

An Examination of How Instructors Manage Their Time in a Foreign Language Blended Class

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Abstract

This study examines the time factor in a blended first-semester Spanish course taught at a university in the United States. This course enrolled 60 students. Time was examined in terms of where instructors' time was allocated when 50% of the face-to-face teaching was replaced with online activities. The results indicate that instructors do not need to work more time than they do in a traditional course, but the course coordinator has to allocate additional time to the set-up of the master course. The perception reported by instructors that they seem to work for longer to manage a blended course may be a consequence of the increased frequency of certain tasks and how they are managed. In other words, more effort may be needed to manage a blended class while operating within the same time frame as in a traditional class. The study also shows that blended teaching requires allocating time into new tasks.

1. Introduction

Where time is allocated in blended instruction is particularly relevant to foreign language teaching because in-class time in traditional classes affords students the opportunity to speak the language and makes it possible for instructors to present course material such as grammar, which students usually find difficult to study on their own. An equally important aspect of time is the time for which instructors and graduate teaching assistants receive financial compensation. This is an aspect of time, as it relates to online and blended teaching, that needs continued discussion as administrators may not be fully aware of how the mode of delivery may impact instructors' time and therefore they may underestimate the potential for online teaching to be more expensive if the nature of certain courses demand more instructional time when delivered in a virtual format.

1.1. Time versus cognitive effort

Although measuring cognitive effort is not within the scope of the present study, acknowledging its role is relevant to understanding that time measurements as reported by instructors in this and other studies [2, 8, 9] offer limited insight on how blended instruction, as opposed to traditional instruction, may impact instructors' workload beyond the mere logistics of the time allocated to the different tasks.

Cognitive effort is a multi-faceted psychology construct that depends on a number of factors such as practice in the task at hand, perceived difficulty of a task, cognitive ability, and conscientiousness [10]. One method used by psychologists to infer levels of cognitive effort is to observe signs of mental fatigue. Instructors who believe that online teaching requires more effort, and even those who report more time commitment, may in fact have experienced that this kind of teaching demands a more intense level of cognitive activity.

1.2. Time

In the present study the term time is used to refer to time on task. Since the publication of the NEA [6]'s survey, which led to the conclusion that online teaching was more time-consuming than traditional

instruction, a number of studies have been conducted in an effort to determine whether or not non-traditional ways of delivering instruction require more time commitment on the part of instructors. These studies have yielded contradictory results [1, 2, 8, 9]. The conflicting results may merely be a reflection of the different nature of the subject matter addressed in the courses used to collect data. The present study will show results that learn support to this explanation. Courses that require a lot of paragraph-length writing may require more instructor's time if the delivery and feedback are carried out electronically as opposed to physically. On the other hand, a course that revolves around a ready-to-use electronic packet as prepared by a publisher, may take less time to set up than a course whose materials have to be researched, selected one piece at a time, and finally uploaded to a course management system.

The purpose of this study is to answer the question of whether or not a blended first-semester Spanish course enrolling 60 students, that is, twice the enrollment size of a traditional course, can be taught within the time frame of 135 hours per semester. The main difference between the two teaching environments is that while traditional course instructors meet with their students twice a week for 75 minutes, blended course instructors meet with their students once a week for 75 minutes. Another difference is that traditional course students are not graded on online activities whereas blended course students have to complete machine-graded online activities.

2. Method

The present study's approach to analyzing instructors' time allocation departs from previous studies in that it does not present a comparison between time logs associated with a traditional course and a parallel online or blended course. The data collection was approached by taking as a reference the time frame of 135 hours per semester, which is the amount of time that traditional first-semester Spanish instructors put into teaching one course in a given semester at UNCC. The data was collected in spring 2010.

2.1. Participants

Three instructors participated in the data collection. One instructor was a full-time lecturer. She was the coordinator of the first-semester Spanish program. Another instructor was teaching part-time. The third instructor was a tenured faculty member.

2.2. Materials and Procedure

The instruments used to keep track of non-grading events that happened outside of class were two logs where instructors had to enter a check every time an event occurred. These logs were submitted to the researcher every week. The calculation of the time estimates is described in the analysis section.

From the outset it was realized that a sizeable component of instructors' time allocation in a first-semester Spanish traditional course was the time spent on grading and that this amount of time would double in the blended course enrolling twice the number of students. Therefore adjustments were made to the number of pieces that the instructor would have to grade. The details of these adjustments are provided in the analysis section.

2.3. Analysis

The adjustments to the number of graded pieces in the blended course were made by calculating the time necessary to grade the different pieces. This calculation was made by timing the grading of the specific pieces for half of the class and dividing it by the number of students, thereby obtaining the

average amount of time to grade one piece. See table 1 for a comparison between grading time in a traditional class and in a blended class.

Table 1. Estimate of Grading Time in Traditional and Blended First-Semester Spanish Courses

Graded Piece	Traditional Course (grading time per student per semester)	Blended Course (grading time per student per semester)
Exam 1	15 minutes	15 minutes
Exam 2	15 minutes	15 minutes
Exam 3	15 minutes	-----
Exam 4	15 minutes	-----
Final Exam (75% machine-graded multiple-choice, 25% open-ended answers manually graded)	10 minutes	10 minutes
Listening Lab Quiz 1	3 minutes	-----
Listening Lab Quiz 2	3 minutes	-----
Listening Lab Quiz 3	3 minutes	-----
Listening Lab Quiz 4	3 minutes	-----
Listening Lab Quiz 5	3 minutes	-----
Composition 1 (one draft) (50 or 60-words)	5 minutes	5 minutes
Composition 2 (one draft) (50 or 60-words)	5 minutes	5 minutes
Composition 3 (one draft) (50 or 60-words)	5 minutes	-----
Total Grading Time per Student per Semester	100 minutes (or 1 ½ hours)	50 minutes
Total Grading Time per Course per Semester	50 hours	50 hours

By eliminating eight of the pieces that used to be graded in the traditional course, grading time was kept at the same level in the blended course as in traditional courses.

In order to keep track of the non-grading activities, instructors were asked to use a log where they needed to mark with a check the occurrence of the following eight types of event: 1) checking students progress with their online work (online progress), 2) emailing students about their progress (email on progress), 3) phone counseling, 4) face-to-face counseling (f2f counseling), 5) reading emails from students, 6) responding to students' emails (email to student), 7) reading students' postings (reading student posting), and 8) writing postings (instructor posting).

Instructors did not need to log in time. The time for each event was estimated by calculating average length of written communication, average writing speed, average reading speed, and average counseling time. The calculations were made by assuming a reading speed of 225 words per minute and a typing speed of 40 words per minute, and the average length of each email and posting was calculated at 50 words. For background on these estimates, see [3, 7, 8].

3. Results and Discussion

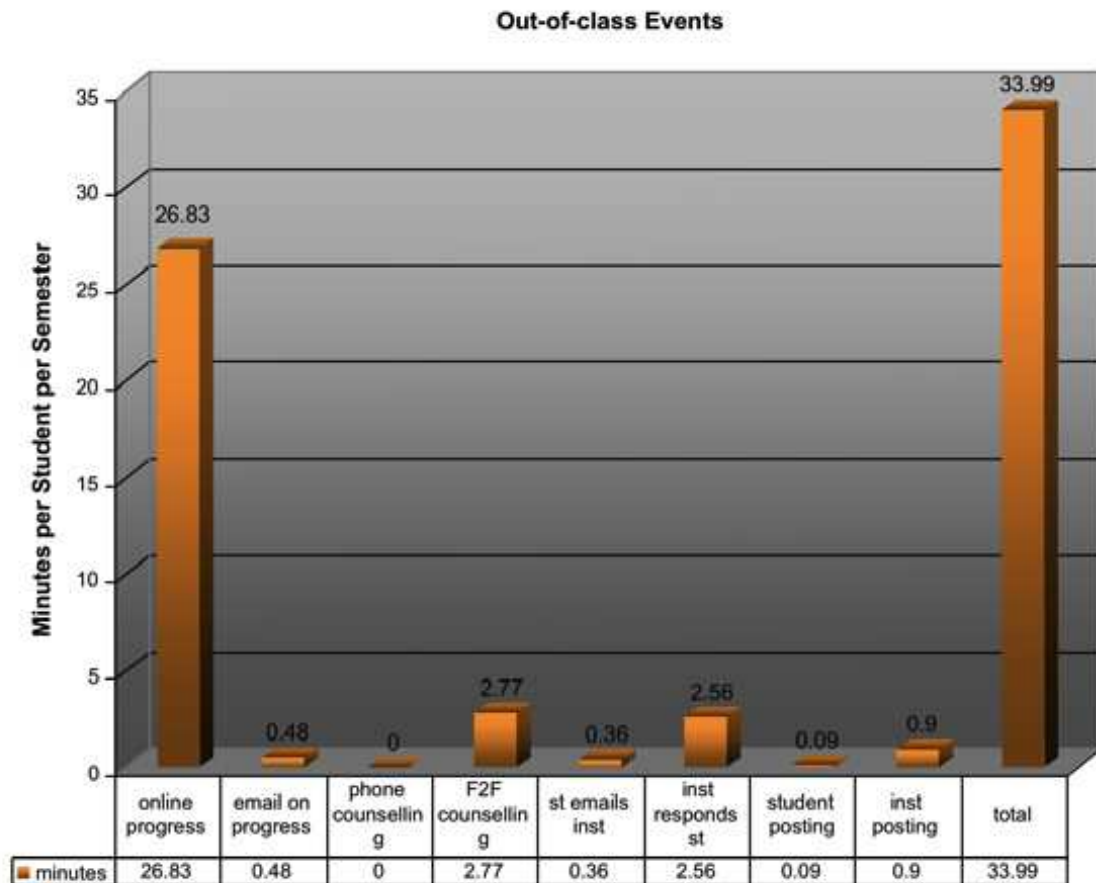
The results in table 2 show that instructors needed to allocate an average of 33.99 minutes per student per semester to tasks that occurred outside of class and did not involve grading. Therefore, instructors spent some 34 hours per course to attend to out-of-class tasks that did not involve grading.

The largest number of emails occurred during the first two and last two weeks of classes. This result is consistent with similar findings reported in another study [4].

Table 2. Average Number of Minutes per Type of Event per Student per Semester

Type of Event	Instructor 1 (115 students) minutes/student	Instructor 2 (79 students) minutes/student	Instructor 3 (58 students) minutes/student	Instructors Average minutes/student
online progress	27	31.5	22	26.83
email on progress	.33	.44	.66	.48
phone counseling	0	0	0	0
f2f counseling	3.52	2.47	2.33	2.77
email from student	.45	.26	.36	.36
email to student	2.96	1.98	2.73	2.56
student posting	.12	.10	.04	.09
instructor posting	1.43	.46	.80	.90
Total	35.81	37.22	28.93	33.99

Figure 1. Estimated Average Number of Minutes per Student in one Semester



4. Conclusion

The time allocation breakdown per course per semester turned out to be as follows: 50 hours of grading, 34 hours of out-of-class tasks, 18 hours of face-to-face instruction, and 27 hours of class preparation. Therefore instructors spent some 129 hours to manage all the tasks involved in teaching a course. This result leads to conclude that the blended first-semester Spanish course could be taught within the traditional course time frame of 135 hours.

What is not apparent from these results is information about instructors' amount of effort. Nevertheless, a mere look at the tasks listed in table 2 can provide a hint that instructors may have had to engage in rapid task-switching that may have contributed to increasing fatigue and diminishing stamina [5]. Another aspect of blended teaching that is not readily visible in this study is the need to build in periodical training so that instructors learn how to navigate four virtual spaces that are not fully integrated: the e-materials, the Moodle space that instructors use to communicate with their classes, the email system, and the Moodle space that instructors use to communicate with their coordinator. The time spent switching between virtual spaces is another factor that surely taxed instructors' time. All these factors led to redefining instructors' time dedication and compensation. Currently, instructors teaching blended first-semester Spanish courses enrolling 60 students are compensated for 180 hours per semester.

Future studies will have to examine the expanded and more critical roles of the coordinator of blended foreign language courses.

5. Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge that this study was made possible thanks to the contributions of UNCC Department of Languages and Culture Studies' instructors Maria Mahaffey, Carlos Coria, and Lorena Delgadillo, coordinators Adriana Vega-Hidalgo and Sandra Watts, associate chair Ann Gonzalez, UNCC Center for Teaching and Learning colleagues Garvey Pyke and Jaesoon An, and a UNCC SoTL grant.

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