Problem
Many first-year foreign language students at the high school level have difficulties learning sentence construction. Students often want to create coherent sentences, but during the first year of foreign language instruction are not able to acquire the needed grammatical foundation to write such sentences.

Background
According to Sigsbee, the experience in the foreign language classroom needs to be enhanced because American students fall short in both fluency and proficiency. The situation needs to be remedied by changing the way foreign language is taught and by increasing the duration of foreign language education before college (46-48).

Is computer based learning a way to enhance foreign language instruction? It is plausible that computer based learning can both apply generic teaching concepts as described by McDonough (294-95) as well as fun, creative lessons. Many studies have been conducted regarding the benefits of the use of cinematography in foreign language education. Chang has found that foreign language education has become more exciting since multimedia technology has entered education, a finding that directly correlates with computer based (visual) learning (12-14). Furthermore, classes that present students with pragmatic based activities offer students real-life skills according to Brickman and Manning (64-66). Computer experience has never been more crucial and offering students practice with computer experience may be viewed favorably by students and enhance their foreign language learning experience. The need for greater sophistication in textbooks applies also to foreign language textbooks according to Birchbickler (295-96). Walz believes that foreign language textbooks are still too steeped in written traditions of the past and do not provide enough oral language practice; therefore, computer based learning may offer an alternative to emphasizing textbook learning (161-63).

The Research Question
What are the student-perceived benefits and detriments associated with traditional classroom instruction and computer-based instruction in the foreign language classroom at the high school level?
Objectives and Hypotheses

Objective 1: To understand the initial perceptions of students towards the two types of learning.
Hypothesis 1: Students will initially be more attracted to the computer-based setting.

Objective 2: To observe any potential change of students’ perceptions of both learning methods following the study.
Hypothesis 2: Students’ perception will remain highly positive relating to computer-based learning, but perceptions of traditional classroom learning will be viewed more favorably than initial responses.

Variables

Dependent Variable: Teaching setting and the materials used (ex. computer vs. textbook and blackboard) These are also considered treatment variables.

Independent Variables: The independent variables in this study primarily focus upon student academic and demographic characteristics. The variables include the following: IQ, gender, economic status, study habits, level of interest in foreign language, level of interest in computers, computer proficiency level, and maturity level

Criterion Variables: the students’ self-reported satisfaction scores with each educational method and the actual student grade in the class. Although improving student academic performance scores is not the primary purpose of this study, the scores should be considered when evaluating student perceptions and preference for the different classroom settings.

Outcomes

Initially, students will likely rank computer-based learning environments more positively (a minimum of 2 points greater than the ranking for a the traditional classroom setting on a 7-point scale) because it offers a change from their current everyday environment; however, after participating in comparable 6-week educational units in each setting, student reported survey scores will become more diverse with a portion of students retaining their initial perceptions, while a portion will show greater support (a higher score on a 7-point scale) for the traditional classroom setting.

Sample Design

There are approximately fourteen first-year foreign language classes (French and Spanish) in Martin County taught each academic year (fall and spring semesters). Due to the difficulty and challenge of
studying individual students in different classrooms, a cluster sample will be utilized. This sampling method will allow the researcher to select a specified number of units (entire classrooms) as the sample population. Though there are problems with the sample being representative and determining confidence limits, this sampling strategy is the most feasible option. Because a typical first-year foreign language learner does not exist. That is, every individual student comes with different abilities and deficiencies in academic ability, IQ score, etc. (refer to independent variables for a listing of these variables). The identified sampling method will minimize sample bias as a threat to validity. As a second data collection method, focus groups will be utilized to obtain qualitative data and to minimize gaps and deficiencies in the survey questionnaire items. These focus groups will be composed of a number of students within the foreign language curriculum who are willing to participate in this portion of the research. If enough people are interested in participating in the focus groups, a random sampling strategy will be incorporated in selecting participants.

Fifty percent of the total population (7 classes) will be selected. Though some are French and some Spanish students, they will all have the same course of study. All students will go through 6 weeks of one method followed by 6 weeks of the other method. Both methods will be administered simultaneously to determine if the order of the instruction method influences preference scores. To determine if these preferences remain constant over time an extended longitudinal study may prove beneficial. A quantitative approach will be used to collect data. A written survey questionnaire will be administered to all students before instruction and after completion of both teaching methods. Surveys will be quantitative in nature with the majority of questions using a likert scale/ranking criteria. The survey will consist of positive and negative statements relating to the computer-based learning environment and to the traditional classroom environment in which students will indicate a numeric response to the level in which they agree or disagree with the statement (e.g. 1 = strongly disagree, 4 = unsure, 7 = strongly agree).
Works Cited


