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**THE FACE-TO-FACE AND THE ONLINE LEARNER: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TUTORIAL SUPPORT FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LANGUAGE LEARNING AND THE LEARNER EXPERIENCE WITH AUDIO-GRAPHIC SCMC**

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**Abstract**

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This paper reports on a large-scale quantitative study into the student population of the online and face-to-face versions of a language course to find out whether there are any salient differences. The paper also reports on a smaller group of students and their impressions of audio-graphic conferencing and learning with it, as well as their reasons for choosing to use Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC) over face-to-face. The data suggests that there are not many differences between online and face-to-face learners but there are differences in course marks. The responses suggest that despite some technical problems, the software is generally liked and perceived to provide a good, convenient learning environment.

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**Introduction**

The option of using audio-graphic Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC) instead of face-to-face communication for the provision of tutorials in open and distance learning (ODL) creates choices for students who must decide which medium they wish to use for their language tuition.<sup>1</sup> The audio-graphic environment provides opportunities for human-to-human interaction through computers, with obvious potential for language learning, but the environment has been described as cold, and communication through the medium can be slow. Are there any differences between online and face-to-face learners? Will their academic results change depending on the tuition mode? What is the learning experience like for audio-graphic students?

The next section in this paper will provide an overview of the literature on the use of audio-graphic SCMC in ODL, its challenges and benefits, and previous research into the view of the learners who use it. It will be followed by the presentation of the methodology and results of two surveys, one large-scale and the other small-scale, followed by the conclusion.

The research agenda for SCMC includes the evaluation of the media and its users. Colpaert (2004) suggested four criteria to evaluate online interactive language courseware: usability, usage, user satisfaction, and criteria for optimizing didactic efficiency. These criteria

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'tuition' is used here to refer to scheduled contact time between tutors and students. This researcher feels that the word 'instruction' has a connotation of being a one-sided relationship where the tutor *instructs* students, which does not seem coherent with a communicative approach to language teaching and learning.

can be adopted for the evaluation of SCMS since the adoption of audio-graphic conferencing affects usage, user satisfaction, and the learning process (didactic efficiency).

One of the key elements in the research into audio-graphic conferencing is the relationship of the human side and the software. There has been much research on student perceptions of different computer-enhanced learning environments (see Stepp-Greany, 2002 for an overview) but research into the perceptions of any new learning environment is essential because “learners are individuals with their own views about different types of communication media” (Levy & Stockwell, 2006, p.109). Among the social and psychological dimensions of CMC, “it is necessary to consider the situation from the viewpoint of the learner. This is of particular importance in distance learning environments” (Levy & Stockwell, 2006, p. 100) as “it is the learner’s diverse experiences and attitudes that provide us with a point of departure for an alternative view on CALL” (Debsky & Levy, 1999, p. 9). The relationship between users through the computer is important as well. In a study of online tuition using *OnLive Traveller*, a success factor was “the close relationship which is created between the teachers and the students” (Eklund-Braconi, 2004, p. 1).

Research shows that learners’ performance improves if they feel in command of the situation, and if they are familiar with their environment (Oxford, 1990), and pilot studies had found that students need time and help to familiarize themselves with the software (Kötter & Shield, 2000). In addition, the use of the online environment brings changes to the roles of both learners and tutor (Hauck & Haezwindt, 1999). It is therefore necessary to consider the students’ viewpoint, especially in the case of ODL where CMC may be the only contact between the tutor and the learners, or the learners with their peers. As Hampel (2003) stated, there is a “need to listen to both students’ and tutors’ experiences, thereby integrating theory with practice” (p. 34). A recent study of the impressions of tutors working with audio-graphic tools reported that most tutors found the teaching experience very positive and liked using the tools; however, some experienced technical problems and believed that these affect the learning experience (Rosell-Aguilar, 2006). In audio-graphic conferencing it has been suggested that “the fact that students have to interact orally in foreign language without the usual verbal and visual clues (paralinguistic features and body language) can cause increased anxiety and lower motivation in language learning” (Hampel, 2003, p. 29). On the other hand, later research into this issue found positive responses to the lack of visual clues. One study concluded that “it is paramount that tutors and learners alike are aware that for interaction to be successful in audio-graphic collaborative learning environments, there has to be a mutual understanding of what the medium requires of the user for the user to benefit fully from the medium” (de los Arcos & Arnedillo Sánchez, 2006, p. 91).

The first major research into students’ perceptions of a course using audio-graphic conferencing for the provision of tuition was carried out in 2002 by Hampel, who examined the experience of twelve students taking an Open University German upper-intermediate course, the first language course at the institution to fully use the *Lyceum* software. From the student perspective, she found among others the following challenges of audio-graphic tuition:

- technical difficulties, especially with the sound (audio levels, general quality of the audio) and with losing the connection
- students felt that technical difficulties had a negative impact on the learning experience
- reluctance to seek help from the helpdesk
- lack of body language

- less spontaneity
- awkward silences
- shy people were less likely to participate
- complexity of having too many things to do (using the mouse, speaking, typing)
- groups were often too small. (Hampel 2003)

In contrast, the following benefits of using the software were identified:

- improving oral communication skills
- authentic communication with other learners
- bridging the distance between learners and tutors
- sharing texts
- useful tool for group work. (Hampel 2003)

In 2003, an internal report from the Open University reported on the experience of *Lyceum* users, tutors, and students. Although the conclusion was positive, it reported the case of a student who said the following:

I am afraid I feel *Lyceum* is fundamentally a flawed system for the teaching of foreign languages. The essential element of teaching foreign language is that of communication - *Lyceum* creates barriers that inhibit that aspect of teaching. It is slow, clunky and totally inappropriate. (Schrafagnl, 2003, p. 32)

This description of the medium as slow, together with a general impression that the environment is cold, was common among internal reports and personal accounts at the beginning of its use.

An important issue which relates to the learner experience is knowing why students have opted to use a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) instead of traditional face-to-face teaching. Shield (2000) found that there were two main reasons for learners to use VLEs: to practice using the target language in synchronous, spoken interaction within a meaningful framework, and to reduce the isolation of being a distance learner who does not attend face-to-face tutorials. In 2005, Rosell-Aguilar hypothesized that there were four main reasons why students chose the online strand of a language course:

- a) it provides access to tutorials that otherwise would not be available to them for reasons of
  - their geographical location – if they live far away from the regional centre where face to face tutorials are offered and therefore to reduce their sense of isolation.
  - limited time availability (online tutorials tend to be scheduled on weekday evenings and do not require the time to travel to the regional centre).
  - physical disability that may make their traveling difficult.
- b) they like ICT and the idea of using their computers for their learning.

- c) they may feel more comfortable “shielded” behind a PC and not making mistakes in the physical presence of others.
- d) they wrongly assume that the whole course is taught online, rather than the tutorials only. (p. 432)

Audio-graphic tools (and in this context, *Lyceum* in particular) have improved with constant advancements and technical developments since the time of the earlier reports. The expertise in the field of audio-graphic conferencing for the provision of language instruction has also grown. Therefore, there is a need to find out whether the findings reported on the learner experience are still applicable today: what students think of the environment, the tutorials, the reported feelings of isolation and a slow and cold environment. The studies reported in this paper also aim to get a picture of online learners and if there are any differences with their face-to-face counterparts. A common assumption about online learners which this study aims to clarify is that they are younger and male. The author of this paper also hypothesized, more by intuition than evidence, that those who did not intend to attend tutorials would enroll in the online version of the course, as it is easier to ‘hide’ behind a computer. Another interesting issue to clarify is the students’ reasons for choosing the online version of the course.

The following sections will describe the course and audio-graphic software that are the focus of this study and report on two surveys of the student population of the online and the face-to-face versions of the same language course.

### **Two Surveys: Large-Scale and Small-Scale**

This study has two clearly-defined parts. The first is a quantitative approach at finding out more about the differences between online and face-to-face learners, the perceived benefits of their chosen mode of tuition, attendance, course results, and whether they intend to continue with that tuition mode. The second part uses a qualitative approach to report on the results of a smaller-scale, more in-depth survey with one of the tutorial groups of students to look at their impressions of the audio-graphic conferencing medium and learning with it.

The students who took part in this study were taking *Portales*, a beginners’ Spanish distance course at the UK Open University. There are two versions of the course: L194, which offers face-to-face tutorials and the oral component of the end of course assessment (ECA), and LZX194, in which tutorials and ECA take place online using an audio-graphic synchronous CMC tool. Otherwise, the courses are the same. The main method of tuition is through print and audio materials which the students work through at a distance. Completion of the course equals 30 points, which means that students should take around 300 hours to complete it. Of these, 21 hours are for contact with a tutor either face-to-face or online.

The software used for the online tutorials is an in-house audio-graphic conferencing program called *Lyceum*. When connected to the system, users can synchronously speak to other users and are supported by additional tools which include a whiteboard, a grid or concept map, a text editor, and a chat facility, among others. The software was fully adopted for language tuition by the Department of Languages at the Open University in 2002 (for details of the software, its pilot stages, and challenges presented during its use, see Hampel, 2003; Hampel & Hauck, 2004; Hauck & Haezewindt, 1999; Kötter, 2001; Rosell-Aguilar, 2005; Shield, 2000). A taster website

with technical information about the software and sample video clips is available <http://lyceum-taster.open.ac.uk/>.

When students install the software, they can follow an animated tutorial which helps them become familiar with the basic features of the program, and further training is offered during their first tutorial and throughout the course. The materials used during the tutorials consist of activities aimed at developing their oral interaction skills, and they are provided for the tutors with the rest of the teaching materials, although they are free to use these materials or develop their own.

The results presented in this paper correspond to the first presentation of the course from November 2003 to October 2004. Over 2000 students enrolled on the course: 1,694 for L194 (the option with face-to-face tutorial support) and 536 for LZX194 (the option with online tutorial support). They were divided into tutorial groups of 15 to 20 students and a personal tutor was allocated per group.

### *The Large Scale Survey: Online and Face-to-Face Learners*

Previous research comparing online environments focused mostly on asynchronous text-based CMC (see de Freitas & Roberts, 2004 for a comparison of online and face-to-face versions of the same course and Creanor, 2002 for a comparison between two online courses). There is little research comparing the tuition modes of identical online and face-to-face beginner language courses. In fact, de los Arcos & Arnedillo Sánchez (2006) claim that “teaching a language over an audio-graphic conferencing system is a completely different experience from teaching a language in a face-to-face environment; any attempt at comparing the two should be disregarded as futile” (p. 91). This study does not attempt to compare the teaching experience of both tuition modes. Instead, it compares the learners of the two different strands, online and face-to-face, of the same course and then focuses on the learning experience of online students only.

Pre- and post-questionnaires were sent to the student cohort of the Spanish beginner courses, except to those that had requested not to be approached. Out of a student population of 2,235 at the start of the course in November 2003, a total of 1,961 pre-questionnaires were sent out, of which 1,345 were returned (68.58% return rate). Lower-level distance language courses at The Open University have a dropout rate of around 50%. Of those who started the course, 1,090 finished it. In December 2004, after the end of the course, 1,676 post-questionnaires were sent, of which 724 were returned (43.13% return rate from the total of those who started the course and 66.42% of the total of 1090 students who actually finished the course).

### Gender

Table 1 shows that the ratio of males and females on the course was two third females to one third males overall and also on each strand. These almost identical ratios shatter the assumption that the online version would appeal more to males than females.

**Table 1.** Student Gender

	Total Number	Female	Male
Both strands	1345	888 (66%)	457 (34%)
Face-to-face	1028	679 (66.1%)	349 (33.9%)
Online	317	209 (65.9%)	108 (34.1%)

### Age

Respondents are divided into six age groups for each version of the course (see Table 2). Although the percentages for the online version were higher overall for ages 18 to 54 and lower for ages 55 to 82, the differences are quite small, and not enough to support the stereotype/assumption that the online version would be more appealing to the younger learner. The data about learners in the 65-82 age group shows that the face-to-face option appealed more to that particular age group.

**Table 2.** Student Age

Student age:	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-82
Face-to-face	4.7%	21.6%	27.9%	23.8%	16.4%	5.5%
Online	5.4%	22.4%	28.1%	26.8%	16.1%	1.3%

### Experience with the Software

Most students were not as familiar with the software used for the provision of online tutorials as they may be with more common applications, although some students may have used it before for other OU courses. The data did not show whether previous experience of using the software played a part in the decision to choose one strand over the other. When asked whether they have had experience with using the software before, the difference is minimal. Only 3% of the students of the face-to-face strand and 4.1% of the students on the online strand had previous experience of using *Lyceum*. Given that ‘having experience’ could range from having attended one training session to having used it for a whole course before, it cannot be verified whether having used *Lyceum* before meant they were keen to use it again or made them decide to opt for face-to-face instead. In future courses, data will be available to tell whether those who signed for the one version switched the other for the follow-up course.

### Attendance

This researcher had hypothesized that the online version of the course might appeal more to students who did not intend to attend tutorials, as the anonymity that the environment provides might cover absences better. In fact, 97.4% of those taking the online version expressed that they intended to participate in tutorials compared to a smaller 90.1% of the face-to-face students.

The questionnaires returned at the end of the course showed that actual attendance did not match the intentions expressed at the beginning of the course for the students taking the online version. Indeed 10% of the face-to-face students never attended any tutorials (which exactly matched the 90% who intended to), but in the online strand the 2.6% who did not intend to attend grew to a 13.2% who never attended any tutorials. In contrast, over 40% of face-to-face and just under 30% of online students attended all or almost all tutorials, with the attendance in-between presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Tutorial Attendance

Tutorials attended:	All or almost all	More than half	About half	Fewer than half	One	None
Face-to-face	40.2%	12.3%	12.8%	14.9%	9.8%	10.0%
Online	29.1%	14.6%	10.6%	26.5%	6.0%	13.2%

### Helpfulness of Tutorials

The students from both strands were asked how helpful participating in tutorials was for the development of their spoken Spanish. Overall, 76% of face-to-face and 71.1% of online students found tutorials very or fairly useful and 11.4% of face-to-face and 13.4% of online students not very or not at all useful.

### Dropout Rate

The dropout rate for lower-level distance language courses at The Open University is high. About 50% of students dropped out of the course, which is in line with the trend. The ratio of face-to-face and online students at the beginning of the course was 76.4% face-to-face and 23.6% online. At the end of the course, the ratio had changed slightly to 79% face-to-face and 21% online. The 2.6% difference is not large, but more online than face-to-face students dropped out.

### Course Results

The course result is a combination of continuous assessment and the written and oral end-of-course assessment components. Course results for the first presentation of the course were very high. There are four possible marks: distinction (85% and above), pass (40 to 84%), “high” fail, with entitlement to retake the end-of-course components (15 to 39% in the continuous assessment and 40% or more in the end-of-course assessment), and fail (less than 40% in the end-of-course assessment and 0-14% in the continuous assessment). Overall, 23.2% of students obtained a distinction, 65.1% passed, 4.3% got a high fail, and 6.2% failed. The breakdown between the face-to-face and online courses can be seen in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Course Results

Results:	Distinction	Pass	Fail (Can resit)	Fail
Face-to-face	25.2%	63.8%	4%	5.8%
Online	15.8%	69.7%	5.3%	7.9%

### Further Study

Of those students who completed the end of course questionnaire, 76.9% intended to continue studying Spanish (face-to-face 77.9% / online 73.2%), 7% did not (face-to-face 7.3% / online 6%), and 16.1% were not sure (face-to-face 14.9% / online 20.8%). The tuition mode, therefore, does not appear to have a considerable effect on their intention to continue with their

studies of the language. Of the 549 students who stated that they wished to continue their studies, 453 ticked that they would continue by taking the next OU Spanish course which now also offers either face-to-face or online tutorials. Of those who took the face-to-face strand, 93.4% intended to continue with the face-to-face option in the next level, and 6.6% intended to switch to the online version. Of the online tuition students, 74.2% ticked that they would continue with the online option and 25.8% would switch to the face-to-face option.

### *The Small-Scale Survey: The Learning Experience of the Online Students*

In addition to the data gathered by the general large-sale survey, a small survey was carried out with one of the online tutorial groups. The students completed a questionnaire which focused entirely on their online tutorials, and was mostly open-ended to gather their impressions without imposing the restrictions of multiple choices, which might have reflected the researcher's hypotheses. After obtaining permission from their tutor, the questionnaire was sent immediately after the end of the course in October 2004 to the fifteen students who were originally in one of the online tutorial groups. Four participants had abandoned the course and did not reply, and of the remaining eleven, seven returned the questionnaire (see Appendix A for full questionnaire). The questionnaire asked the students about:

1. the tutorials: attendance, what they found particularly useful, enjoyable, and difficult about the tutorials, whether they thought they had got enough opportunities to speak, and whether they thought that attending the online tutorials had improved their language skills.
2. the software and its potential for language learning: whether they like using the software and felt confident using it, whether they had experienced any problems, if the time spent online was worth it, the most and least helpful aspect of using the software for language learning, and whether they had used the software outside tutorials.
3. the online environment: if they agreed with statements about the online environment being cold and slow, and what the atmosphere in the tutorials was like: whether they felt at ease with their fellow students and if they got to know their classmates.
4. their choice between online or face-to-face tuition: their reasons for choosing the online version of the course, which version of the course they would prefer if they were taking it again, their opinion of the experience of being assessed using the audio-graphic environment, whether they would continue studying Spanish, and - given the choice - whether they would choose an audio-graphic-based course or switch to face to face.

Before progressing any further, it is worth presenting the following video clips, which show two examples of students interacting in *Lyceum*. Permission to record and display the extracts for research purposes was granted by all participants.

The first one was captured during the student's second tutorial for their Spanish course. Having revised exchanging personal information, the tutor presents a grid with a jumbled dialogue between a French student and a Japanese student who meet at a Spanish school. After the students collaborate to arrange the dialogue in the correct order, they are asked to reproduce the dialogue with their own personal information.



<http://www.readingmatrix.com/articles/rosell-aguilar/videoclip1.rm>

The second clip was captured during the fourteenth tutorial for the course. Although the change in the mood is hard to capture or transcribe, the clip shows both how comfortable students feel and how humorous exchanges can take place in the environment. In the clip, a student is asked what she is wearing (an activity that is normally meaningless in a face-to-face environment as the rest of the students can see what the others are wearing but becomes a real exchange of information in the online environment). The student replies “nada” (nothing), causing a burst of laughter from the tutor. Another student later says that he is wearing only his boots and underwear. Taken out of context this could be misinterpreted, but in the tutorial it was a clear example of students who felt comfortable with one another and their tutor, and an environment that does not feel at all cold.



<http://www.readingmatrix.com/articles/rosell-aguilar/videoclip2.rm>

The responses to the small-scale survey are presented here in four sections as described above: tutorials, the software and its potential for language learning, the online environment, and student choice between online or face-to-face tuition:

### Tutorials

Of the seven students who returned the questionnaire, three had attended all or almost all of the tutorials, one had attended more than half, and three had attended fewer than half. One of the main reasons for non-attendance at particular tutorials was that students were not free (5 responses). One mentioned technical problems, and another the fact that she fell behind. One of the students wrote that she found it hard to concentrate “for such long periods.”

All seven students stated that their main reason for attending the tutorials was to practice Spanish. Six felt that they achieved this purpose, but one felt she had not (“because my concentration would go, then I could not fully avail of the help.”). This student attended few tutorials and was a false-beginner who was also taking the following intermediate Spanish course. In addition, other goals mentioned were to practice pronunciation (2), to obtain feedback (2), and to meet or keep in touch with the tutor and other students (2).

Students were asked what they found particularly useful, enjoyable, and difficult about the tutorials. What they found most useful were pronunciation practice (3), getting feedback and the opportunity to ask questions (2), and meeting and talking to others (2). What they found particularly enjoyable was the fact that the tutorials were fun, enjoyable, and had a relaxed atmosphere (3), meeting and interacting with other fellow students (3), as well as the feeling of having learned and not having to travel. What they found most difficult about the tutorials was on the one hand related to the online environment: one student referred to “technical problems and slowness of the system,” another found it hard keeping up concentration in the online environment, and one did not feel at ease with the software (“getting used to the technology,

feeling relaxed about it. In fact I never did”), and on the other hand related to their studies in general such as making spontaneous replies in Spanish and keeping up with the material. Two of the students stated that they found nothing difficult about the tutorials.

All respondents felt that they got enough opportunities to speak, and five of them think that they made the most of these opportunities. The other two were the student who fell behind with her coursework and the one who did not attend much, which may be the reason for these responses, since all seven agreed that attending the online tutorials had improved their language skills.

### The Software and its Potential for Language Learning

Four of the students said they liked using *Lyceum*, one did not reply, one said she neither liked nor disliked it, and one student said she did not like it as her concentration “goes very quickly,” but then added that “for people who are not good in face-to-face situations then it is superb.” Six students felt confident using the software; all but one ticked that they knew what most of the menus, icons and buttons do and felt they could use the modules.

Five respondents had experienced problems while using the software, of which four related to sound. Of these, two solved their problem quickly and the other two had intermittent problems with sound quality. The other two problems were one of usage (not being able to open a whiteboard at the beginning) and the other was being disconnected from the system. This student thought that encountering these problems had a negative impact on their learning, as did two others (one specified that this was only at the beginning of the course). The other four did not think that technical problems had a negative effect. Regardless of those problems, all seven students felt that the time spent online using the software was worth it.

Six of the students stated that the most helpful aspect of using *Lyceum* for language learning was the possibility of attending tutorials from a distance and interacting in the target language (“it is just like having a school in your own home.”). Two of the students stated how not seeing the others was beneficial: one thinks that not being able to see other students led her to using her listening skills more effectively, and the other added that the anonymity provided by the medium led to feeling less intimidated, which allowed her to feel more confident and enthusiastic about learning “and not feeling as bad or put off if you make mistakes. It allows people like me to complete their studies, who may otherwise have withdrawn.” In contrast, two other students choose the lack of body language and paralinguistic clues as the least helpful aspect of using the audio-graphic software for language learning. Another two students mention slowness, and the other three cannot think of anything negative about the software.

The software allows students to connect outside scheduled tutorials and many meet to practice with other students in self-help groups. Five students used the software outside tutorial time for this purpose, although they do not provide details of how often or how they used it.

### The Online Environment

Students were asked if they agreed that the online environment was cold. Six out of the seven students disagreed, and the seventh said she both agreed and disagreed. She stated “yes [it is cold] because you are unable to speak continuously like in full conversation. It is not cold from the point of view that it allows people ... to gain their confidence from the fact that it is not face to face.” Two of the students mentioned the role their tutor played in creating a good atmosphere. One said “Not cold – for our tutor was the very opposite and her warmth, friendliness and

encouragement as well as sense of humor were very evident at every session.” However, she qualified her statement by adding that “it can feel a little stilted and unnatural and therefore intimidating.” One of the students expected it to be a cold medium, but found it was not (“I would have thought so myself, but no, not in my experience. I’m a radio listener, I think the voice is wonderful, and it’s less distracting just to hear a voice.”) Having realistic preconceptions of what a VLE is and what can be achieved is another factor as can be extracted from these replies: “I believe the rewards from *Lyceum* are commensurate with the efforts applied” and “I would not describe it as a cold medium as *Lyceum* tutorials were based on human interaction.” Another student added: “it is what you make it. Obviously [it is] not going to be like an ordinary class. I would not be able to learn as much in an ordinary language school.” The most positive comment is that of a student who wrote: “I have made so many friends through *Lyceum* and had such fun during the tutorials.”

Students were also asked to agree or disagree with the statement that ‘communication can be quite slow.’ Four of the students agreed, and three disagreed. Among those who agreed it is slow, one wrote: “Yes, it is very slow, you get bored easily and concentration disappears.” Another stated that “there is often a silence while everyone waits for the others to say something” and another added that “it’s certainly slower and can be a little inflexible: No hand gestures ... easier to misunderstand people.” The fourth one agreed: “I would not want to see a large class because it would take too long to get a chance to speak.” Among those who did not think that communication is slow one stated that “any communication problems I might have experienced were due to times where I had not prepared/studied enough for the tutorials.” Another wrote, “I don’t think that communication is unduly slow on *Lyceum*” and the third student agreed, “obviously it is not as fast as face to face but you quickly get used to it.”

With regards to the atmosphere in the tutorial, five of the students felt that they got to know the other students in the course who attended the same tutorials, although one specified that “not as well as if I had met them face to face.” The other two did not feel like they got to know the others, but one clarified that “you do eventually feel comfortable with your group and end up having conversations before and after the tutorials.” Six claimed that they felt at ease with their fellow students, although one did not. All seven students stated that they felt they were part of a group and not isolated.

#### Student Choice Between Online or Face-to-Face Tuition.

Students were asked why they chose the version of the course with online tuition. The main reason, given by six students, was connecting from home and not having to travel to tutorials, either because they were not willing to or live far away from the center where the tutorials are held. For some, it was this that sold the course to them (“I think it is fantastic to be able to complete a course from your living room. It was the opportunity of working through *Lyceum* that convinced me to register for *Portales*.”). Another reason was avoiding face to face contact (“I am not good with face to face so *Lyceum* provided a very valuable alternative ... it encouraged me to learn, whereas face to face may have made me too uncomfortable and then my studies would have suffered.”).

In response to the question ‘Regardless of your personal circumstances (distance, accessibility), if you had the chance to start this course again now that you have experienced *Lyceum*, which version would you prefer?’, two respondents ticked ‘face-to-face’ and explained that this was because they think that “there is no substitute for face-to-face” and “face-to-face cannot be bettered.” The other five ticked ‘*Lyceum*.’ One student praised the flexibility that the

software affords as she travels a lot and can connect to tutorials from different locations in different countries and another because she enjoyed using it and found it practical and innovative. Another student stated that she preferred the audio-graphic environment “because I am not good with face-to-face tutorials and so *Lyceum* is great for those in similar positions to myself – a great confidence booster (...) I feel if it had been face-to-face I may have found it too much and may have withdrawn from the course.” Yet another student agreed (“it suits shy people better”) and added that she did not want to travel to tutorials. The last student who preferred the online option wrote that “regardless of distance, it is much easier to connect in your own home and also the tutorials are only for one hour.”

All students completed the oral component of their end of course assessment online. Almost all of them found that the experience was fine and they did not experience any problems, except one student whose sound was not as clear as she would have liked. Six students wrote they would continue studying Spanish and all of them, when given the choice between a course with audio-graphic tutorial provision or switching to face-to-face, claimed that they would take the online option again. Their reasons were convenience (“suits me better”), motivation (“if the facility wasn’t there I wouldn’t be able to continue. Being a mature student with lots of responsibilities I would find every excuse under the sun not to attend”), enjoyment (“I really enjoyed studying Portales through *Lyceum* so I hope to study *en Rumbo* [the next level OU Spanish course] through *Lyceum*), anonymity (“it’s much more embarrassing and off-putting when you are face-to-face”), and familiarity (“at this stage I have some understanding of *Lyceum* so I can, with practice, only get better and more comfortable with it. Also I want to continue to improve my computer skills.”).

### Conclusion

Given that tuition time represents only a small part of the total number of hours to complete the course, and that the students have access to many other sources of input and stimuli, there are too many variables for the small differences found between the online and face-to-face environments in the large-scale study to be conclusive. The results from the large study show that online and face-to-face learners are not very different in terms of age or sex, in contrast with previous speculation that it might appeal to younger male students. Although attendance to tutorials overall is quite similar, online learners expressed less intention to miss tutorials than their face-to-face counterparts. However, more online learners never attended at all. It must be taken into consideration that, on average, face-to-face tutors scheduled 12 tutorials throughout the year (approximately once a month), whereas most online tutors scheduled between 18 and 24 (almost fortnightly). The reason for this is mostly financial: face-to-face tutorials require the hiring of classroom space and students and tutors incur traveling expenses, whereas there is no cost (other than connection fees with their internet provider) involved in the use of the online environment. Because of this scheduling, a student who attended, say, six tutorials would have attended half the face-to-face tutorials but only a quarter of online tutorials, and in some cases an online student would have had to attend double the number of tutorials than a face-to-face student to claim that they had attended all tutorials. Both online and face-to-face learners reported similar perceived benefits of attending.

The difference in dropout rate is not prominent, but the course results show that 10% more face-to-face learners achieved a distinction than online learners, for which no explanation is apparent. Given that the course result is a combination of the continuous assessment and the

end-of-course assessment, and the fact that tutorials are not compulsory (and only represent 21 hours out of the 300 it takes to complete the course), to establish a direct correlation between the result and the tutorial mode would be impossible, especially as attendance is low. The beginner course and the follow-up lower-intermediate course form the certificate in Spanish qualification. Since the lower-intermediate course was available for many years before the introduction of the beginner course, but only with the option of face-to-face tuition, a large number of students took the beginner course only for credit purposes after having completed the follow-up course. It is possible that those students took the face-to-face option (which they were familiar with) and therefore, as false beginners, skewed the ratio of distinctions in the face-to-face option. Despite this, the difference in numbers of distinctions is striking and possibly worthy of further research.

The higher number of students who wish to switch from online to face-to-face rather than vice-versa suggests that a quarter of the online students have not had a good enough experience with the online tuition to wish to continue using the medium. On a more positive note, it can be assumed that over 6% of the face-to-face students have received reports about the online option positive enough to make them want to switch to it. This shows that online learning appeals more to a certain type of student. Given that there are no major differences that can be extracted from personal details, the key to finding out who is better suited to online learning will depend, as some of the responses showed, on characteristics such as learning style and personality.

There are limitations in the small study because of the low numbers and the nature of self-report, but the responses show that three of the reasons for choosing the online option given by students match previous hypotheses (Rosell-Aguilar, 2005): access (motivation and convenience), enjoying the use of computers, and anonymity (using the computer as a “shield” for students who are afraid of making mistakes face-to-face). A reason that respondents did not mention was assuming that the whole course was online. This has been discussed in the past in the text-only course conference and it is one of the reasons why some students withdraw from the course. It may not have been mentioned here as only those that completed the course returned the small-scale survey. The small-scale study also shows that although over half the students describe the communication patterns as slow, the audio-graphic environment is not generally considered cold and students felt comfortable using it. The lack of visual clues had been perceived to have both negative (Hampel, 2003) and positive (de los Arcos & Arnedillo Sánchez, 2006) sides to it and this was confirmed by the responses, which may therefore mean that it is more a case of individual styles and preferences rather than an issue about the medium. The challenges and benefits of audio-graphic tuition are very similar to those previously reported, especially technical problems and the fact that these are still perceived to have a negative impact on the learning experience for some, just like tutors do. Despite this, the software is generally liked and perceived to provide a useful, convenient learning environment which provides students with opportunities to interact with their tutor and each other.

Research into audio-graphic SCMC environments has so far been mostly carried out by the institutions that have access to such software and therefore, although the potential for language learning is great, the impact for other researchers and institutions has been limited. At the UK Open University, *Lyceum* will be phased out from 2008 and replaced by a new Moodle-based open-content audio-graphic synchronous conferencing tool which should have similar characteristics and provide similar affordances. The lessons learned from experience and research will actively inform the design of the new tool. With this development, the insight into teaching with such tools becomes more valuable and also open to other language learning professionals and institutions for teaching and research.

Future research should include the observation and analysis of tutorials, how the different modules and tools are used, task design in practice, and the nature of interactions in the audio-graphic environment. Also, the students who took part in the small study presented here had a tutor who was very positive about the audio-graphic software. Whether these results would have been affected by asking students who had a different tutor would be interesting as the personality and style of the tutor will no doubt affect impressions and performance. In addition, research into the learning styles and motivation of students, both those who complete and those who withdraw from the course, would be a major advancement in finding out what differences there are between good online and face-to-face learners.

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## Appendix A

### LZX 194 End of course questionnaire

Please answer these questions as accurately as you can. Where possible give as much detail as you can. Where there are boxes, just replace the box with an "X" to indicate your answer(s) or delete all the other options available.

All information gathered in connection with this project will remain strictly confidential and participants will not be publicly identified.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

- 1 How many tutorials have you attended during the course?  
all or almost all  more than half  about half   
fewer than half  one  none
- 2 What were your main reasons for not attending the tutorials you missed?  
If you attended tutorials:
- 3 What was your main purpose for attending these tutorials?
- 4 Overall, do you feel that you achieved this purpose?  
Yes  No
- 5 What did you find particularly useful about the tutorials?
- 6 What did you find particularly enjoyable about the tutorials?
- 7 What did you find particularly difficult about the tutorials?
- 8 Overall, did you feel that you got enough opportunities to speak?  
Yes  No
- 9 Overall, do you think you made the most of these opportunities?  
Yes  No
- 10 Overall, which do you prefer?  
Working with the whole group  Working in small groups

11 Why?

12 Has attending the Lyceum tutorials improved your language skills?

Yes  No

13 If YES which skill has improved? (please number these on a scale of 1-4 to indicate which skill you think improved the most: 1 = most 4 = least)

Vocabulary  Grammar  Listening comprehension  Speaking

14 Did you find the graphics/images, boxes and text on screen helpful for the activities?

Yes  No

15 What is your opinion of the preparation document on the course website?

16 Regardless of your personal circumstances (distance, accessibility), if you had the chance to start this course again now that you have experienced Lyceum, which version would you prefer?

Face to face  Lyceum

17 Why?

18 Why did you choose the Lyceum version of the course?

19 Do you like using Lyceum?

Yes  No

20 Overall, do you feel confident using Lyceum?

Yes  No

21 Do you think you know what most of the menus, icons and buttons do?

Yes  No

22 Do you feel you can use the modules (whiteboard, grid, and document)?

Yes  No

23 Do you feel you can use the tools (pin, moving boxes, writing, pictures...)?

Yes  No

24 Does your ability to use the modules and tools impact on what you learn at the tutorial?

Yes  No

25 Did you ever experience any problems while using Lyceum?

Yes  No

26 If YES, what kind of problem?

27 Did encountering such problems have a negative impact on your learning?

Yes  No

28 What did you usually do when encountering a problem?

29 Do you think that the time you spent online using Lyceum was worth it?

Yes  No

30 In your opinion what is the most helpful aspect of using Lyceum for language learning?

31 In your opinion what is the least helpful aspect of using Lyceum for language learning?

32 Did you ever use Lyceum outside tutorials?

Yes  No

33 If YES, how many times approximately?

What for?

34 Did you take your ECA2 via Lyceum?

Yes  No

35 If not why not?

36 How was your experience of doing assessment on Lyceum?

37 One comment about Lyceum is that it is a “cold” medium. Do you agree?

Yes  No  Please comment:

38 Another comment about Lyceum is that communication can be quite slow. Do you agree?

Yes  No  Please comment.

39 Do you feel that you got to know the other students in the course who attended the same tutorials as you?

Yes  No

40 Did you feel at ease with your fellow students?

Yes  No

41 Did you feel part of a group or isolated? Please comment.

42 Would you change anything in Lyceum?

Yes  No

43 If YES what would you change?

44 Will you continue studying Spanish?

Yes  No

45 If YES, would you choose another Lyceum-taught course or switch to face to face?

46 Why?

*Thank you very much for taking part in this study.*