

Lessons from Online Modern Foreign Language Classes for the Classical Language Instructor¹

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ABSTRACT

Recent research comparing fully online beginning level modern foreign language classes versus face-to-face classes has suggested no significant difference between the learning outcomes achieved via the different instructional formats (Money Penny and Aldrich; Sato, Chen, and Jourdain; Blake and Delforge). At Indiana State University, online courses in beginning level modern foreign language classes have been offered for several years and provided a template for classical language classes to quickly transition from face-to-face instruction to fully online instruction during the Spring 2020 semester. This article assesses the utility and effectiveness of some of the teaching methods currently used in those classes for a beginning ancient Greek course. Lecture archiving and video conferencing were the most useful methods for teaching in an online format, but it was difficult to recreate online the in-class exercises critical for reinforcing lessons in morphology and grammar. In the author's view, any attempt to move classical language classes fully online would require smaller beginning class sizes than currently offered (fewer than 25 students), significant online support from textbook publishers like that provided for modern foreign language instruction, and validation through studies that demonstrate that fully online classical language classes are capable of achieving learning outcomes similar to those achieved in face-to-face classes (e.g., by using the ACTFL ALIRA test for Latin classes).

Introduction

Entirely online foreign language courses have been a part of the educational landscape for decades (White 18-19). Still, during the Spring semester of 2020, most foreign language instructors were forced to adapt their classes to this format. Located in the Midwest, Indiana State University (ISU) is a regional public university that offers courses in Spanish, German, French, and Latin, with occasional course offerings in Japanese, Korean, Arabic, and ancient Greek. Fortunately, at ISU, the commonly taught

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modern foreign languages (French, German, Spanish) have offered fully online foreign language classes at the elementary level for several years. Fully online foreign language classes at ISU were designed, though, with the knowledge that these courses are generally better suited for the strongly self-motivated student (Blake, “Best Practices” 24) and that oral proficiency is difficult to attain in a wholly asynchronous format (Bruland 146). As such, online foreign language courses are restricted to distance education students and incorporate synchronous exercises into course delivery. In order to adapt my elementary ancient Greek class to a fully online format, I used a fully online elementary German class as a model. First, I provide an overview of recent research on the effectiveness of fully online foreign language classes. Next, I describe the structure and components of the fully online elementary German course at ISU and discuss adapting the teaching methods used in the online German class for my ancient Greek class. Lastly, I assess the potential of integrating fully online classes into the classical languages curriculum.

Literature Review

Although online learning has become a staple of most college curricula, surveys demonstrate that only about 30% of college faculty perceive it as a valuable and legitimate educational option (Allen et al. 6). Many modern foreign language faculty still harbor skepticism about the efficacy of online education (Blake et al. 114; Blake, “Best Practices” 18-19) and most would agree that achieving advanced proficiency requires face-to-face interaction with native speakers (Blake, “The use of technology” 824; cf. Enkin and Mejías-Bikandi). Recent studies on the effectiveness of fully online foreign language classes, however, have demonstrated that students taking these classes can reach the same proficiency as those enrolled in face-to-face classes at the elementary level. Blake and Delforge developed a yearlong fully online Spanish course for the UC Davis Extension School. They found that their students performed just as well on identical grammar and composition tests as UC Davis students enrolled in face-to-face classes after one year (143-44). A follow-up study comparing students in the fully online course with their peers in face-to-face Spanish classes found similar results when both groups took the same oral proficiency exams (Blake et al. 123-24). Money Penny and Aldrich conducted a study on a university elementary Spanish program where students were allowed to choose between fully online or face-to-face classes to meet their two-semester foreign language requirement and they found no significant difference in proficiency outcomes for students after one year, regardless of the chosen instructional format or sequence (124-26). Online course

offerings in Spanish are most common in U.S. universities, having accounted for 62% of all online foreign language course offerings in a 2017 survey (Murphy-Judy and Johnshoy 141), but research into fully online classes in other foreign languages has illustrated similar results at lower levels. In German, Goertler and Gacs documented equivalent learning outcomes when comparing their second-year fully online and face-to-face German classes at Michigan State University (171). A study of a fully online elementary Japanese course at Stony Brook University conducted by Sato, Chen, and Jourdain reported that student outcomes in their online courses have actually surpassed those achieved by students enrolled in the program's face-to-face elementary Japanese courses (768-69). In short, comparative research at several U.S. colleges and universities indicates that fully online modern foreign language courses at the lower levels can achieve the same learning outcomes as face-to-face classes.

In the classical languages, research into online Latin or ancient Greek courses has generally been descriptive and falls into two categories. The first category focuses on wholly asynchronous online classes, such as the Open University's online Latin course (Lloyd and Robson) or Biblical Greek courses for seminarians (e.g., Harlow, Morse), that are aimed at part-time adult students. The second category includes hybrid or blended learning classes integrated into existing college courses that reduce face-to-face instruction and incorporate online learning techniques (e.g., Bayerle, Manousakis). Neither category fully encapsulates the situation that classical language teachers found themselves in during Spring 2020 (and many currently still do), where there was an expectation for instructors to develop fully online courses that use both asynchronous and synchronous distance learning techniques for full-time students.

Methods

Elementary German online

At ISU, it is important to note that the online elementary German class uses a different textbook than the one used in the face-to-face classes. For the online classes, the assigned textbook is *Sag Mal*, an elementary German language textbook that aims to guide students through ACTFL novice level proficiency. *Sag Mal* is specifically tailored for an online or hybrid language German course, allowing students to purchase fully electronic textbooks with all of the instructional material referenced to and used in the paper textbook

(Hoecherl-Alden). The textbook has twelve chapters, with each chapter divided into two sections. These sections have five components: new vocabulary, a video demonstrating the use of new vocabulary (accessible on the textbook's 'Supersite' (website)), a culture section in English, short explanations of new grammar concepts, and, lastly, exercises and another video reviewing that section's material.

The Learning Management System (LMS) used at ISU is Blackboard, supplemented by the video platforms Yuja and Skype to provide additional options for video lectures, virtual meetings, and chatrooms that instructors and students may be more comfortable using. In designing the elementary German 101 course, each chapter in *Sag Mal* is divided up into four stand-alone modules within Blackboard, and students are given a week to two weeks to complete each module, depending on the complexity of the material. Within each module, students were required to:

- (1) watch two short video lectures by the instructor
- (2) complete textbook exercises on the *Sag Mal* Supersite
- (3) post on a cultural subject in English on a Blackboard discussion forum

Outside of the modules, students were also required to:

- (4) take several timed exams focusing on grammar and translation on Blackboard, which can be remotely proctored at the instructor's discretion
- (5) participate in three individual interviews with the instructor

All of these tasks are designed to be accomplished asynchronously, with the exception of the individual interviews. As far as grading, four exams made up 50% of the student grade, with the textbook exercises on the *Sag Mal* Supersite making up the next largest component of a student's grade at 20%.

Ancient Greek online

The elementary ancient Greek textbook used at ISU is N.C. Croy's *A Primer of Biblical Greek*, chosen primarily because it is structured similarly to the Classics program's Latin textbook, *Wheelock's Latin*. Like Wheelock, each chapter in Croy's textbook focuses on a few key grammatical concepts and presents students with a short vocabulary list. There are about twenty contrived ancient Greek sentences ('Practice and Review') based on the chapter's grammar and vocabulary that provide students with targeted translation practice, as well as four or five English to Greek translation exercises. Each chapter concludes with a number of actual ancient Greek sentences from the Old and New Testament. There is, however, no companion website.

For the Greek course, converting a full chapter in the Croy textbook into an online module was a convenient way to present the material. Lectures were written out at first and posted in the module, but Yuja lectures turned out to be more convenient (similar to (1) in the German class). Cultural aspects of the ancient Mediterranean were covered during the lectures (similar to (3) in the German class) but no assignment was linked to that material. Students could return to the module to view instructional material as many times as they wanted, as in the online German class. In order to recreate the interaction of a face-to-face classroom, I hosted three hour-long synchronous Yuja Video Conference/Chat rooms during the week, which I believe played a role similar to that of the individual interviews used in the online German class ((5) above). To replicate grammar and morphology exercises that would have occurred in a face-to-face classroom (similar to (2) in the German class), I used the Blackboard Discussion Forums for asynchronous morphology and translation practice. For exams and quizzes (similar to (4) in the German class), I composed multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short-answer translations using Blackboard's testing tools. Grading schemes among the elementary languages at ISU are roughly the same, with quizzes/exams making up about 50% of the student's grade in ancient Greek.

Results*Pros*

Of the five components included in a module of the online German class, the video conferencing and chatroom sessions ((5) above) were the most useful for students. Individual interviews were scheduled in the online German class because group discussions

of up to 20 students on Skype would not allow full participation. I benefited from a very small ancient Greek class (only four students), so there was no need to schedule students for a particular video conference/chatroom session. The ability of multiple students to participate in a video conference/chatroom was made easy by the 'Raise Hand' tool in Yuja, which students can select at any time. In this way, an instructor can see which students want to participate in a discussion by viewing who has a 'yellow hand' icon next to their name. This queuing system seems to encourage students to ask more questions than they otherwise might in a face-to-face classroom. The ability of students to return to lectures to review an instructor's guidance, as afforded by the archiving of lectures within modules ((1) above), also seemed to encourage participation, since students have time to revisit and reflect on newly introduced material outside of class before interacting with the instructor. Ultimately, making lecture material available before a synchronous video conference/chatroom session makes the 'flipped classroom' a reality, even if it is virtual.

However, easier mechanisms for participation make fielding questions and comments in a video conference/chatroom session time-consuming. In my experience, it seems unlikely that a language instructor can interact productively with more than four or five students in a given hour during a video conference/chatroom. In the studies cited above, where fully online modern foreign language students achieved proficiency comparable to their face-to-face peers, weekly synchronous sessions with low instructor/teaching assistant to student ratios were common. In the fully online UC Davis Extension Spanish class, instructors held weekly hour-long discussion sections with students in groups of three (Blake and Delforge 134). For the online beginning Japanese course at Stony Brook University, Sato, Chen, and Jourdain reported that a major factor in the course's success was the use of multiple undergraduate TAs instead of a single undergraduate teaching assistant (TA), as is typical for their face-to-face elementary Japanese course. To facilitate interaction, the TAs led synchronous group sessions for students on Google Hangouts (Sato, Chen, and Jourdain 760). In their first iteration of the fully online Japanese course in 2015, they used four TAs for 26 students (an instructor/TA to student ratio of 1:5.2), but with improved technology, they can currently run the fully online Japanese course with two TAs for 20 students (an instructor/TA to student ratio of 1:6.6) (Sato). In the online German courses taught at Michigan State University, the instructor/TA to student ratio was higher at 1:12.5. Still the instructor conducted two hour-long synchronous group discussions per week (Goertler and Gacs 159-160). Incorporating weekly synchronous sessions into the

course allows for direct interaction between students and an instructor/TA and reduces the ‘psychological distance’ concomitant with the physical separation of a fully online course (Sato, Chen, and Jourdain 770). In general, ‘psychological distance’ has been identified as an obstacle to student success in online courses (Baker 18) but particularly in online foreign language courses (Oliver, Kellogg, and Patel 289).

Cons

The biggest obstacle to using an online modern language course as a model for developing an online course for classical languages was replicating grammar and translation exercises ((2) above) in an online environment. In the first half-chapter of *Sag Mal* alone, there are over 100 exercises for students in the textbook that can be completed in class or on the *Sag Mal* Supersite. There are also partner and group exercises in the textbook and the Supersite that the instructor can assign to students if they want them to work together outside of the classroom, whether in a synchronous or asynchronous format. All of these exercises are auto-graded (except a handful of speaking exercises that can be recorded by students and graded by the instructor later) and entered into a student gradebook maintained on the Supersite, accessible to students and instructors. These exercises change with each new edition of the textbook, thereby hindering any attempts to build and distribute answer keys on the internet. *Sag Mal*’s second edition (2017) was published only three years after its first edition (2014). As noted above, there is no companion website for Croy’s *A Primer of Biblical Greek* and the exercises in the textbook are of limited value in an online environment. Answer keys for the textbook’s Greek to English translation passages (‘Practice and Review’) can readily be found on the internet. In a face-to-face classroom, any student who uses answer keys to complete homework can easily be identified, but in an online discussion forum, it is more difficult to root out. Indeed, this is a problem for any instructor teaching an online ancient Greek or Latin class who assigns a commonly used classical language textbook. For translation exercises, I relied on English to Greek sentences since answer keys to those exercises are not available on the internet (to my knowledge). Students were able to type out accented Greek with little trouble by utilizing the keyboard functions on the website Lexilogos (<https://www.lexilogos.com/keyboard/greek_ancient.htm>). The handful of asynchronous morphology exercises that I developed for the Blackboard Discussion Forums provided students with limited practice opportunities. Though a fair number of digital platforms complement existing ancient Greek textbooks with online exercises (see Rosenbecker and Sullivan 104-107), it is difficult for classical

language instructors to create original exercises and tests within their LMS that rival those found in modern language textbooks developed specifically for online and hybrid foreign language classes.

Discussion

As Senta Goertler observes in her 2019 article on the development and integration of computer assisted language learning (CALL) into foreign language curricula, online education is here to stay regardless of how language educators feel about it (77-78). Only a year later, this observation seems all the more timely. Most foreign language instructors will need to develop ways to integrate online instruction into their curricula in the near future. Teachers of ancient Greek will probably not find much help from publishers in addressing the biggest obstacle identified above: developing original and robust grammar, morphology, and translation exercises for an online platform. In the most recent Fall 2016 MLA enrollment survey, German had about 80,000 students, French 175,000 students, and Spanish had over 700,000 students at the college level. In comparison, ancient Greek and Latin had about 13,000 and 25,000 students enrolled, respectively (Looney and Lusin 32). It is unlikely that the small market for classical languages will spur any publishers to develop and continually update and reissue textbooks focused on online or hybrid instruction like *Sag Mal*. It is worth noting for Latin instructors, however, that Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers has recently launched the companion website ‘Lumina’ for its textbook *Latin for the New Millennium* that contains supplemental exercises that can be integrated into an instructor’s online LMS.

Class size also presents a problem. In the successful fully online German program at Michigan State University cited above, the online German classes had a maximum enrollment of 17 students, which is almost 40% smaller than the face-to-face classes (capped at 27 students). The smaller online class size recognizes the increased time commitment required from instructors to run an online course and the need for frequent synchronous interaction (Goertler and Gacs 159). An optimum number of students for a fully online elementary Greek or Latin course would probably be around 15 students, enabling an instructor to schedule at least three hour-long synchronous sessions with groups of five each week. Most administrators, though, would balk at fielding 100-level courses at enrollments below 20 to 30 students.

Convincing administrators to schedule smaller classes is one matter; convincing colleagues skeptical of online education is another. Most studies focused on online foreign language classes' outcomes have relied on student surveys or class tests to gauge student achievement of course goals (Link and Li 3). Without external measures of success, most foreign language teachers will be hesitant to adopt a fully online mode of instruction. It is significant that the studies of learning outcomes in the fully online Spanish classes discussed above relied on a third-party assessment tool, Pearson's *Versant for Spanish* test, to demonstrate the robustness of their fully online elementary Spanish courses and their ability to meet ACTFL proficiency standards (Blake, "Messy Task" 410; Money Penny and Aldrich 115; Aldrich and Money Penny 34-35). For the classical languages, no such studies exist. Future studies comparing online and face-to-face Latin classes could use ACTFL's computer-adaptive ALIRA test for comparative purposes to demonstrate their efficacy (or lack thereof). To my knowledge, no equivalent computer-adaptive exam to gauge proficiency at the novice or intermediate level exists for ancient Greek.

Nonetheless, pessimism for the outlook of online instruction in classical languages is not fully warranted. What seems clear is that teaching an online foreign language class benefits from a 'team effort.' For the commonly taught modern foreign languages like Spanish, French, and German, that team includes the instructor as well as the textbook publisher's editorial team. For the less commonly taught foreign languages, another approach is probably necessary. In the fully online Japanese course at Stony Brook University, the instructors developed their own 'course pack' for elementary level courses and relied on multiple TAs to help with grading and synchronous group work (Sato, Chen, and Jourdain 759). In the absence of publisher support, Classics programs at the college level could try to replicate that success by adopting a similar approach. Maintaining a low instructor/TA to student ratio in the range of 1:5 and ensuring weekly synchronous contact between the instructors and the students appear to be key aspects of a successful fully online foreign language class. Including advanced undergraduates as TAs in elementary online language classes could be predicated on teaching mentorships/internships for students interested in education or information technology careers. In this way, administrators would find it difficult to turn over elementary online language courses to adjunct faculty. At most schools, mentorships or internships are supervised by full-time faculty.

From the programmatic perspective, devoting resources to develop and offer fully online elementary classical language classes could boost upper-level enrollments. A recent study on the incorporation of online classes into the German program at Waterloo University in Canada suggests that implementing fully online courses at the 100- and 200-level led to increased enrollments at the 300- and 400-level (Schulze and Scholz). After a decade of teaching fully online the German 101, 102, and 201 courses alongside their face-to-face counterparts, Schulze and Scholz conducted a retrospective study to assess these online courses' role in the wider German curriculum. In general, students' continuation rates in online German classes were lower than that of face-to-face students. For German 101, the percentage of online German 101 students who continued into German 102 (8.3%) was much lower than that of the face-to-face German 101 students (37.5%). The low persistence of the online German 101 students was most likely due to the University's one-semester foreign language requirement: those who were committed to taking only one foreign language course sought out the online version of German 101 since it was least likely to impact their schedules. Looking at the trajectory of students who continued on to take upper-level German classes, though, Schulze and Scholz found that about one-third of their 300-level German students and 15% of their 400-level students had taken at least one of their 100- or 200-level German courses online. Those taking the 400-level courses were German majors and they surmised that without the scheduling flexibility afforded by the lower-level online courses, that group of students would not have remained in the German program (Schulze and Scholz 194-195). Their research illustrates that a foreign language program's upper-level course enrollments may depend not only on the quality of instruction in lower level courses, but also on those courses' availability. Developing and implementing fully online classes at the elementary level could offer a new approach for classical language programs to attract and recruit students pursuing rigidly structured programs of study during their freshman and sophomore years, but who would still like to take advantage of the opportunity to study the classical languages at an advanced level while at college.

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