My research centers on the acquisition of Spanish by native English speakers. Specifically, I work within the field of instructed language acquisition: learning that takes place in the classroom or other formal settings. Although my work focuses on all aspects of language, my primary interest lies in the acquisition of the phonetics/phonology of the second language, and what the learner must do: perceive new sounds; accommodate a new system that either coexists or merges with the native system; and produce new and different second language sounds. I have, however, conducted research in various areas of language, from sounds to grammar to attitudes, because it is impossible to separate one element of a language from the others. No single aspect can exist independently of the others, and only by examining the learner and the system together can we begin to understand the complexities involved in acquiring new systems. I approach the issues related to instructed Spanish acquisition from two primary perspectives: the design of language programs; and the role that environmental factors play in the acquisition process.

My work with language program design is a direct result of having taken over the direction of the lower division Spanish program in 2009. Although I had worked with the intermediate Spanish classes for years prior to that, taking on the much larger beginning Spanish program as well represented a range of new challenges. Surprisingly, I found remarkably little prior literature – scholarly or otherwise – to consult, which led me to research and write my own monograph on the theory and praxis of designing and directing language programs. The creation of this volume coincided with a time in which language enrollments across the US were declining, and programs around the country were exploring ways to modify and modernize their curricula, so my book appeared at a truly opportune moment. It has since led to other invited talks, workshops and publications in the areas of language program design and program articulation, and has served as a guiding framework for language program directors at various institutions, including our own.

The other angle of my research explores variables related to the learning environment. This factor encompasses a wide range of settings in which language learning can take place, and how: from classrooms to naturalistic immersion, from study abroad programs to online courses. I have conducted research on acquisition during study abroad (e.g., my 2010 article), although with the growing local and national interest in online learning, my experience in computer assisted language instruction (CALL) has pushed that area to the forefront of my research agenda in recent years. My work in CALL investigates what tools can be beneficial in learning languages, and how. I have experimented with podcasting, blogging and microblogging (e.g., Twitter), social networking
(e.g., Facebook), and more recently have explored the effectiveness of Rosetta Stone program, questioning if their programs stand up to the claims made by their advertisements. My research looks generally at the affordances of these tools but also, crucially, how educators and learners must incorporate them into the learning process in order to maximize outcomes. In my studies I look primarily at measurable linguistic variables, and how technology tools can impact the language the students produce, but I am also interested in cultural and attitudinal outcomes as well.

My current project is one that unites my expertise in language program direction, my passion for instructed language acquisition, and my interest in maximizing the benefits of technology in this endeavor. I am co-authoring the first-ever Spanish language program that has been conceived, created, and designed for digital delivery. Although on the surface a well-designed program should appear simple, even easy to use, the best pedagogical texts are those that are based on solid theory and empirically tested tenets. This program brings together our expertise in language learning theories and CALL, to provide a new, effective experience for both students and instructors. More than any other project I have undertaken, I believe this one has the potential to truly change the way languages are taught and learned.

There is no shortage of avenues to explore moving forward. Students will continue to learn languages in our increasingly multinational world, and we will always need to know how they learn, and how we can help them. With our online and hybrid course offerings going strong, and ample opportunities to incorporate emerging technologies into a variety of other courses, I can continue to link my research and my administrative and pedagogical interests.