"Leveling the Playing Field:” The Effects of Online Second Language Instruction on Student Willingness to Communicate in French

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ABSTRACT
Second language (L2) instruction in the United States has in recent history experienced significant change. Instead of emphasizing grammatical accuracy, L2 teachers are now asked to focus on developing student communication skills. Furthermore, L2 classrooms are being transformed via the growth of computer-mediated instruction. Traditional, face-to-face L2 classrooms are frequently being supplemented (or even replaced) by online instruction. Despite these two relatively recent phenomena, little research conducted in North America has investigated the effect of one change on the other. In this study the researchers investigated the effects of online L2 instruction on student willingness to communicate in the L2. Six postsecondary students taking an online French course completed a questionnaire at the beginning and the end of the semester and had their communication in the L2 monitored over the course of the semester. The results were then further explored during student interviews. Results indicated that not only did the online environment help to reduce L2 anxiety and increase perceived competence in the language but also was able to meet the varying needs of the diverse students.

KEYWORDS
Online Learning, Willingness to Communicate, French, Anxiety, Perceived Competence, Heritage Language Learners

INTRODUCTION
Second language (L2) instruction in the United States has experienced significant changes in the past 20 years and continues to evolve today. During this time, teaching methodologies have been modified to reflect both the emphasis on developing communication skills in the L2 and the ever-increasing presence of computer-mediated L2 instruction.

Indicative of the shift in focus toward developing communicative competence in the target language, the grammar-translation approach to teaching second languages, characterized by students sitting quietly in rows memorizing rules and practicing verb conjugations, has been almost completely replaced by more communicative methods. Communicative language teaching (CLT), with its emphasis on real-world, authentic tasks and interaction in the target language, has been the dominant approach to teaching second languages for the past two decades (Brown, 2007). Differentiating itself from some of the previous methods of teaching second languages that focused on accuracy and failed to develop oral communication skills...
in the target language, CLT emphasizes meaning over accuracy and encourages students to interact in the target language. The primary goal of CLT is to develop communicative competence in L2 students.

Another more recent and equally significant change in L2 teaching methodology has been the integration of technology and computer-mediated language learning. The availability and variety of instructional technologies have increased in all academic disciplines during the past decade (Thorne & Payne, 2005). Over this time period, information technology in general has developed to offer more collaborative and communicative features than previous generations of technologies that were used primarily to store and organize information (Arnold & Ducate, 2006). In particular for L2 instruction, new technologies such as blogs, wikis, discussion forums, and social networking sites offer rich opportunities for CLT by allowing language learners to use the target language with peers and with native speakers. In addition to being transformed in recent years via such dramatic advancements in technology, traditional, face-to-face L2 classrooms are now competing with the growing presence of online L2 instruction (Matsumura & Hann, 2004; Meskill & Anthony, 2007; Nunan, 1999). In an article discussing the role of technology in L2 teacher education programs, Luke and Britten (2007) reported that advancements in computer-based technologies will continue to play an expanding role in all aspects of L2 learning.

Given these two major shifts in L2 instruction, the focus on developing communication skills and the growth of computer-mediated L2 instruction, the obvious question that emerges is what effect one might have on the other. Specifically, will the growth of online L2 instruction be a benefit or hurdle in the development of oral communication skills?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus on communication skills has also been reflected in L2 acquisition research. Much research in recent years has focused on willingness to communicate in the target language as an important factor in L2 acquisition (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2002; MacIntyre & Clément, 1996; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998). As defined by MacIntyre et al. (1998), willingness to communicate refers to an individual’s readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person. For example, students who are ready and willing to communicate in the L2 are more likely to interact in the target language, receive comprehensible input in the language, and, as a result, improve their L2 skills. Highlighting the importance of a learner’s willingness to communicate, one of the most influential researchers in the field of L2 acquisition, Dörnyei (2001), stated that generating a willingness to communicate is one of the most central goals in L2 teaching.

Numerous studies have reported that the two best predictors of one’s willingness to communicate in the target language are perceived competence in the L2 and language anxiety (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre & Clément, 1996). Perceived competence refers to an individual’s judgment of his/her capabilities to carry out successfully the action required in various tasks (Bandura, 1986). Several studies have found a significant relationship between perceived competence and motivation. Learners who feel they are likely to succeed are more motivated to learn than those who expect failure (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; James, 1996; Kissau, 2006).

Intricately intertwined with perceived competence is the notion of anxiety, or feelings of uneasiness, frustration, and self-doubt (Oxford, 1999). Components of language anxiety include communication apprehension, fear of negative social evaluation, and test anxiety. Researchers have demonstrated that language anxiety can have a negative effect on the
language learning process (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). For example, individuals who have a high level of French class anxiety may not believe that they have the ability to master the language and therefore may not be motivated to put forth the effort to learn the language.

Research has consistently shown strong negative correlations between a willingness to communicate and both anxiety and perceived competence (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). Simply put, the greater the anxiety and the lower the perceived competence, the less likely is the person to communicate. People who perceive themselves to lack the necessary skills in the target language and who experience fear and anxiety about using it tend to avoid communicating in the L2. In such circumstances a vicious cycle may develop. Individuals with higher anxiety and lower perceived competence will likely be less willing to communicate, and, when people avoid communication, they deprive themselves of the opportunity to improve their proficiency. Without an improvement in proficiency, it is unlikely these people will experience a reduction in anxiety or an increase in perceived competence.

Naiman, Frölich, Stern, and Todesco (1979) supported this notion in their seminal report describing the good language learner. According to the researchers, good language learners go beyond passive attendance in learning environments. They actively pursue language learning opportunities. Anxious students with low levels of perceived competence, who as a result are less willing to communicate in the target language, are at a considerable disadvantage compared to less anxious and more confident peers.

As anxiety and perceptions of competence in the L2 may be influenced by the face-to-face nature of traditional L2 classrooms in which students are required to communicate in the L2 in front of their peers, it could be hypothesized that online discussion may help alleviate student anxiety, increase perceptions of competence, and thus generate a greater willingness to communicate in the L2. According to Cummings, Katoku, Nichols, and Russell (2001), online instruction is less threatening than face-to-face interaction, giving students more freedom to voice their opinions, practice the language, and improve their skills.

Supporting this claim, research by Beauvois (1997, 1998) involving fourth-semester French students reported that the students who had engaged in only asynchronous electronic text-based discussions of course material performed significantly better on oral exams than did the students who discussed the material in class. The researcher suggested the results were due to the fact that in electronic discussions all students can and usually do participate more actively due to a low stress atmosphere, resulting in greater use of the target language.

A more recent study by Arnold (2007) found further anxiety-related benefits of online L2 discussion. In this study, the researcher compared communication apprehension in a third-semester German class as it was associated with different modes of communication. The study compared face-to-face in-class discussions, online synchronous chat discussions, and online asynchronous discussions. Results indicated that online communication, both synchronous and asynchronous, helped to reduce student anxiety in oral communication situations.

Several other recent studies, all coming out of Japan and involving Japanese students learning English as a foreign language (EFL), have also demonstrated communicative advantages to online L2 instruction. Cummings (2004), for example, set out to investigate whether an online environment would alleviate student stress and improve the quantity and quality of writing in an EFL writing course in rural Japan. The researcher set up an asynchronous internet classroom and also communicated with the students via campus email. Although Cummings could not state with certainty that the students’ writing skills had improved significantly over
the 14-week course, she did notice an improved attitude toward communicating in English; the students appeared more confident in using the language and were writing more than was required of them by the end of the course.

Similar results were reported in a study by Freiermuth and Jarrell (2006) that compared the experiences of groups of Japanese EFL students communicating via online asynchronous discussion with those communicating in a traditional face-to-face setting. The online experience was rated much more favorably by the students. The most common reason provided for this favorable rating was the decrease in anxiety provided by the online venue. Students claimed it was easier to communicate when they did not know their classmates and when they could not see their faces. The students also greatly appreciated the additional time for reflection before answering that is characteristic of online instruction. On the other hand, students in the face-to-face classroom stated that they often felt intimidated to communicate in the L2 in front of peers who had stronger English skills and who tended to dominate the conversation. Quite the opposite was true in the online discussion. Less experienced and less proficient English speakers wanted to communicate with the more advanced students as a way to improve their skills in the language.

Of course, not all online L2 experiences were reported to be positive. Although the participants in the study by Freiermuth and Jarrell (2006) felt that a greater amount of language output took place in the online setting, several commented that students were simply stating what they wanted to say and that there was no real meaningful discussion. Furthermore, the lag time in discussion was reported to result in contributions that were out of sequence, causing some confusion among participants. According to Abrams (2003b), the anonymity provided via online discussions also has its drawbacks. This researcher reported instances during online discussions in a German class of students using sarcasm, insults, and aggressive or offensive language.

While the above-mentioned studies all report the anxiety-related benefits of online instruction in enhancing one’s willingness to communicate, another study of Japanese origin pointed out that online instruction can actually lead to greater anxiety among some L2 learners. Matsumura and Hann (2004) stated that the expansion of technology into L2 classrooms has been accompanied by a growing number of students who experience anxiety when required to use computers. Results of their study indicated that students who were anxious about using computers tended to avoid some communication tasks and preferred to communicate face-to-face with the instructor. The researchers emphasized the need for L2 instructors to recognize computer anxiety and to create an environment where such individuals are not seriously disadvantaged.

As technology continues to advance and as universities attempt to increase enrollments and meet the needs of nontraditional students with families and careers, the number of postsecondary online L2 classes will surely grow. As a case in point, over the past year one of the researchers involved in this study was awarded two separate grants to develop postsecondary online L2 classes to compete with other universities offering online L2 instruction and to recruit additional students. Although no data are currently available specific to the growth of online L2 courses within the United States, Allen and Seaman (2007) state that the number of online students, overall, has more than doubled in the past four years and that academic leaders overwhelmingly perceive student demand for online learning to be growing.

Despite the imminent growth in popularity of online L2 classes, a review of related literature uncovered very little research on the relationship between online L2 instruction and willingness to communicate in the L2. Compounding this limited research, the related studies that do exist often involve Japanese students learning English and therefore may not be
directly applicable to L2 learners in the United States. Responding to this lack of research, the purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of online instruction on postsecondary students’ willingness to communicate in French.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Design**

To examine the effects of online course participation and degrees of perceived competence and anxiety to communicate in French, the researchers chose a mixed method design to explore the complex social phenomena at play. Namely, an explanatory mixed method design (Creswell, 2002) was used in which the researchers collected quantitative data that were used to inform the qualitative data collection. First, surveys consisting of only close-ended questions were administered at the beginning and end of the course (see questionnaire in Appendix A). Next, the survey data were analyzed to look for areas of differences that may have occurred over the semester. The researchers used these data to create a set of follow-up, open-ended interview questions for the students to clarify their perceptions. It was the goal of the researchers to examine and compare the data collected from the student interviews in order to support the survey findings and to detect emerging themes that help explain the findings.

**Participants**

Students enrolled in an intermediate to advanced-level online French course offered at a large public university in the southeastern United States were invited to participate in the study. Due to the small number of students studying French at this institution and the optional nature of the online course, the sample size was small: a total of six students enrolled in the course in the spring of 2008. All six agreed to participate in the study. Although the sample size was small, the students represented a diverse group of individuals. Even though the course was an undergraduate course, the age of the students ranged from 29 to 57. This is not extremely unusual for this particular university, which is a city campus and serves many nontraditional students.

Four of the students were heritage learners of French who had been living in the United States for an extended period of time and had not used the French language as their primary language for many years. Three of these four students were originally from Africa, and the fourth had moved to the United States from Haiti more than 20 years ago. The two remaining students were from the United States and had studied French in high school, but given their ages, this experience was a long time in the past.

As a result of their diverse life experiences, the six students possessed a wide range of proficiency levels in French. Even among the heritage learners of French, there were significant differences in French language skills. During conversations with one of the French-speaking researchers prior to conducting the interviews, it was apparent that all four heritage learners could speak very well in French. However, their writing skills, as demonstrated in their online postings, varied greatly. Three of the four expressed some trepidation to the researchers about using the language after an extended lapse in use and stated that their skills were somewhat rusty. It was also observed during course participation that the two American-born students had the weakest French skills. One of these students had twice spent a month living in France but had taken very few previous French courses at the postsecondary level. The other American-born student was also taking a French literature course at the time of the
study but prior to that semester had not taken a French course in over 10 years. Five of the students were female and one was male. For all six students involved in the study, this was their first online course. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the students.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Heritage learner</th>
<th>Absence from French-speaking community</th>
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<td>28</td>
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Course Description

The course was offered completely online and served to introduce students to the possibility of a career in teaching French in a K-12 setting and to further develop their language skills. The development and teaching of the course was facilitated by the involvement of a faculty member with a joint position in both the College of Education and the Department of Language and Culture Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences at the postsecondary institution involved in the study. The 3-credit hour, semester long course was offered to undergraduate students with an intermediate to advanced level of proficiency in the French language. As part of the course, students were required to complete 10 modules of work that addressed various aspects associated with teaching a foreign language in an elementary, middle or secondary school. All topics were introductory in nature, yet still exposed students to the following topics: (a) teaching methodologies, (b) communicative language teaching, (c) factors influencing L2 acquisition, (d) motivation, (e) classroom management, (f) the integration of French culture in the classroom, (g) the use of technology in L2 learning, (h) assessment, (i) the standard course of study for L2 instruction, and (j) lesson planning. In each module, students were assigned online readings and were required to respond to related questions via online postings. Students were also required to respond to the comments made by their classmates in each of the 10 modules in order to encourage discussion. This component of the course represented 50% of the final grade. Students were also presented in each module with a realistic case study drawn from K-12 foreign language classrooms that required them to apply the knowledge they gained in the module. This expectation represented 25% of the final grade. The rubric (translated into English) used to assess student work with respect to both of these course components is provided in Appendix B. The rubric assessed comprehension of the related content, provision of details and examples to support ideas, completion of work by the given deadline, contribution to the discussion, and quality of written French. With respect to quality of written French, the students were not penalized for each individual written error but rather were assessed as to whether or not the number and severity of errors impeded comprehension of the message. This global approach to evaluating writing was used to encourage students to work on improving the grammatical accuracy of their writing while at the same time allowing them to use the language creatively without fear of making minor errors. The third component of the course, representing the final 25% of the course grade, required students to spend 10 hours observing in a K-12 French classroom. All readings and communication were done in French.
Questionnaire

At the beginning of the semester, students completed a survey that was designed to measure their perceived competence and anxiety to communicate in the L2 (see Appendix A). As previously noted, perceived competence and anxiety are believed to be the two best predictors of an individual’s willingness to communicate in the target language (MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre & Clément, 1996). At the end of the semester, the same questionnaire was re-administered as a posttest to see what effect, if any, enrollment and participation in the online course had on students’ perceived competence and anxiety to communicate in French. The questionnaire was conducted online and required approximately 20 minutes to complete.

The survey was constructed using two different measures that had been found in the literature, and both had been reported to have strong face and predictive validities. The first measure was the Situational Communication Apprehension Measure (Richmond, 1978), which was used to determine each student’s degree of anxiety to communicate in French. There were 20 questions regarding how students feel when communicating in French. Students indicated their attitudes on a 5-point Likert scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) to such items as, “I feel relaxed,” or, “I feel insecure.” The measure has a reported alpha reliability of .90.

The second measure used in the survey, the Self-Perceived Communication Competence Scale (SPCC) was designed by McCroskey and McCroskey (1988), and was used to explore the students’ perceived competence to communicate in French. The SPCC’s questions centered around different situations in which learners could find themselves needing to use French. The instructions for this portion of the survey noted that individuals “abilities to communicate effectively vary a lot, and sometimes the same person is more competent to communicate in one situation than in another.” Students indicated how competent they believed themselves to be in each of the situations described: a score of 0 would indicate completely incompetent and a score of 100 would indicate completely competent. The SPCC has a reported alpha reliability estimate of .85.

Total Language Output

As an additional indicator of a student’s willingness to communicate in French, the number of words posted by the students in French throughout the course was calculated. If it were determined that students were writing more or less in French as the course progressed, this too would provide evidence to suggest that participation in the course affected their willingness to communicate in the L2. Total language output has been considered in several studies investigating willingness to communicate in a L2 setting (Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006; Porter, 1986; Varonis & Gass, 1985). Freiermuth and Jarrell, for example, in their study comparing Japanese students’ willingness to communicate in English in face-to-face and online environments, counted the number of English words the students used to solve tasks.

Interviews

Once the data from both pre- and posttest questionnaires were analyzed, the quantitative findings from the questionnaires were then elaborated upon by means of personal interviews with all students. The interviews each took approximately 15 to 30 minutes to complete and were conducted by one of the researchers after the semester had ended and students had received their final grades. Interview questions were generated from the survey results (see interview questions in Appendix C). Students were initially asked questions with the intent
of validating the findings from the survey data and word count data measured earlier in the study. For example, with respect to anxiety, students were asked if their level of anxiety to communicate in French changed over the course of the semester. Depending upon their answers, students were then asked to speculate why, in their opinion, they felt more or less anxious to communicate in French. Next, the students were asked what components of the online course, if any, contributed to their increase or decrease in anxiety to communicate in French and whether they had any suggestions how the course could be modified to reduce their anxiety.

Data Analysis

A repeated measures t test was used to examine the effect of participation in the online French course on student perceived competence and anxiety to communicate in French. This type of test is used frequently in educational research in cases when a single sample of individuals is measured more than once on the same dependent variables. In the case of this study, student responses at the beginning of the semester to the items pertaining to perceived competence and anxiety were compared to their responses to the same items at the end of the semester. In all cases, in order for differences to be considered significant, the significance level was set at .05. Cohen’s d (1988) was used as a measure of effect size.

To determine whether there was an increase in the amount of French being used by the students over the course of the semester, the number of words in French posted by the students during online course discussions was tabulated. Students were required to complete a total of 10 modules of work in the online course, and each module contained two questions that the students were to discuss with their classmates in the online environment. In addition, students were required to respond to a case study in each module in which they were asked to apply the knowledge they gained in the module. To gauge whether or not the students’ willingness to communicate changed over the course of the semester the number of written words in French posted by each student in the first five modules was tabulated as was the number of total words posted in the last five modules. The word total for the first five modules for each student was then compared with the corresponding total for the last five modules.

The data provided by the interviews were also analyzed. Consistent with data analysis procedures in grounded theory (Glaser, 1992), the data were coded. In other words, comparisons were made between the data obtained looking for themes to emerge. During the coding of the data obtained from the interviews certain core themes emerged and were noted by the researchers.

RESULTS

Quantitative Data

There was improvement in the overall perceived competence of the students from the beginning of the semester (M = 83.01, SD = 20.26) to the end of the semester (M = 90.04, SD = 11.12). The difference, however, was not statistically significant (t(5) = 1.77, p = .14, d = 0.72). The results from the surveys, therefore, did not demonstrate that the students perceived themselves to be more confident in their abilities to communicate in French at the end of the online course than they were at the beginning of the course.

Keeping in mind that a high score indicates a less anxious student, there was also an improvement with respect to the level of anxiety students experienced when communicat-
ing in French at the beginning of the semester (\( M = 4.20, SD = 0.58 \)) compared to the end of the semester (\( M = 4.33, SD = 0.62 \)). The difference, however, was again not statistically significant (\( t(5) = 0.97, p = .38, d = 0.40 \)). The survey results did not demonstrate that the students perceived themselves to be less anxious to communicate in French at the end of the online course than they were at the beginning of the course.

In addition to comparing their pre- and posttest scores for perceived competence and anxiety, change in the students’ willingness to communicate was also gauged by the amount of French they actually used over the course of the semester. As shown in Table 2, the amount of student output in French increased in the last five modules when compared to the first five modules. While only slight increases of 174 and 30 words were noted for Students 4 and 5, respectively, more substantial increases were observed in the use of French by Students 1, 2, 3, and 6. The amount of French used by Participant 2, for example, increased by more than 50% in the second half of the course, from 672 words to 1025.

### Table 2

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Participant 1</th>
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### Qualitative Data

The qualitative data obtained during interviews were successful in shedding light on issues that were less apparent in the survey results. For example, although significant differences were not reported in the quantitative phase of the study, during the interviews both nonnative and heritage speakers of French indicated that the online discussion did in fact reduce their level of anxiety to communicate in French and increased their perceived competence in the target language.

### Anxiety level

The nonnative and less proficient speakers of French felt more comfortable communicating in French in the online forum, even among a majority of heritage language learners. As the course progressed and students became more comfortable with the online environment,
they felt that the emphasis was placed on the quality of their ideas and not the accuracy of their French. Furthermore, these students explained that the additional time allowed by the asynchronous communication alleviated their anxiety because it allowed them time to reflect on their responses and to consult dictionaries and grammar-based resources to verify their language use.

Participant 2, a nonnative speaker, stated, “You can allow just to completely relax. You are not going to make a fool of yourself trying to say something that you do not know yet. You can translate it, try to learn it, and understand.” The other nonnative student (Participant 6) echoed this sentiment, explaining that she felt less anxious in an online discussion because she had more time to prepare an answer. She attributed nervousness in her face-to-face class to a “lack of confidence in the skills” and stated “You know you get intimidated when you are around people who are so much more fluent.” She felt the online environment “leveled the playing field” between the nonnative students and the heritage learners, stating “I don’t know as much as [name of heritage speaker in class] but I had the time to take my hour planning period and look up those words I’m missing and put it together.”

Participant 2 identified the general format of the online course as alleviating her anxiety. The format which presented the content for each module significantly reduced her anxiety because it allowed her to “get her mind around” the topic, study it, and prepare an answer. She elaborated on how the need to respond quickly in face-to-face classes can have the effect of impeding nonnative students from participating more.

I can see it in my French lit class. I know there are people like myself. We would all sit there and unless the few students that are majors or had been in continual French classes, a lot of them are just really quiet and it is not because they haven’t read it, I think it is … you just don’t have the facility to start answering and moving on. (Participant 2)

Nonnative students were not the only ones who reported that the time allowed to compose and verify their answers reduced their anxiety. Participant 4, a heritage learner who had not used French actively for close to 40 years, explained that he was not sure how much French he would remember at the beginning of the course. The online environment eased his anxiety by allowing him time to develop his answers. This student commented,

I was less anxious in the beginning, as I say in the beginning, I did not know how much that I would remember. I knew that I would remember some, but I didn’t know how much I would have remembered and be comfortable, so it was easier for me because I did not have to say right away. If I had a problem, I could go to my dictionary.

When asked what they felt could be done to further reduce their anxiety to communicate in French in the online environment, 5 of the 6 students stated that an initial face-to-face meeting with the class and the instructor would have helped to alleviate their early concerns relating to course expectations and the use of technology. Participant 1, in particular, felt that her inexperience with computers caused her some initial anxiety and impeded her online communication in the early stages of the course. She suggested that in the future an initial face-to-face meeting be scheduled during which time a demonstration of the various online tools could be provided to the students.
Perceived competence

The majority of the students, both nonnative and heritage learners, reported an increase in their confidence in speaking French over the term of the course. In response to whether she felt more confident in an online or face-to-face environment, one of the nonnative students (Participant 6) indicated she felt more confident in the online environment: “Absolutely, I could look everything up in a dictionary, in my 501 French Verbs, to make sure I was conjugating correctly … . It is like you are given the chance to think about and make sure your adjectives agree and then present.” In describing why she felt her confidence was bolstered in the online environment, this same student stated “I did not feel like I was blatantly announcing to the world that my French is not perfect.”

The other nonnative student (Participant 2) also described how the online environment boosted her confidence to participate by allowing her time to develop her answers “I think the confidence I have is that I can prepare the work without being intimidated in the classroom when you are not feeling like you are completely fluent yet.” She also stated: “Yeah, it [the online environment] gave me more confidence definitely.”

One of the heritage speakers (Participant 4) also indicated that the course increased his confidence to communicate in French. He explained that his oral facility would usually give him an advantage in a face-to-face course but that the online environment required him to use his writing skills which, in turn, improved his overall confidence in his ability to communicate.

Well, it has been going on 40 years since I live in Haiti with my family, so I basically never write anymore. So, that was very good for me. It allow me to get back to my written abilities I guess. Whatever I knew was from my grandma and everything came back and I really enjoy that, which would not have been possible for me speaking.

This student indicated that writing the language activated dormant communicative abilities that an oral situation would not have activated. He recognized that through writing regularly in the online course, his spoken French improved and became more fluent: “I had to think in French, to write in French … . So, what it has done for me is allowed me even when I am communicating orally, it came a little faster and a little easier.”

A second heritage learner (Participant 1) also reported that she felt her ability to communicate in French increased over the term of the course: “Well, overall, I think I communicate much better. I think now I can speak French more than before when I would just speak French when I would call my family. I don't mix English and French like I used to anymore.”

The students offered very little in the way of suggestions for how the course could be modified to further increase their perceived competence in the language. Participant 6, the nonnative speaker of French, felt that her confidence in French might have improved more had she received greater feedback from the instructor pertaining to her written errors. She felt the lack of corrective feedback at times caused her to question her progress. She commented, “That was going to be one of my constructive feedbacks because at the end of the day I still need to keep improving. I don't know if I was. Obviously I was making errors, but I don't know what they were.” However, as demonstrated in the following quote, this same student later acknowledged that had she been made aware of all her errors in French, she may have begun to doubt her abilities and as a result participated less. “I don't know. Had you started correcting things, if I would have backed off on the length, who knows?” (Participant 6)
Willingness to communicate

Despite reporting to be less anxious and more confident in their French abilities in the online environment, the heritage learners generally stated that they would probably participate more in a face-to-face course. The nonnative students, on the other hand, indicated that they felt like they participated more in the online environment than they would have in a traditional classroom atmosphere. Both groups said they were engaged by the online discussion, but the French-speaking students seemed to recognize that they did not have the same advantage over nonnatives that they might in a face-to-face French class.

One of the nonnative students (Participant 6) who is already teaching French explained that the online environment caused her to become a more active participant in the course and to contribute more to the discussion. She commented, “In a face-to-face course, especially foreign language, a lot of times I just sit and listen and every once in a while, throw in one phrase if I had something that I’m dying to tell.”

The same student felt that she contributed more in an online course. She explained, “The information I was able to convey online being an experienced teacher and having feedback on lessons plans or whatever the topic, I do not think I would have thrown out nearly that much information in a face-to-face.” She also explained that she was able to prepare her responses to module questions much more quickly at the end of the semester and described her increased confidence and decreased anxiety with making mistakes as contributing to her increase in production.

I just started believing in myself a little bit more. I do know I don’t have to look up every word. Because a lot of it, I would look up every word to make sure I was spelling it right or make sure I had the gender, and as I got towards the end, I was like just go with it, you know it. So, there might be more errors but .... . (Participant 6)

The other nonnative student (Participant 2) described how her willingness to communicate changed over the semester as she began to view the assignments less as formal writing assignments and more as exchanges in a conversation. She explained that, as she began viewing her contributions as part of a conversation, she felt they would be read more quickly and less critically by the instructor and her fellow students, which, in turn, encouraged her to participate more and to write longer responses.

DISCUSSION

Although the results of the quantitative data analysis were not significant, it is important to note that the nonsignificant findings may have been the result of the small sample size. Cohen’s $d$ (1998) did report a medium to large effect size for both measures. Despite the inconclusive questionnaire results, the students’ total language output over the course of the semester, as well as the qualitative data gathered during the interviews, offer substantial evidence to suggest that online discussion does provide communication-related benefits to students. Even though the students were evaluated on the quality of their written French, which could have served as a deterrent to providing lengthier responses, both the nonnative and heritage learners of French produced more L2 output in the second half of the semester than in the first. They also perceived themselves to be less anxious and more confident when communicating in French during the course.
While these results are similar to those reported in previous research (Abrams, 2003a; Arnold, 2007; Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006; Payne & Whitney, 2002), the study did uncover one unanticipated and unique finding. The heritage learners in the class reported enjoying the online discussions, and two perceived that their spoken and written French improved over the course of the semester. With the growing immigrant population participating in L2 programs in the United States, elementary, middle, secondary, and postsecondary schools are all challenged by how to deal with heritage language learners in L2 classes geared for nonnative speakers. Perhaps the most interesting and significant finding of this study was that the online environment was able to serve the needs of all students, regardless of their French language proficiency.

Furthermore, it seemed that the students identified and targeted their own language weaknesses using the online discussion. The nonnatives recognized that they would need to participate more, and the heritage learners recognized that their oral proficiency would not suffice to pull them through the participation requirement. Both nonnative students described how they increasingly felt a part of a conversation in which they had valuable contributions to make. Two of the heritage learners reported that their French proficiency, written and spoken, improved through the online discussions.

**Implications**

Greater use of online L2 classes at the postsecondary level may be a way to meet the needs of nontraditional students with families and careers who cannot attend traditional face-to-face classes. The nontraditional, adult students involved in the study appreciated the practicality and convenience of the online course. Had the course been offered in a face-to-face classroom, three of the six students would not have been able to enroll due to family and career obligations.

Considering the growth in numbers of heritage language learners in L2 classrooms, the implications of the study’s findings have even further reach. The presence of heritage language learners in L2 classrooms is one of the most pressing issues in L2 instruction (Brecht & Ingold, 2002; Fishman, 2001; Kondo-Brown, 2005; Valdés, 2001). L2 teachers often find themselves at a loss for how to meet the needs of students who have never studied the language, while simultaneously instructing those for whom the language represents a significant part of their culture and life experiences. As demonstrated in this study, the online discussion component was able to meet different learning needs for heritage and nonnative students as they engaged in subject matter discussions. For example, the online format was shown to increase the confidence and willingness to communicate among the nonnatives in the class, while also improving the written and oral proficiency of the heritage learners. These needs were met holistically as students participated in discussions rather than through grammar exercises or overt error correction.

**Limitations of the Study**

It is unfortunate that the course was not a required course for French majors or minors at the participating institution. Many students who had initially enrolled in the course were later encouraged by academic advisors to drop it due to its optional nature, thereby reducing the sample size.
The very unique sample of students is both a strength and a weakness of the study. The large presence of nontraditional and heritage language learners, while providing rich research opportunities, is not representative of the traditional foreign language classroom. The results of the study can therefore not be generalized to the entire population of L2 learners in the United States.

Finally, the researchers chose to maintain the use of the preexisting scales for the measures of perceived competence and anxiety. A scale of 0 to 100 was used in the measure for perceived competence, and a scale of 1 to 5 in the measure for anxiety. Had both measures used the same scale, this would have allowed for greater comparison between scores.

CONCLUSION

School administrators, curriculum developers as well as L2 educators and advocates should take notice of the findings of this study. In a time when emphasis is placed on developing communicative proficiency in L2 classrooms and when online instruction is becoming more prevalent, the qualitative data collected in the study suggested that the asynchronous online discussion was beneficial in developing a greater willingness to communicate among L2 students. Participation in the online environment was reported by students to both reduce L2 anxiety and increase perceived competence to communicate in the target language.

While these findings are in themselves notable, perhaps the study’s most noteworthy finding pertains to the online venue’s ability to meet a variety of different student needs. The students in the study, whether American born and raised or heritage speakers of the target language, whether possessing advanced target language skills or struggling to write a complete sentence, all found the online environment to not only support their use of the language, but also to be beneficial to the further development of their skills.

NOTE

1 The term “heritage language learner” is generally used to describe a person studying a language who has proficiency in or a cultural connection to that language.

REFERENCES


Arnold, N. & Ducate, L. (2006). CALL: Where are we and where do we go from here? In L Ducate & N. Arnold (Eds.), *Calling on CALL: From theory and research to new directions in foreign language teaching* (pp. 1-20). San Marcos, TX: CALICO.


APPENDIX A
Questionnaire

Section A

Please answer the following questions:

Your sex: _______ Male _______ Female

When were you born? Month: _______________ Year: ____________

How would you rate your overall French language skills?

1. _____ Beginner  2. _____ Intermediate  3. _____ Advanced

Have you ever previously taken an online foreign language course?

1. _____ Yes  2. _____ No

Section B

Directions: Below are twelve situations in which you might need to communicate in French. People's abilities to communicate effectively vary a lot, and sometimes the same person is more competent to communicate in one situation than in another. Please indicate how competent you believe you are to communicate in French in each of the situations described below. Indicate in the space provided at the left of each item your estimate of your competence.

Presume 0 = completely incompetent and 100 = completely competent

____ 1. Present a talk to a group of strangers.

____ 2. Talk with an acquaintance.

____ 3. Talk in a large meeting of friends.

____ 4. Talk in a small group of strangers.

____ 5. Talk with a friend.

____ 6. Talk in a large meeting of acquaintances.

____ 7. Talk with a stranger.

____ 8. Present a talk to a group of friends.

____ 9. Talk in a small group of acquaintances.

____ 10. Talk in a large meeting of strangers.

____ 11. Talk in a small group of friends.

____ 12. Present a talk to a group of acquaintances.
Section C

Directions: Please complete the following questionnaire about how you feel when communicating in French. Mark 5 if you strongly agree with the statement; 4 if you agree; 3 if you neither agree nor disagree; 2 if you disagree or 1 if you strongly disagree.

1. I feel apprehensive.
2. I feel disturbed.
3. I am peaceful.
4. I feel relaxed.
5. I feel uneasy.
7. I feel fearful.
8. I feel ruffled.
9. I am jumpy.
10. I feel composed.
11. I am insecure.
12. I feel satisfied.
13. I feel safe.
15. I am cheerful.
16. I feel happy.
17. I feel dejected.
18. I feel pleased.
19. I feel good.
20. I feel unhappy.
### APPENDIX B

**Evaluation Rubric**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension of content</td>
<td>Student demonstrated weak understanding of the content of the module.</td>
<td>Student demonstrated some understanding of the content of the module.</td>
<td>Student demonstrated strong understanding of the content of the module.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision of details and examples</td>
<td>No details or examples were provided to support ideas.</td>
<td>One or two details or examples were provided to support ideas.</td>
<td>Several details or examples were provided to support ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion of work</td>
<td>Student failed to submit the assignment by the deadline and/or did not respond to all of the task requirements.</td>
<td>Student submitted the assignment by the deadline but neglected to respond to one or two of the task requirements.</td>
<td>Student submitted the assignment by the deadline and responded to all of the task requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution to discussion</td>
<td>Student failed to mention or address comments made by classmates and therefore did not contribute to the discussion.</td>
<td>Student occasionally mentioned or addressed comments made by classmates and therefore made some contribution to the discussion.</td>
<td>Student regularly mentioned or addressed comments made by classmates and therefore significantly contributed to the discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of French</td>
<td>Numerous and significant errors in vocabulary and grammar often impeded comprehension of the student’s message.</td>
<td>Errors in vocabulary and grammar rarely impeded comprehension of the student’s message.</td>
<td>Occasional, minor errors did not impede comprehension of the student’s message.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### APPENDIX C

**Interview Questions**

1. Describe your level of confidence in your abilities to communicate in French in an online or face-to-face course?

2. Did your participation in the online course in any way affect your confidence to communicate in French? If so, explain.

3. Do you feel that you would participate more in French in a face-to-face or online course? Why?

4. What modifications to the online course do you feel could be made that would help students to feel more confident when communicating in French?

5. Describe your level of comfort while participating in the online French class?

6. Did your participation in the online course in any way affect your degree of anxiety to communicate in French? If so, explain.

7. How does the level of anxiety you felt while participating in the online course compare to the anxiety you felt or feel when taking traditional, face-to-face French courses?

8. What modifications to the online course do you feel could be made that would help students to feel less anxious to communicate in French?
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