
Comparing Enrollment and Persistence Rates in Hybrid and Traditional Post-Secondary French

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Abstract

Persistence rates in foreign language study have been historically disappointing. This also tends to be the case for many hybrid and online courses, especially when contrasted with comparable face-to-face courses. Therefore, when transitioning foreign language coursework to online and hybrid formats, increased persistence rates and a large number of resulting majors should not be expected. Following a review of the literature on both foreign language and hybrid/online persistence respectively, the following study compares persistence rates from concurrently taught traditional and hybrid offerings in post-secondary French across three years. An interpretation of the resulting trends is offered, along with suggestions for additional research.

Persistence Rates in Foreign Language Study

While enrollment numbers in foreign language study are often reported and discussed, persistence rates rarely share in the spotlight. Perhaps this is because enrollment data are much more interesting: growing one decade and declining the next, up in some languages and down in others. The most recent Modern Languages Association (MLA) survey, for example, reports that course enrollments in languages other than English have reached a new high, continuing a pattern of growth that began in 1995. And, while Spanish, French, and German remain the three most studied languages, enrollments in other languages, such as Arabic, have increased by as much as 46.3% since 2006 (MLA, 2010). Not only is this type of information interesting, but in this case, it is positive as well.

Foreign language persistence rates among both high school and college students, on the other hand, have tended to go in one predictable and unpleasant direction: down (Bartley, 1970; Matsumoto, 2009; Rammage, 2000; Schwartz, 1991; Speiller, 1988). Bartley (1970) referred to this trend as the "foreign language drop-out problem" (p. 386) and it is one that is both widely recognized and accepted by both teachers and administrators alike. Indeed, it is the rule rather than the exception that the number of language students "diminishes as they advance to higher levels of study" (Matsumoto, 2009, p. 10.1). Perhaps it is because this trend is so common and generally accepted among educators that research on the topic is limited. Because so few reports of foreign language persistence are available in the literature, the following review includes those conducted at both the secondary and post-secondary levels. Thus far Bartley (1970), Speiller (1988), and Rammage (1990) have examined this phenomenon among high school students and Schwartz (1981) and Matsumoto (2009) have done so at the post-secondary level.

Bartley (1970) administered the Foreign Language Aptitude Scale to eighth grade students at both the beginning and the end of the academic year. She then divided the scores according to whether students continued or dropped their foreign language course in the 9th grade. She found that the attitude toward language study of the non-continuing students was significantly lower than that of students who continued. This difference was present at both the beginning and the end of the academic year.

Speiller (1988) sought to catalogue and compare students' reasons for continuing or discontinuing study of French and Spanish into their second, third, or fourth year of high school study. The most commonly cited

reasons for continuing were: getting into college, daily use, getting a job, and travel. The most commonly cited reasons for abandoning study were: course conflicts, difficulty of the subject, lack of progress (or proficiency), and lack of opportunity to use the language. She also confirmed that as students moved from second, third, and fourth-year study to their third, fourth, and fifth-year, the number of continuing students declined.

Ramage (1990) surveyed 138 second-year high school students of French and Spanish with the aim of distinguishing the motivations of students who elected to continue foreign language study beyond "the standard two-year stint" (p. 191) from those students who did not continue. She found that intrinsic factors, such as an interest in the culture or an authentic desire to learn the language, distinguished continuing students from those who did not go on. Extrinsic factors, such as fulfilling a college entrance requirement, on the other hand, characterized the discontinuing student. Two variables that correlated the most highly with one's decision to continue were grade in the course and grade level when taking the second-year course, suggesting that "the earlier the students start to study a foreign language, the more likely they are to continue beyond level II" (p. 209). Higher course grades also predicted continued study.

While rare at any level, reviews and studies of foreign language persistence at the post-secondary level are fewer still. Looking at department enrollment data, Schwartz (1981) reported that half of initially enrolled first-year foreign language students at the University of North Dakota did not finish the two-semester sequence. This trend held such that "no matter what the year, the language, or the teacher" (Schwartz, p. 210) no more than 50% of beginning students completed the first year of language study.

Matsumoto (2009) examined persistence among post-secondary students of Japanese. Specifically, he administered a pre- and post-semester questionnaire targeting the motivations and intentions of 450 beginning and intermediate learners in order to identify which "affecting factors are closely related to their intentions for continuing or discontinuing study" (p. 10.1). He found that students' cultural and linguistic background was an important determinant for persistence in language study. Specifically, students with a Western background lost interest in Japanese language study after having completed one semester, whereas students coming from a similar cultural or linguistic background as the target language tended to persist.

As opposed to reports on persistence, discussions of motivation are more common (Clément, Smythe, & Gardner, 1978; Dornyei, 1998, 1990; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Wesely, 2012). However, most are focused on the role of motivation in performance and proficiency, and only make tangential reference to persistence. While it stands to reason that increased motivation would likely correlate positively with continued study (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Ramage, 1990; Matsumoto, 2009), and that increased persistence will lead to improved performance (Bandura, 1982), dedicated studies of the relationship between motivation and persistence are few. An important exception, however, is the work of Clément, Smythe, and Gardner (1978). Clément et al. surveyed 4,471 seven-through eleventh-grade Anglophone students of French across Canada. They found that the most important determinant of a student's persistence in second language study is his or her motivation to learn the language, which is supported by the student's attitude toward the second language community and impressions of the learning environment. They conclude that it is "evident that motivation is the primary determinant of persistence [and] it therefore follows that any attempt at increasing second-language course re-enrollment should focus on the motivational aspects of the second-language learning process" (p. 694).

Even if not often discussed, language educators are keenly aware of the persistence problem. Many of us live in perennial fear of our upper-level courses being canceled due to low enrollments and/or must work to creatively combine upper levels in order to make our quota. For others, online and hybrid offerings have been suggested as a possible solution by increasing the population from which to draw students and attracting new students through innovations in technology (Gascoigne & Parnell, 2013; Ushida, 2005). However, a closer look at persistence rates in hybrid and online courses shows that they too are often problematic (Despain, 2003; Frydenberg, 2007; Parker, 2003; Patterson & McFadden, 2012).

Persistence in Online and Hybrid Environments

Although our review of the literature produced no dedicated reports of persistence among students in hybrid learning contexts, there is no shortage of research on student persistence in online environments. According to Simpson (2003), "retention rates in online, open, and distance learning are lower—sometimes considerably

lower—than they need to be" (p. 2) and almost always lower than comparable face-to-face courses. The lower retention rate for online courses appears to hold across disciplines and across levels of study: secondary, post-secondary, and graduate.

Patterson and McFadden (2012) investigated how mode of instructional delivery (face-to-face or online) affected retention relative to students' academic background. Targeting 640 graduate students (Masters of Business Administration and Masters of Communications students), in both face-to-face and online programs, they found that the online MBA students were six times more likely to drop than face-to-face students and the online communications students were seven times more likely to drop than their face-to-face peers. There was no significant effect on persistence found for student background.

In a two-year study that tracked nearly 30,000 continuing professional education course students through the Extension Program at the University of California-Irvine, Fryenberg (2007) found significantly higher dropout rates in distance education courses as compared to traditional face-to-face equivalents, at times ranging as high as 50% greater. However, when looking at drop rates after courses start (as opposed to including withdraws done before the first day of class), the drop rate for online courses was 21% compared to 16% for the face-to-face courses.

Looking at beginning post-secondary Spanish, Despain (2003) compared the persistence rates across three groups of learners: traditional degree-seeking students enrolled in a face-to-face course, traditional degree-seeking students enrolled in an online version of the course, and continuing education students (comprised of students working full-time and stay-at-home parents) enrolled in a distance version of the course. He labeled the three groups traditional-class, traditional-internet, and distance-internet respectively. Averaging completion data from ten sections enrolling 173 students, the completion rate for the traditional-class group was 83.9%. For the traditional-internet group it was 67.4%, and for the distance-internet group it was 59.3%.

Coupling the historically poor retention numbers for continued foreign language study with the more recently reported low retention rates in hybrid and online coursework, one might expect a dismal outcome when implementing hybrid or online foreign language courses. Indeed, Despain (2003) notes significantly lower completion numbers for online iterations of beginning post-secondary Spanish. Most studies of hybrid and online language courses; however, have focused not on persistence, but on comparing student learning outcomes between those enrolled in traditional and online versions of the course, often finding no significant difference (Chenoweth, Ushida, & Murday, 2006; Cubillos, 2007; Gascoigne & Parnell, 2013; Scida & Saury, 2006).

The Present Study

Faculty at the University of Nebraska at Omaha began offering one of two available sections of beginning French in a hybrid format in the Fall of 2011. The other section remained a traditional face-to-face course so that students had the option of choosing which format they preferred. The hybrid section was labeled as such in the schedule of courses. The traditional section met for 80 minutes three times per week for a total of 240 minutes per week. The hybrid section met for 60 minutes twice per week, for a total of 120 minutes, or one-half of the face-to-face contact time of the traditional section. To compensate for this reduction in seat time, students in the hybrid section completed an additional 120 minutes of online review and practice. Much of the required online work completed by the hybrid section was done in class with the instructor in the traditional section.

Like others before us, our first concern was monitoring student learning outcomes. Finding no significant difference in performance between the hybrid and traditional groups (X, in press), we continued offering hybrid options and proceeded to monitor student enrollment, course completion rates, and persistence into subsequent French coursework for both our hybrid and traditional groups. A description and discussion of these numbers, by semester, is offered below.

First Concurrent Offerings

In the Fall of 2011 both the hybrid and the traditional sections were taught by the same instructor. Twenty-nine students enrolled in the traditional section and 27 enrolled in the hybrid section. Of the 29 traditional students,

three withdrew from the course within the first few weeks of the semester bringing the class total to 26. Of these 26, two failed the course leaving 24 to successfully complete the course. Of the 27 hybrid students, seven withdrew bringing the course enrollment to 20. There were also two students who failed the course bringing the successful completion total to 18. Table 1 below shows persistence rates into subsequent French coursework for each group.

Table 1		
Fall 2011 Persistence by Group		
	Hybrid	Traditional
Semester 2	45%	33%
Semester 3	20%	16%
Semester 4	20%	16%
Semester 5	15%	11.5%
Major	10%	3.8%

The hybrid section initially attracted considerably fewer students. It also had significantly more students withdraw from the course compared to the traditional section. When looking at these numbers in real time, there was concern as to whether or not hybrid course offerings would be detrimental to the program, which needed to attract and retain students and majors to survive. However, when tracking students across time (six additional semesters, or three years), more of the hybrid students continued on into upper level French coursework beyond the four-semester college requirement for most majors, both in terms of the total number (3 to 2) and the percentage (15% to 11.5%). Also, more of the hybrid students went on to major in French (no students were declared majors at the time of original enrollment). This was also the case in terms of total numbers (2 to 1) and percentages (10% to 3.8%).

Second Concurrent Offerings

In the Spring 2012 semester the hybrid and the traditional sections were taught by different instructors. This time, thirty students enrolled in the traditional section and 25 enrolled in the hybrid section. Of the 30 traditional students, one withdrew from the course bringing the class total to 29. All 29 successfully completed the course. Of the 25 hybrid students, one withdrew bringing the course enrollment to 24. In addition, three students failed the hybrid course, bringing the successful completion total to 21. Once again, looking at the completion numbers (29 traditional, 21 hybrid) there was concern that the hybrid offerings could be detrimental to the program. Once again, the concern was tempered with time. (See Table 2 below for persistence rates into subsequent French coursework for each group.) While initially the traditional group had a higher semester-to-semester persistence rate, ultimately more of the hybrid students continued on into upper level French coursework beyond the four-semester college requirement (5 to 2 or 20.8% to 6.8%), and more of the hybrid students went on to major in French (5 to 2 or 20.8% to 6.8%).

Table 2		
Spring 2012 Persistence by Group		
	Hybrid	Traditional
Semester 2	50%	72.4%
Semester 3	45.8%	68.9%
Semester 4	25%	10.3%
Semester 5	20.8%	6.8%
Major	20.8%	6.8%

Due to faculty assignments and scheduling constraints no hybrid section was offered during the Fall 2012 semester.

Third Concurrent Offerings

During the Spring 2013 semester beginning French was once again offered in both a traditional and a hybrid format by two different instructors. Twenty-six students enrolled in the traditional section and thirty students

enrolled in the hybrid course. Two students withdrew from the traditional section bringing the total to 24 and eight students withdrew from hybrid section, bringing its total to 22. One student failed the traditional course yielding a successful completion total of 23. No students failed the hybrid course for a completion total of 22.

First-to-second semester persistence rates were higher for the traditional group (37.5% versus 27.2%). However, second-to-third semester persistence rates were higher for the hybrid group (22.7% versus 16.6%).

Table 3		
Spring 2013 Persistence by Group		
	Hybrid	Traditional
Semester 2	27.2%	37.5%
Semester 3	22.7%	16.6%

Fourth Concurrent Offerings

Most recently, a hybrid and a traditional section of beginning French were offered in the Fall 2013 semester. This time 27 students enrolled in the traditional section and 30 in the hybrid section. Two students withdrew from the traditional section bringing the total to 25. One student withdrew from the hybrid section bringing its total to 29. Two students failed the hybrid course, producing a course completion total of 27, while 3 students failed the traditional course bringing its completion number to 22. For the first time since offering both options to students, there were more students choosing and completing the hybrid version of the course. Also, more of the hybrid students continued on to the second semester, 51.7% compared to 32% for the traditional group.

Discussion

With only a few semesters' worth of data to consider, the following trends are based on informed observation. Continued monitoring and documentation are still needed. This said, several enrollment and persistence patterns are emerging. First, while considerably more students originally enrolled and also successfully completed the traditional versions of beginning French during its first two semesters of availability, this difference was noticeably diminished by the third offering in the Spring of 2013 and completely reversed by the fourth offering (Fall of 2013). It appears that as time passes (from Fall 2011 to Fall 2013) students are becoming increasingly comfortable with the notion of taking a course in a hybrid format such that they are initially enrolling in it, and are withdrawing from it in decreasing numbers. Indeed, the number of hybrid and online courses offered at the post-secondary level across the United States has been increasing steadily over the past decade and shows no signs of abating (Allen, Seaman, Lederman, & Jaschik, 2012).

A second, and perhaps more interesting trend observed is that while the traditional courses had, on occasion, higher initial persistence rates, more of the hybrid students, both in terms of total numbers and percentages, continued on to advanced French study and more ultimately declared and completed the French major.

Because the aim of this study was simply to observe and report, not to test hypotheses, there were no sincere expectations as to how the data would look, or if observable trends would be detected. After reviewing the literature on hybrid and online learning, however, one has to anticipate lower completion and persistence rates for this format. The fact that we found more hybrid students continuing on to upper-level French study and to the major is surprising. It is unlikely that this trend can be attributed to the instructor as any one of four instructors were at times teaching the hybrid course and at other times teaching the traditional course. Also, in one case the same professor taught both sections concurrently. Therefore, the following three-part question remains to be answered: does the hybrid format attract students with a strong motivation to learn French and an inclination toward continued study? Does participation in (or completion of) the hybrid course somehow ignite a motivation/inclination toward continued language study? Or, is this trend simply random? While we cannot answer these questions here, we can suggest one possible interpretation based upon Tinto's model of college persistence (Tinto, 1989, 1993).

One Interpretation

Until recently, the prevailing view on student retention was that persistence was "effectively due to factors outside of the control of institution" (Simpson, 2003, p. 2). For Tinto (1993), however, a lack of meaningful

contact with others within the institution "proves to be the single most important predictor of eventual departure, even after taking into account the individual effects of background, personality, and academic performance" (p. 56). Instead, participation in an academic or social group, or subculture, with some type of identity apart from the dominant institutional culture is conducive to persistence. It is within a subculture or group that one cultivates a "distinct form of association, tying its members to one another" (Tinto, p. 121). Moreover, when the contact among members is stretched beyond the formal domains of the institution, retention and persistence are likely to improve (p. 166).

It is possible that the students in hybrid section of beginning French built stronger ties from increased contact among students and the instructor that took place beyond the formal domains of the institution, as well as from sharing a unique identity that was separate from the dominant institutional culture: they were hybrid students as opposed to traditional students. French majors also share a unique identity as members of a very specific subculture on campus. Unlike business or education majors, French majors tend to be dangerously few in number.

In the future, in addition to tracking enrollment and persistence in both traditional and hybrid courses, we plan to also measure student connectedness using the Classroom Climate Inventory (Dwyer, Bingham, Carlson, Prisbell, Cruz, & Fus, 2004) to compare ratings of classroom climate, defined as "student-to-student perceptions of supportive and cooperative communication in the classroom" (Dwyer et al., 2004, p. 264) in both the traditional and hybrid courses in order to further examine the applicability of Tinto's model to trends in foreign language persistence.

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