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Hybrid Language Teaching and Learning: Exploring Theoretical, Pedagogical and Curricular Issues

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Chapter 1

Hybrid Language Teaching and Learning: Looking Forward

Fernando Rubio and Joshua J. Thoms

The topic of this 23rd volume in the AAUSC Issues in Language Program Direction series is relevant to our readership and timely for our profession. Hybrid language teaching and learning, also referred to as “blended learning” (BL), has become an increasingly popular model for the delivery of foreign language (FL) courses at the college level in the United States. Several factors have contributed to the proliferation of hybrid models of instruction in various institutions. Some include a more thorough understanding of how computer-assisted language learning (CALL), when informed by second language acquisition (SLA) theories, can facilitate learners’ abilities to access input and produce output more effectively in the second language (L2), notice and correct linguistic errors more efficiently, and interact more easily with native speakers of the L2 to understand facets of the L2 culture better, among other benefits. In addition, many FL textbooks now incorporate interactive online components that allow an instructor or a language program director (LPD) to be more creative and flexible when planning a course and determining what can be taught in and outside of the classroom. Yet another factor that plays a role in the growing number of hybrid course offerings is the economy. Given the economic downturn in recent years, many institutions’ budgets have been cut, which has directly affected how FL programs—both large and small—deliver their courses. In some instances, administrators in universities have suggested that FL programs adopt a hybrid learning or BL model to use resources more efficiently versus severely reducing the number of sections of FL courses offered or eliminating FL programs altogether.

Regardless of the reason for the increase in the number of hybrid courses being offered throughout the United States, it is clear that blended teaching and learning is quickly becoming an essential alternative in many FL programs. Specifically, in addition to the option to enroll in a traditional face-to-face FL course, several FL programs now offer students the possibility to take the same course in a hybrid, blended, or fully online format. Therefore, we believe that it is important for our profession to understand the power of different technologies to provide a solid foundation for the design of BL contexts and the theoretical underpinnings that may justify their integration. Although this volume does not claim to have all the answers to the many questions that the recent explosion of BL has raised, we believe that it will guide our readers into aspects of blended teaching and learning that can be of specific interest to them.

In a 2006 review of hybrid learning, Buzzetto-More and Sweat-Guy predicted that hybrid learning was “poised to cause a paradigm shift in higher education” (p. 153). However, unlike other disciplines, particularly mathematics, FL is a

latecomer to the blended world. In fact, no research was available on blended FL courses until Adair-Hauck, Willingham-McLain, and Youngs (2000) evaluated Carnegie Mellon University's program. Since then, CALL researchers have investigated a variety of issues related to FL hybrid courses and have provided insight into the effects of hybrid FL courses on L2 learning and teaching. This volume contributes to that ongoing research effort and provides readers with some useful and practical information that university administrators, LPDs, instructors, and students should consider when experimenting with FL hybrid courses. Although several chapters in this volume offer insights into the various issues that need to be taken into consideration when starting or maintaining a hybrid FL course, we would like to briefly underscore some of those issues here.

Hybrid Foreign Language Courses: Issues to Consider

Before highlighting some of the essential aspects of FL hybrid courses that LPDs and administrators need to consider when creating or implementing these kinds of courses in their FL programs, it is first necessary to define what is meant by hybrid or blended teaching and learning. The definition of *blended teaching and learning* can take a broad approach in which technology is seen as a supplement to a traditional course without substantially altering its approach (for more definitions, see Graham, 2005; Heinze & Proctor, 2004; Nicolson, Murphy, & Southgate, 2011). On the other hand, a more narrow definition, such as the following one adopted by Laster, Otte, Picciano, and Sorg (2005), can also apply: "Courses that integrate online with traditional face-to-face class activities in a planned, pedagogically valuable manner; and where a portion (institutionally defined) of face-to-face time is replaced by online activity." When using the term *hybrid or blended FL course*, we are referring to the aforementioned definition by Laster et al. (2005)—using technology and online projects to replace some portion of face-to-face class time with the aim of reducing in-class contact time without sacrificing the quality of instruction, the learning experience of students, or the learning outcomes of the course.

We now turn to some of the main issues that are important to consider for any LPD who is given the task of creating or maintaining a hybrid FL course. These insights come from our experiences as LPDs who have been in charge of one or more hybrid courses in large FL programs.

Time and Resources

Although hybrid models can afford students and teachers a number of benefits related to L2 learning and teaching, it is worth mentioning early on that implementing and maintaining an effective FL hybrid program can be challenging if LPDs are not allowed the necessary time and resources for this endeavor. Specifically, LPDs need to consider a variety of issues when creating an FL hybrid course or when adapting a traditional course to be taught in a hybrid format. Much of the initial learning phase requires time for LPDs and the instructors who may be asked to help design and implement an FL hybrid course.

It is therefore imperative that anyone considering implementation of an FL hybrid course (e.g., deans, department chairs, or LPDs) realize that those involved with the implementation of the hybrid course need to be provided the essential resources upfront. That might mean that an LPD or instructor be given a course release to spend time (a) researching the various formats hybrid or blended courses can take, (b) experimenting with or understanding the various technologies to be incorporated in the course, (c) working with the publisher of the textbook to see if additional online content can be made accessible to students in the future hybrid course, and (d) familiarizing potential instructors with what a hybrid or blended teaching approach entails, among other tasks. To reiterate, this initial investment in time and resources helps to ensure that all aspects of the FL hybrid course be fully addressed and developed.

Course Redesign and Training for Instructors

In her discussion on the relationship between SLA theory and CALL, Chapelle (2009) reminds us that “based on their work with technology in other domains, most people would probably readily agree that technology alone is not the answer, but that a real solution will draw on technology in a manner that is informed by professional and scientific knowledge about SLA” (p. 750). As the methodology and SLA experts in their programs, the LPDs have the responsibility to pay attention to what we know from SLA theory and consider what aspects of the acquisition process lend themselves best to technology integration and why so they can create the optimal blend of face-to-face and online experiences that will result in improved learning.

Foreign language programs differ in their situational factors and intended goals and outcomes, but a well-designed blended course always starts by establishing the desired results, determining what constitutes appropriate assessment evidence, and then building a learning plan that takes maximal advantage of the face-to-face time with students and of the avenues opened up by interaction with or through a computer. Input, output, feedback, and interaction are aspects of the language acquisition process that are considered crucial by most SLA theories. Therefore, LPDs who are considering embarking on the design of a blended course should take into account and take advantage of the ways that technology changes how we access and interact with input, produce output, and provide and react to feedback. Additionally, a variety of collaborative tools and social networking sites can promote learner autonomy, collaboration outside the classroom, and access to authentic materials and native speakers. Several chapters in this volume provide excellent reviews of technology tools—many of them not necessarily designed for teaching purposes—that provide favorable conditions for language acquisition.

The integration of all or some of these options and the resulting augmented role that technology assumes in a blended course should also translate into pedagogical changes in the classroom. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. More than 20 years ago, Garrett (1991) warned that “technology that can be taken for granted is already light years ahead of the profession’s ability to integrate a principled use of it into the classroom and the curriculum” (p. 74). Again, the role of the LPD must be to start with a 3,000-foot view of his or her language program,

determine what technology is practical and advisable to use based on sound theoretical principles, and then make ground-level decisions regarding what elements of a course can benefit from moving to the online environment and how this move should alter the pedagogy of the face-to-face components. One of the safest approaches is to make sure that there is a seamless connection between what students do online and what happens in the classroom so that even though the medium may change, the overall objectives remain the same.

It is also worth noting here that the instructors asked to teach a hybrid course need to receive adequate training about what hybrid courses are and how the various technologies incorporated in a particular blended course can be used in a pedagogically sound manner. Given that many of the lower-level courses, particularly in large FL programs, are staffed by graduate student teaching assistants (TAs) in many universities in the United States (Maxim, 2009; MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007), it is likely that TAs will be given the task of teaching a hybrid course in any given FL program. Although many TAs make use of a variety of technologies on a daily basis outside of their academic lives, few receive training in their FL programs regarding how technology can be integrated in their teaching (Thoms, 2011). As a result, LPDs considering the implementation of hybrid courses in their FL program need to provide extensive, ongoing training to TAs regarding how various technological applications work and how they can be used in their assigned hybrid FL course. LPDs should also consider involving TAs early on in the process of creating hybrid courses because some graduate students will be able to contribute their extensive knowledge about how specific technologies (e.g., Twitter, wikis, and social networking sites such as Facebook and Ning) can be integrated into the hybrid FL course syllabus.

The Cost Versus Quality Debate

The experience of a significant number of institutions across the country has demonstrated that redesigning courses to the blended model can result in important savings. The National Center for Academic Transformation (n.d.) provides a full report on the degree of success, financial and otherwise, of more than 100 programs in a variety of disciplines. After the field has established that blended contexts do not have any negative effects on acquisition and that they are a legitimate alternative to other curricular options, we have to move past the need to justify their existence based solely on the financial benefits that an institution can accrue from implementing blended courses. Perhaps the financial focus should turn from institutions to students and the discussion should revolve around how BL may lower the cost of education as we discuss below when we mention the marriage of blended teaching and open educational resources.

In any case, quality should remain the central consideration when deciding on a course design or redesign. Interestingly, of the many submissions that we initially received for this volume, none addressed the practical advantages of BL as an answer to budgetary or space concerns or enrollment pressures. On the contrary, as the different sections of the volume clearly indicate, our profession understands that the decision to “go blended” should be considered as an opportunity to facilitate the integration of content and language from the introductory

levels of instruction, address the needs and draw on the strengths of a variety of learners, foster the formation of communities of learners, improve linguistic outcomes, and adopt pedagogies that are well grounded in SLA theories.

Assessing the Effectiveness of Hybrid Course(s)

Language program directors need to focus their energy on designing courses that are pedagogically sound and based on what we know from current theories of language acquisition about the benefits of integrating technology. As blended models continue to evolve, assessment will have to adapt as well. But rather than using the traditional face-to-face course as the benchmark against which blended (and online) courses need to be measured (see Blake, Chapter 2), assessment needs to address how new modes of delivery meet the needs of a changing student population, in terms of both facilitating their linguistic gains and addressing their social and cognitive needs.

Our profession understood years ago that teaching with technology meant a lot more than simply making materials available to students online. Likewise, an assessment plan for a blended course cannot be an online replica of how students are assessed in a traditional class. If we test not only *what* we teach but also *how* we teach, assessment in the blended course needs to be significantly redesigned to reflect how students learn when technology is an integral component of the learning process. Although linguistic indicators are a good starting point, assessment should not stop there. A successful program also needs to look at other aspects of the learning process and gauge the impact that technology integration may have on issues such as student satisfaction and retention, ability to adapt to different learning styles, or ability to facilitate learner autonomy, among others. Of course, only if the results of the assessment are then used to revise and refine the course redesign will we be able to effectively close the assessment loop. Because the ultimate goal of any redesign should always be enhancing program effectiveness and raising program standards, all constituents (other faculty, graduate student TAs, undergraduate students, administrators), not just the LPD, need to be involved in the assessment process.

What This Volume Offers

The remaining 10 chapters in this volume, organized in five sections, offer readers insights, reflections, analysis, and guidance related to creating, maintaining, and assessing the effectiveness of a hybrid FL course. Although some of the chapters report on empirical research related to the benefits of hybrid courses for L2 learning and teaching, all of them offer valuable information to LPDs who are in charge of creating or sustaining a hybrid FL course.

This chapter, coupled with the second chapter, introduces some of the fundamental issues related to offering hybrid FL courses. LPDs are offered some practical advice from Robert Blake, who, in his chapter “Best Practices in Online Learning: Is It for Everyone?” presents readers with a number of concerns that LPDs should consider when implementing hybrid and fully online FL courses in

their programs. In addition to exploring reasons why some still question whether or not a hybrid or fully online FL course should be afforded equal credit as a traditional FL course, Blake goes on to explain that hybrid courses are good alternatives for certain kinds of students but may not be suitable contexts of learning for all students. Specifically, he reports on research indicating that conscientiousness is an important personality trait that can determine a student's success in an FL hybrid course. That is, students who are diligent and dedicated to their academic work in general are those who will perform well in the FL hybrid course environment.

The second theme of the volume explores a number of theoretical issues about principles of SLA that need to be considered when designing a hybrid FL course. In Chapter 3, "Theoretical and Empirical Foundations for Blended Language Learning," Senta Goertler discusses the connection between CALL and SLA theory and the ways in which theory should both inform the design of blended courses and drive the research conducted in them. Her chapter presents seven different formats of CALL: CALL tutorials, intelligent CALL (iCALL), computer-mediated communication (CMC) with peers, CMC across cultures, online communities, games, and simulations. Goertler discusses how each tool can be beneficial from one or more theoretical perspectives. The chapter concludes with a review of how BL can respond to some of the common understandings of the SLA process and provides a list of practical recommendations for anyone interested in designing a blended course.

Chapter 4, "Beyond Hybrid Learning: A Synthesis of Research on E-tutors Under the Lens of Second Language Acquisition Theory," written by Luis Cerezo, offers a review of research conducted to date on the effectiveness of e-tutors, which constitute an essential component of a number of blended FL courses. Cerezo focuses on the success of e-tutors as opposed to other pedagogical approaches to promote grammatical competence. Following SLA theory, the author argues why e-tutors are effective and discusses which e-tutors have the potential to be most effective. The chapter serves as an excellent basis upon which LPDs can make decisions regarding how to deal with grammar pedagogy in a blended environment.

The third theme of the volume addresses several curricular and pedagogical concerns. In Chapter 5, "Hybrid Learning Spaces: Re-envisioning Language Learning," Lara Ducate, Lara Lomicka, and Gillian Lord offer a perspective on the changes that the profession is undergoing as a result of the inclusion of Web 2.0 technologies in the pedagogical tapestry of L2 teaching and their potential to promote collaborative learning. Their chapter reviews the theoretical underpinnings of the justification for the implementation of hybrid courses, particularly for the crucial role that some Web 2.0 tools can play in them. The last section of the chapter reviews a number of case studies of the successful use of blogs, wikis, Facebook, and Twitter in language courses. It provides examples for LPDs and instructors of how to use these tools effectively.

Chapter 6, "Introducing Blended Learning in Large Multi-Section Foreign Language Programs: An Opportunity for Reflecting on Course Content, Pedagogy, Learning Outcomes, and Assessment Issues," by Dolly Young and Jason Pettigrew provides an overview of the implementation and maintenance of hybrid courses in

a large, multi-section, Spanish language program at the University of Tennessee. Their chapter provides an overview of BL programs implemented across the country over the past decade. They emphasize the fact that in most cases, the motivations behind the implementation of blended courses and the way the redesign is reported revolves around issues of cost savings, course delivery, and instructional components rather than pedagogical or curricular issues. In an effort to move beyond the way that BL courses are normally described and to provide LPDs with some useful guidance, they offer a detailed account of how curricular and pedagogical issues were considered from the development stages to the implementation of the beginning Spanish BL course at the University of Tennessee.

Learning outcomes is the fourth theme of the volume and consists of three chapters. In Chapter 7, “The Effects of Blended Learning on Second Language Fluency and Proficiency,” Fernando Rubio reports on a study comparing linguistic gains of students enrolled in beginning-level face-to-face and blended Spanish courses. The results show no significant difference in the proficiency gains made by the two groups. However, when looking at a number of quantifiable measures of writing and speaking fluency, the data point to a small advantage for students who enrolled in the blended courses. The results suggest that a fine-grained analysis of fluency may be a better way to measure differences in linguistic gains after short treatments that are typically not enough to elicit measurable gains in proficiency.

In Chapter 8, “Complementary Functions of Face-to-Face and Online Oral Achievement Tests in a Hybrid Learning Program,” Susanne Rott discusses the advantages of combining in-class oral activities with online asynchronous tasks and the benefits for language development of this blended approach. She reports on a study comparing the type of language produced by students in three oral exam tasks: a teacher–student interview and role-play, both done face to face, and a monologue recorded online. The students in the monologue condition showed the highest level of linguistic complexity but, interestingly, they did not think that the medium allowed them to demonstrate their real abilities in the language. The results of the study should give instructors pause when deciding what tasks to assign to the online as opposed to the face-to-face component of a blended course.

In Chapter 9, “Analyzing Linguistic Outcomes of Second Language Learners: Hybrid Versus Traditional Course Contexts,” Joshua Thoms reports on an empirical study that compares gains made in speaking and writing by two groups of students enrolled in a hybrid and a face-to-face version of an elementary Spanish course. Although the results of the speaking assessment confirm what previous studies found, namely that there is no significant difference in speaking skills between the two groups, his data indicate a significant advantage in writing gains for students enrolled in the hybrid version of the course. Thoms speculates that the advantage may be attributable to increased writing practice built into the design of the hybrid version.

The volume ends with a final theme that explores a topic that is relevant to hybrid or online FL courses: open access concerns. In Chapter 10, “Opening Up Foreign Language Education: The Case of *Français Interactif*,” Carl Blyth gives an overview of the open education movement and its overall impact on higher education. He discusses how the adoption of open educational resources (OERs) in FL

courses may facilitate and improve blended teaching and learning. The chapter includes a case study of the French OER *Français Interactif* and shows how a diverse community of users finds ways to adapt the program to their particular needs. The chapter ends with suggestions for language professionals about how to take advantage of the open education movement.

The final chapter of the volume, Chapter 11, “Integrating Foundational Language and Content Study Through New Approaches to Hybrid Learning and Teaching” by Amy Rossomondo, presents the open-access Spanish program *Acceso* as an example of hybrid design and hybrid implementation. The chapter describes how the collaborative process that resulted in the development and maintenance of *Acceso* (more than 70 faculty, instructors, and graduate TAs and several different units on campus) benefits all stakeholders. It closes with a reflection on how open-access hybrid courses with a literacy-based approach can help address the challenges of integrating language and content in introductory-level FL courses while facilitating the development of digital literacies.

Looking Forward

Every year since 2005, The New Media Consortium has published the annual Horizon Report, which identifies key trends and challenges in the integration of technology in higher education. The 2011 report (Johnson, Smith, Willis, Levine, & Haywood, 2011) identifies two key trends that are crucial for understanding some of the justifications for the growth in popularity of blended teaching and learning. One has to do with the flexibility that we have come to expect in an increasingly mobile world in which students move across time and space and in and out of interaction with technology: “People expect to be able to work, learn, and study whenever and wherever they want” (p. 3). The other key trend emphasizes the changing nature of working and learning, no longer an individual endeavor: “The world of work is increasingly collaborative, giving rise to reflection about the way student projects are structured” (p. 3).

These two tendencies have crucial pedagogical consequences that our profession will need to be prepared to address, and we believe that BL can move us in the right direction. Our profession needs to come up with teaching and learning materials and practices that reflect the ways students learn outside the classroom and the ways we interact in the workplace. Because this initiative is unlikely to happen at a large scale within the traditional publishing venues, particularly in languages that are less financially attractive for publishers, we as a profession need to take advantage of the possibilities opened up by the surge in open-access and open-source educational resources. In *The Power of Open*, Casserly and Ito, respectively CEO and chair of Creative Commons, remind us that “the field of openness is approaching a critical mass of adoption that could result in sharing becoming a default standard for the many works that were previously made available only under the all-rights-reserved framework” (2011, p. 5). As Blyth (see Chapter 10) and Rossomondo (see Chapter 11) very convincingly argue in their chapters, a combination of open and closed

materials as well as online and printed ones is already used successfully at some institutions and may become “the new blended,” a new way of organizing formal learning that resembles the way people learn and interact with information today. As teachers and students continue to demand and expect more and better technology integrated into L2 courses, the cost of producing these teaching materials through the traditional channels will continue to spiral up with the corresponding increase in cost to students. Again, the open movement may provide a way to facilitate technological advances in L2 teaching without increasing the already high cost of higher education. In any case, we look forward to the various ways in which blended language teaching and learning will continue to evolve and contribute to the ever-changing landscape of FL education.

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