such as, “I have a chance to write everything down [in the lab] and it just keeps me engaged more” (Caleb, Interview 1) and “I like being in the computer lab and being able to compare something and write something and then talking about what you wrote” (Kerry, Interview 1) showed that students believed that they benefitted from being able to establish a link between their spoken knowledge about language and their written knowledge through language.

4.3. Feedback

As forecasted by the teacher before the semester began, feedback became a primary theme in helping to effectively bridge students’ writing practices in the Spanish 301 courses. Talking about the way that technology fostered more valuable opportunities for formative assessment and feedback, she stated, “Now they are correcting their own, it’s like they have a little more pride in their writing, and that’s been because we’re using the technology for writing, a word processor, it’s not much, but it’s much more flexible” (Teacher, Interview 9). The way the teacher had students use the online workbook in class together with NetSupport allowed students to do work alongside their teacher and classmates. Here, the teacher provided input about how to complete a certain task and the principles behind a given concept. Students could then immediately put these concepts into practice by applying their new knowledge during a computer assisted language task. Reflecting on how the technology had personalized the students’ experience for her, the teacher contended that a clear

Table 6
Sample comments on How Netsupport/Online Workbook were used in Spanish 301.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment 1</th>
<th>Comment 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>“I really like when she goes through what people have written and corrects it because then it kinda gives you an idea of what you're doing wrong too, so if you did the same thing that that person did, you're like 'oh this is how you do it instead of her having to explain it to every person, it gives me more examples to go on.” (Mary, Interview 2)</td>
<td>“I think the technology has personalized their experience. I think that they feel closer, what I always believe is that the technology always helps me to get closer to their writing experience and I think that has been achieved.” (Teacher, Interview 9)</td>
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</table>
relationship existed between their writing of different texts and her own experience reading and evaluating them. Being able to do grammar and writing tasks and being able to discuss how to do (i.e., know) them with the teacher and as a group was invaluable for personalizing students’ experiences and engaging them with the course content. This knowing-doing connection was present on various levels throughout the semester and became visible through the use of Netsupport in the classroom.

4.4. Concerns

As technology continues to make life easier, in many respects students showed a growing concern about it also possibly robbing them of valuable lessons. One example of this was the automatic spell-and-grammar-check feature in Google Docs: “it’s kind of a crutch, [on the other hand] writing things down first you can see all of the errors you made yourself” (Mike, Interview 1). Students expressed another worry that using Google Docs sped up important learning processes to the point that it rendered them ineffectual. Three students mentioned that although it may have been slower and more painstaking to write comments and corrections by hand, there was an advantage to making manual revisions to one’s writing, especially if it meant that they had sufficient opportunities to understand the rationale behind their errors. “So are you really learning that or are you having it done? Who’s to say you knew that or the computer knew that for you?” (Cerise, Interview 1). The role of technology in making students miss out on important lessons and speed up their learning processes were two concerns that came up during in-depth interviews. A third concern surrounded the viewing of videos in class. Although two heritage language learners reported liking watching videos in class and being able to relate to them, seven FL learners reported disliking watching these videos Kerry, for example, said “focusing on a lot of videos, I think that that can just bog you down and then it’s easy to space out a little bit… halfway through it’s kinda easy to just check out” (Interview 2).

5. Discussion

Infusing additional technology into Spanish 301 entailed mindfully bringing specific technological tools into the classroom to help accomplish the teacher’s objective of apprenticing students into the writing process, where pedagogy drives technology and other curricular decisions (Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Tai, 2013). “Let’s make sure that we make this an experience that they will get the most feedback out of. Maybe technology and this type of approach will help us” (Teacher, Interview 5). As the teacher explained time and again, third-year Spanish students came in with a variety of strengths and weaknesses and a one-size-fits-all grammar and composition course was not serving them. Spanish 301 was redesigned to personalize students’ experiences.

Technology was used on grammar and writing days, catering to each student’s strengths and challenges. This was in line with Taylor’s (2009) principles for incorporating instructional technology into new blended classrooms including (a) keeping students first (b) starting simple, and (c) identifying and building from program principles. Using technology, the teacher was able to comply with these three important principles. Students agreed that the writing practices that they engaged in during the workshops in the language laboratory allowed them to keep their thoughts more organized. These results support the findings of Kittle and Hicks (2009) among others who have argued the advantages of using online word processors as part of the blended writing environment (Broin & Raftery, 2011; Mansor, 2011; Montero-Fleta & Perez-Sabater, 2012).

While much BL research has focused on beginning and intermediate language courses (Blake et al., 2008; Gleason, 2013a), little has been said about implementing technology to foster writing tools in third-year FL courses. As the first time that Netsupport with online workbook tasks had been incorporated into Spanish 301, technology facilitated frequent interaction among the teacher and students. Since one of the main concerns brought up in the research on BL course development has revolved around students feeling a lack of interaction with the teacher and classmates (e.g., Webb Boyd, 2008), the fact that

<table>
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<th>Table 7</th>
<th>Sample comments on how Google Docs was used in Spanish 301.</th>
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<td><strong>Advantages</strong></td>
<td><strong>Drawbacks</strong></td>
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<td>“I think it's very efficient, time-wise, it's somewhat more reliable than Word, I think it was beneficial; I feel it’s easier to write out on a computer, you start learning how to better process your ideas.” (Cerise, Interview 2)</td>
<td>“Sometimes it can be hard for me when you're going through it that quickly to really connect and say okay, why was that wrong…sometimes if the comment's on the side it's easy for me just to make the change really quickly and not really think about what the change meant or what I did wrong...it's really so much faster to do it but then you don't really say oh, well what was wrong about that; it's almost too fast in a way.” (Kerry, Interview 2)</td>
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<th>Table 8</th>
<th>Main themes and sub-themes surrounding the role of technology in Spanish 301.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To alleviate</td>
<td>As a motivator</td>
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<tr>
<td>To lighten the teacher’s load</td>
<td>Netsupport as a motivator</td>
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<tr>
<td>To lighten the students’ load</td>
<td>Technology keeps students engaged</td>
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students were motivated by the new format was extremely important. Given that other research has shown that technology can be a disincentive for students to engage with the course, this finding suggests that the way technology was harnessed by the teacher of Spanish 301 served to strengthen the lines of communication and feelings of enthusiasm among students.

The role of feedback in the blended writing classroom has been a major issue both in research on L1 writing development and in the L2. Some of the aspects investigated in this area have been the importance of oral in addition to written feedback (Krych-Appelbaum & Musial, 2007; Wolsey, 2008), the anonymity provided by written mediums (Guardado & Shi, 2007), and the importance of peer-collaboration (Roux-Rodríguez, 2003). While some literature has shown that anonymity of feedback has been a positive result of using technology in blended writing courses (e.g., Guardado & Shi, 2007), the fact that much of the peer feedback in the 301 courses was carried out orally within the classroom (and therefore precluded anonymity) could have been seen as a disadvantage of the setup. However, the role of Netsupport in the third-year courses, in addition to positively pressuring students to do their best, kept the lines of communication and interaction intact among class members. Having the teacher there to mediate student feedback may have offset the potential setback of decreased anonymity. By being present, the teacher was able to play a facilitative role to prevent confusion or lack of trust in peer commentary, a negative result in earlier studies (Wolsey, 2008).

Confusion among peers concerning the meaning of written peer feedback has been an issue broached by many blended writing researchers, who have questioned the role of technology-mediated versus f2f oral feedback in helping students revise their writing (Krych-Appelbaum & Musial, 2007; Roux-Rodríguez, 2003). This problem was avoided in the Spanish 301 courses by offering students opportunities to receive feedback in the form of written comments on the side of their electronic documents, followed by chances to discuss these comments with their teacher and peers. Overall, participants were satisfied with the high level of interaction and feedback that the course format provided.

In addition to the positive role technology played in third-year Spanish writing courses, several students brought up a potentially negative role. Several students feared that the computer was in a sense allowing them to “cheat” by providing them with automated spell-and-grammar check features and other means of mindlessly correcting their work. These findings relate to and build upon other work in the area of BL learning that focus on student perceptions (Gleason, 2013a; Mehlenbacher, et al., 1999; Webb Boyd, 2008). Although the studies that have been carried out so far on student perceptions of blended and online learning have largely been comparisons of student opinions using questionnaires or end-of-semester interviews, the present study had the advantage of being able to track students’ concerns throughout the semester in order to note changes over time. For example, students such as Caleb, who at first expressed apprehension about using technology such as Netsupport for public viewing of work, later changed his opinion.

Notwithstanding, not all students changed their negative opinions of technology’s role. Some expressed concerns in the first interview that seemed only to grow over time. Kerry brought up the issue of the excessive speed of technology for preventing her from sufficiently digesting and pondering important feedback. When receiving feedback in the form of a comment on the side of her essay, she related the problematic nature of being able to quickly click on her essay and make the change without taking the time to reflect upon how or why the change had been suggested. This both builds on and contradicts the findings of Wolsey (2008), who discovered that students in a blended writing course preferred written feedback embedded in their essays in the form of comments rather than at the end of the document.

6. Conclusion

An important issue in the research literature on BL learning surrounds how to maximize student engagement in BL courses (Myazoe & Anderson, 2010; Webb Boyd, 2008; Wolsey, 2008). Technology should not be used as a novelty but rather to help teachers fulfill important objectives. With the idea of the “flipped” classroom (e.g., Brunsell & Horejsi, 2011), which maximizes in-class time to revisit concepts and address student concerns, two types of technology implemented in the Spanish 301 courses kept students actively engaged in their learning without distracting them from the objectives of the course. As a tool for strengthening students’ conceptual knowledge, Netsupport in conjunction with online grammar tasks aided in strengthening students’ knowledge and the application of grammar concepts. Google Docs for process writing (e.g., Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) was one way that students could constantly engage in their third-year Spanish writing courses. By supporting students and facilitating the teacher’s feedback on students’ particular weaknesses and challenges, technology permitted students to engage with the course material, to take maximum advantage of their in-class writing time, and to exploit expert feedback. In light of the ways that a third-year FL course needs to unite students’ knowledge of grammar principles with their applications in real texts, students connected their reflections about language to their active applications of linguistic principles.

Third-year FL courses must be uniquely able to harness technology in ways that encourage intimacy with the teacher while at the same time promoting learner independence. As Taylor’s (2009) principles for sound implementation of instructional technology emphasize: *humans must be first*. Suffice it to say that the human relationship in third-year FL courses must be prioritized, so that technology imperceptibly falls into the background while human classroom relationships are cultivated. Given the importance of students’ successful transition to upper-level courses, the facilitative role of technology in these courses for helping to bridge the language-content divide cannot be overemphasized. A methodological

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2 Here, I define intimacy as increased time and emotional investment, where students and the teacher were engaged toward a common goal.
implication of this study includes the importance of iterative, longitudinal grounded ethnographic research carried out as collaboration with foreign language teachers. Future research focusing on how the unique specifications of technologies such as Google Docs (e.g., the sharing feature) for feedback and language development will help to extend and further interpret these results. As was shown, collaborative teacher-researcher collaboration can be mutually beneficial. Researchers can join forces with instructors to carry out grounded ethnographies that will gainfully benefit all involved.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol For Student and Teacher Participants.

For students.

How did technology play a role in the task/s from today’s/this week’s lesson/s?
Do you feel technology was used effectively for these task/s?
Tell me about your experiences with language learning with technology in this course in general.
How does technology help to complete the language learning tasks?
How does technology perhaps interfere with your language learning?
Do you feel that there is too much/not enough/just about the right amount of technology used in this course?
Do you feel the teacher makes effective use of technology?
Is there a steep learning curve for the technology used in this course? Please explain.
How do you feel about the feedback provided by the teacher in the lab and/or classroom? Is it enough.
Does the writing feedback help F2F or would you prefer in Google docs?
What do you think about the language learning task/s we have done in class so far? Possible task types we’ve done so far:
   Youtube videos and class discussion, Quia grammar activities, Summarizing sources, outlines in Google docs
What was your favorite task/s?
What was least favorite task/s?
How would you improve the task/s?
How do the tasks in face-to-face differ from those online?
Which day do you prefer: Mon. culture, Wed. grammar, or Fri. writing?

For instructor.

How does technology play a role in your lessons?
Do you think that you made an effective use of technology with the language learning tasks?
Tell me about your experiences with language learning with technology in this course in general.
How does technology help students complete the language learning tasks?
How does technology perhaps interfere with students’ language learning?
Do you feel that there is too much/not enough/just about the right amount of technology used in this course?
Do you feel the students use the technology effectively?
Do you feel that students have a steep learning curve for the technology used in this course? Please explain.
Do you feel that you receive enough support, technical or otherwise, when you have technology questions or problems?
Did you receive any or enough special instructor training to enable you to use the technology required for carrying out lessons or other tasks for this course?
Describe some of the differences in the ways that students respond to tasks involving technology versus those that are carried out face-to-face.
What, if any, problems have you or your students encountered, with online tasks?
What role does technology play in the language learning of Spanish students?
How has technology been incorporated into these courses over the past five or 10 years?
Do you feel pressure to incorporate more technology into these courses?
Do you feel pressure to create more online courses?
What have been some of the consequences of incorporating increased amounts of technology into these courses?
How have instructors/students reacted to increased incorporation of technology?
Have you had any special issues with technology in these courses that stand out in your mind?
What technological support is provided to you for teaching the Spanish 301 courses?
Do you feel enough technological support is provided you?
What technological support is provided to students?
Do you feel student are provided with enough technological support?
What sort of theory, if any, is or has been incorporated in the creation/implementation of technology-based tasks/assessment? (e.g., CALL, SLA, etc.)?
Appendix B

IRB Consent Document With Different Levels of Student Participation

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: The Language of Tasks and Technology in Blended Spanish Classrooms

Investigator: Jesse Gleason (jgleas@iastate.edu)

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to look at how language students interact in the foreign language classroom. I am particularly interested in the role of technology in these practices and in understanding student and teacher attitudes about language learning in blended courses. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are enrolled in Spanish 301 at ISU. You should not participate if you are under 18 years of age and/or not affiliated with the Spanish program.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to allow me to observe your Spanish classes throughout the spring semester 2013 as well as audio-record your interactions during various language-learning tasks. I will visit and audio-record all class meetings but it is your decision if you would like the recorder placed near you at any given time. Throughout the semester, some students will also be invited to be interviewed about their ideas and attitudes toward language learning. In addition, you will have the option of granting me access to your in-class and online assignments and test results.

You have the right to decline the invitation and/or participate in the study to varying degrees as indicated below. Please put a check (✓) in the box to indicate the degree of participation that you agree to.

☑ Full participation. This includes all online and face-to-face interactions, copied assignments and tests, audio-taping, and interviews.

☐ Stage 1 participation. This includes online and face-to-face interactions only.

☐ Stage 2 participation. This includes online and face-to-face interactions, and interviews.

☐ Stage 3 participation. This includes online and face-to-face interactions, interviews, and copies of assignments but no copies of tests.

☐ No participation.

RISKS

Your participation in this study is not likely to cause you any risk or discomfort.

BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study there may be no direct benefits to you beyond having the opportunity to include another fluent Spanish speaker in your context. However, your input about the role of technology and tasks in Spanish courses at the university level can benefit future instructors, curriculum designers, and students by providing for a deeper understanding of these aspects, as well as how to improve such courses.

Office for Responsible Research
Revised 06/14/10
Appendix C

Teacher-Researcher Contract.

October 13, 2012
Ames, IA USA

I, Jesse Gleason, agree to uphold the following contract regarding data collection in two of Dr. [redacted] Spanish 301 courses in the World Languages Department at Iowa State University during the Spring semester of 2013. I will use the collected data from these courses to fulfill the dissertation requirements for the Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics and Technology at Iowa State University.

1. At all points, the right to participate in this collaboration is reserved if she or he feels that it negatively interferes with any point.
2. Only the students that accept to participate will do so and will not force them to participate.
3. Communication between Jesse, Gleason, and the instructor reserves is key. Jesse Gleason vows to inform each of the steps of data to be collected prior to its collection. She will also inform in the time and format of the collection of data reserves.
4. The researcher, Jesse Gleason, will tell in advance if she plans to make an admission of error, or to have a dialogue with other faculty and administrators involving the researcher.

Signed: ____________________________
Date: Oct. 13, 2012

References
