

## REVIEW OF *BLENDED LEARNING: USING TECHNOLOGY IN AND BEYOND THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM*

### ***Blended Learning: Using technology in and beyond the language classroom***

Pete Sharma & Barney Barrett

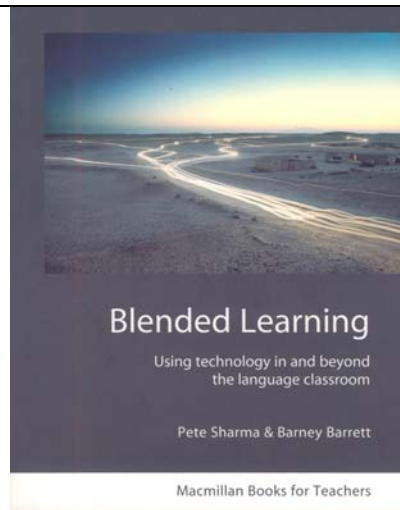
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### **Review by Alison Leithner, [Georgetown University](#)**

Computers and technology play starring roles in our personal and professional lives, and they have also been playing dominant roles in the classroom. In recent years, publishing houses have disseminated new language learning technology, and teachers have also posted a wealth of materials on the Internet that help to enhance students' language learning experiences. In *Blended Learning: Using technology in and beyond the language classroom*, Pete Sharma and Barney Barrett have assembled a guide for beginning teachers and technology users that introduces these supplements to the language classroom.

The authors note that their goal is to introduce different pieces of technology to all language instructors, regardless of their level of experience with the technology under discussion. While they do a solid job of introducing the technology to novices, much of the information in the chapters may, however, be too basic for more advanced users. *Blended Learning* consists of nine chapters that cover a wide range of topics – from introducing new pieces of technology to creating one's own materials using the Internet. The book also contains two appendices with supplemental lesson plans as well as a very basic how-to guide for true beginners to the Internet and the World Wide Web. Each chapter consists of three parts: a basic guide to using the equipment, such as ways of finding information and multimedia using search engines, a section covering common problems and solutions, and a segment consisting of a few model lesson plans for learners in secondary and higher education institutions at all proficiency levels. Many chapters also contain case studies of successful use of the technology under discussion. Each segment and each chapter is independent from the others so that readers can skip to portions of the text that are of specific interest to them. This makes the book potentially more accessible to a wider audience. Overall, the majority of the book is geared toward technology users at a beginner level, but there are helpful websites and lessons for more advanced technology users as well.

### **Chapter by Chapter Analysis**

The first chapter in the book offers a definition of blended learning, a concept that has become more and more prominent in second language classrooms (MacDonald, 2008; Thorne, 2003). Sharma and Barrett indicate that the crucial element in blended learning is an appropriate balance of face-to-face teaching and technology use. Neither the computer nor the World Wide Web is meant to replace instructors; both are supplements to instructor-developed lesson plans, but technology can provide a myriad of benefits,

including the development of independent learners, a source of instant feedback, and motivation to learners. The authors also suggest that many second language learners have come to expect technology in the classroom because they see themselves as part of the “Net generation” (Tapscott, 1999, p. 2); however, Sharma and Barrett stress that technology should fit appropriately into each lesson plan and should not be used just for the sake of using it. Technology should be used to enhance instructors’ lesson plans and create interactive and motivating lessons for both teachers and students. For those who have been in the language instruction field for a few years, this will not be new information, but for new teachers this could be helpful advice.

Chapter Two focuses on the very basics of the Internet and the World Wide Web. The chapter explains in detail how to search on the web and offers tips about refining searches and finding multimedia resources, such as audio and video segments, on the Internet. Sharma and Barrett also briefly touch on various other items of technology that an instructor can use to locate information, such as blogs, podcasts, email newsletters, and RSS feeds; however, they discuss each of these in greater depth in later chapters. In the “Opportunities and Issues” section of the chapter, the authors note that a variety of authentic texts, such as news articles, are useful for creating reading lessons, while the multimedia available, such as BBC video news, are helpful for listening lessons. Such web-based multimedia outputs have the added benefit of being up-to-date so that material might be more appropriate and meaningful to learners, especially those in secondary and higher educational institutions. In the “Practical Activities” portion of the chapter, the authors provide a number of model lesson plans they developed, though frequently based on others’ ideas. These lessons teach students how to search for vocabulary collocations on the Web and evaluate blogs to use in class. They also help students distinguish between reliable and unreliable Internet sources through webquests (Dodge, 1995). This chapter features two case studies with examples of authentic tasks using the Internet. The theme of the chapter is that the goal when using the Internet in the classroom is the creation of independent learners through scaffolding lesson plans and authentic tasks, such as using podcasts for extra listening practice.

The book’s third chapter focuses on the ELT materials teachers can find on the Internet or on publisher-provided CD-ROMs. The first segment explains the different formats and types of materials available, such as downloadable materials, online materials, and materials on a disk, as well as some suggestions about combining these e-materials with their respective course books. The authors list a number of websites through which instructors can create their own materials, such as [www.cambridge.org/elt](http://www.cambridge.org/elt) and [englishfeed.com](http://englishfeed.com), and they explain how these websites work. The authors also speak enthusiastically about the *Macmillan English Campus*, “an Internet-based, interactive learning environment” (p. 42) that contains various pre-designed materials (grammar worksheets, vocabulary activities, listening and pronunciation practice) and can be purchased by schools though the price is not provided. In the “Opportunities and Issues” section, the authors touch on the many evident benefits and pitfalls of using the Internet to create one’s own materials, such as the necessity for teachers to gear lessons directly towards their students and not only use pre-designed lesson plans. They also address how online materials can affect both the teacher (increased flexibility in lesson planning) and the student (increased motivation from online language games). Again, this is probably not a new idea to experienced teachers but could be helpful to those newer to the field. A number of lessons that take advantage of the interactive and up-to-date materials available on the web and on CD-ROM are presented in the practical activities section, for example, predicting the content of a text from the headlines of online news sources. This chapter emphasizes the increase in motivation, especially of young learners, that online and CD-ROM materials provide, as well as the sense of accomplishment students get from working independently and within their own time frame on assignments and tasks.

Chapter Four discusses various kinds of dictionaries available to second language learners. The authors address Internet-based dictionaries (e.g., Cambridge Dictionaries and Macmillan English Dictionary Online), CD-ROM dictionaries (e.g., *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* and *Macmillan*

*English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*), portable electronic dictionaries (e.g., the English-Polish, Polish-English computer dictionary), and concordancers (devices that “list...the occurrences of either a particular word, or a part of a word or a combination of words in context” (St. John, 2001, p. 185)). Sharma and Barrett point out that, while online and CD-ROM dictionaries create learner independence by allowing students to practice outside of class, portable dictionaries provide the just-in-time (Reinking, McKenna, Labbo, & Kieffer, 1998) learning critical for learners in authentic settings. They also note, as many teachers will have noticed themselves, that some students become over-reliant on electronic dictionaries, thus not developing learner autonomy. While concordancers provide for authentic contexts by taking words from a corpus of authentic texts (St. John, 2001), they are frequently more difficult to find and then overwhelming for second language learners because they require language analysis too difficult for lower level learners. The practical activities section of the chapter provides a number of activities through which learners can practice dictionary use; however, the activities focus more on introducing students to using dictionaries as opposed to creating authentic situations in which students must use dictionaries. For example, one of the activities requires students to choose a word and create a “word map” including the word’s collocations, parts of speech, and pronunciation. This would be more authentic if, instead of being an isolated activity, it was added as the exploiting (Nunan, 1996) activity of a reading or listening lesson plan.

The fifth chapter moves away from Internet-based activities and addresses computer programs. Sharma and Barrett spend the first segment of the chapter talking about the very basics of Microsoft Office. The first segment contains directions about how to install and use Microsoft Office products, both in and outside of class. Some benefits of word processing software for teachers are the ease of correction of student written work and the ability to save lesson plans and adapt them for other classes. These same benefits are also attributed to presentation software. However, these programs are not devoid of distractions for learners as students can get carried away with the additional features, such as the editing tools and animation possibilities. Many of the practical activities suggested by Sharma and Barrett for these programs involve group work. For example, one activity requires students to create a group business presentation using PowerPoint, certainly an example of authentic use for this software. This chapter, while potentially helpful to some true beginners, seems better suited as an addition to Appendix 2 (Getting Started on the Web) than an entire chapter in the book.

The next chapter, Chapter Six, is devoted to interactive whiteboards, a fairly new and expensive technological addition to many of today’s classrooms. Interactive whiteboards are a combination of a computer, electronic projector, and whiteboard. The instructor can project computer programs and files onto the whiteboard and use special pens on the whiteboard to modify the files. “The teacher or [student] can stand at the front of the class and can demonstrate a concept or idea...harnessing the full power of a computer but without having to actually stand next to it” (Williams & Easingwood, 2004, p. 46). Sharma and Barrett list a few producers of interactive whiteboards, such as [SMART](#) and [Promethean](#). As in the other chapters, the authors explain the basic elements of the tool and then discuss potential benefits and disadvantages. The largest drawback is the enormous expense and, thus, the limited availability for smaller institutions. A clear advantage of interactive whiteboards is that, if properly and creatively used, they are engaging and arouse students’ curiosity and participation in the lesson. Interactive whiteboards provide an opportunity for just-in-time (Reinking et al., 1998) learning in the classroom and also promotes group communication among students. The case study in this chapter gives an example of an interactive whiteboard introduced in a language classroom, demonstrating that many second language learners today expect sophisticated technology in their schools but also that many teachers are wary of such advanced pieces of equipment. Sharma and Barrett advise readers that a willingness on the part of instructors and administrators to embrace such new technological tools to enhance students’ in-class experiences is needed.

Chapter Seven is shorter than most other chapters and focuses on portable devices, such as mobile phones, MP3 players, digital cameras, and camcorders. Here, the authors emphasize the everyday, not necessarily pedagogical, use of these portable devices and, thus, their familiarity and accessibility to students and teachers. The authors suggest that this familiarity makes these devices practical and user friendly in the language learning classroom. Most of the problems that arise with these devices have to do with the lack of sufficient memory or quality of recordings. The activities for this chapter revolve around pronunciation and presentation skills and demonstrate how portable devices can provide valuable feedback to students on their oral performances. For example, Sharma and Barrett suggest having students use digital audio recorders to record a draft of a presentation for class and then email it to the teacher for feedback. Another suggested activity is using a digital video camera to record presentations and then having the students watch the video and read written feedback at the same time. The case study in this chapter discusses an experiment in a summer school program that involved creating a video “yearbook” for the students to take home with them. On each field trip, different students video-taped each other and were then responsible for editing the footage. Even the most reticent students became involved in class out of interest in using the technology. This case study is an example of how using this particular kind of technology can get students engaged in the classroom but is perhaps not the best example of how the technology can be useful in language instruction.

In Chapter Eight, the authors focus on some older tools that most people are now familiar with: chat rooms, email, online forums, bulletin boards, audio and video conferencing, and virtual learning environments (also known as learning management systems or course management systems), such as [Blackboard](#) and [Moodle](#). The authors distinguish between synchronous and asynchronous communication and dedicate the “Opportunities and Issues” section to addressing the positive and negative aspects of each of these forms of communication. For example, a positive element in synchronous communication is that it helps to develop fluency since communication happens in real time. Asynchronous communication, on the other hand, helps develop higher order thinking skills since it allows writers to organize their thoughts before posting (Sharma & Barrett, p.105). However, during synchronous learning, a teacher should be present in order to prevent students from continually making the same language errors. The practical activities in this chapter focus on a range of topics, such as using email to practice correct email format and using a chat room to practice expressing an opinion. The authors stress virtual learning environments as interfaces that encompass many different forms of technology, yet, through password protection, offer more of the privacy protection desired by both students and instructors alike than other, non-protected sites. While not explicitly stated in this book, it is important to note that though password-protected virtual learning environments are more secure than entirely open sites, there is still the opportunity for violation of privacy just as there is in chat rooms, so teachers should still remain careful about protecting their students’ work and identities.

The final chapter in the book is geared toward instructors who want to go a step further in using technology in the classroom. Chapter Nine serves as an introduction to creating one’s own teaching materials using a variety of tools, such as blogs, podcasts, wikis, and personal websites. While offering brief introductions to each of these elements, the authors note that, should readers want to incorporate these into the classroom, they should consult other, more in depth literature about each specific tool. To that effect, the authors list many helpful reference texts as well as websites, such as [www.blogger.com](#), [pbwiki.com](#), and [audacity.sourceforge.net](#), to get readers started and also offer some interesting activities to incorporate them into the classroom. The authors highlight the effectiveness of blogs, podcasts, wikis, and websites as additional elements to a classroom lesson and focus on their usefulness in homework or follow-up activities. An example of a wiki-based lesson is questioning and dissecting a text, which, according to the authors, promotes critical thinking and group work. Independent learning and student autonomy serve as the theme of this chapter as stand out as the apparent benefits of these types of technology.



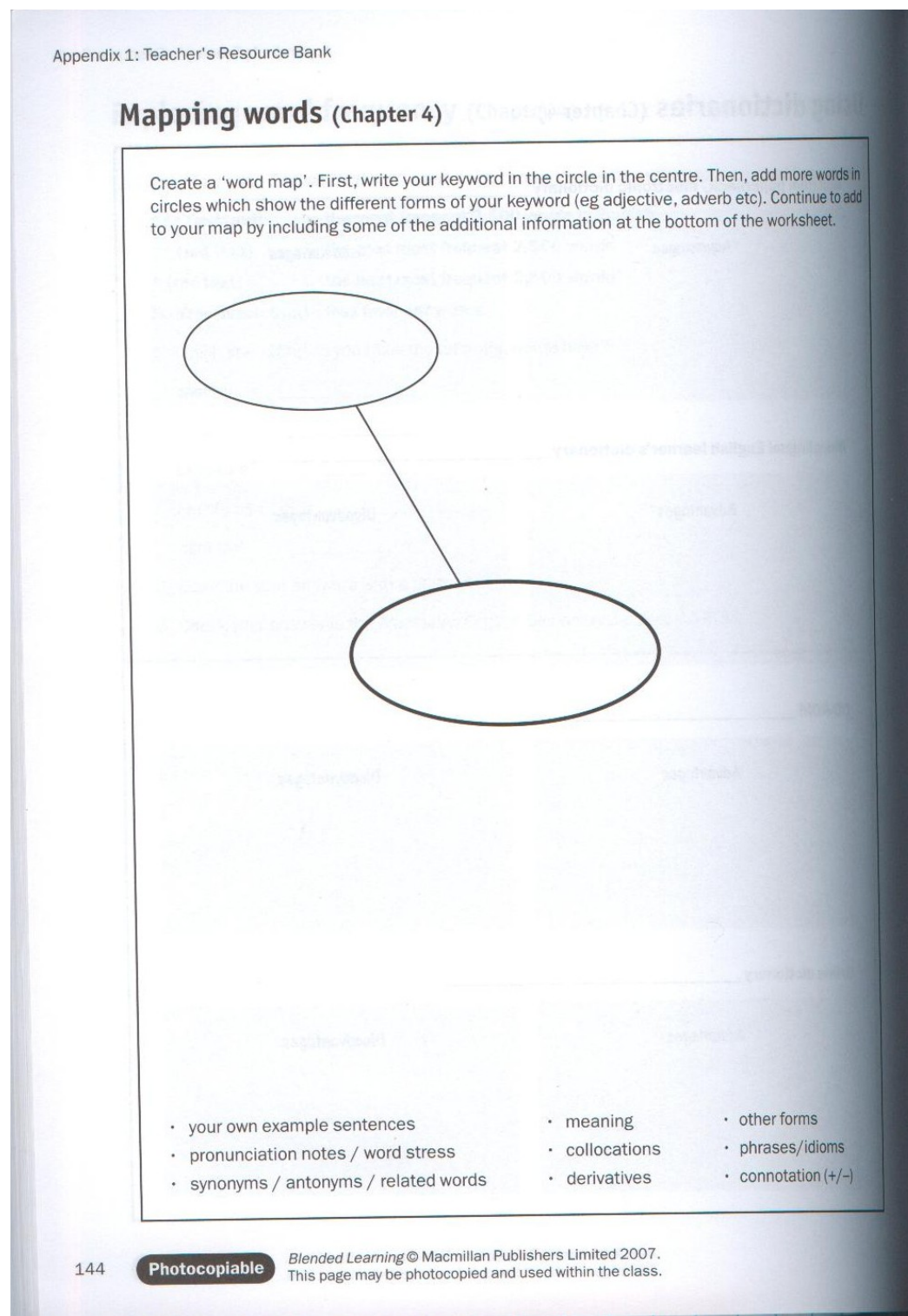


Figure 1. Mapping words (Chapter 4)

*Blended Learning* concludes with an afterword by the authors and two appendices to supplement the content of each of the chapters. The afterword stresses how quickly technology has been advancing and how the products introduced in the text will continue to become more widely used and expected in second language classrooms. Appendix 1 contains worksheets and handouts for each of the practical activities

mentioned in the various chapters of the book to further facilitate incorporation of the different technological elements into the classroom. The handouts are very basic and would need a lot of adaptation to be truly useful in the classroom. For example, Figure 1 shows the worksheet Sharma and Barrett suggest that teachers use for the word mapping activity in Chapter 4. In this activity, students are supposed to select a word and then find its collocations and various parts of speech. Instructors would need to adapt this worksheet for a lower proficiency level by adding more scaffolding bubbles and perhaps adding some of the collocations or parts of speech to help guide students through this highlighting activity.

Finally, Appendix 2 is a remedial guide for those who are novices to the Internet; this guide reviews the concepts of viruses, browsers, downloading, and installing programs and software. In general, these appendices are probably most beneficial for those with very limited to no experience using communicative lesson plans or the Internet. Those who have spent more time in the field might be more likely to design their own worksheets and lessons.

### Summary

In conclusion, Sharma and Barrett approached this book with the goal of giving an introduction into various elements of technology that can be used by language teachers, both in and outside the classroom, to facilitate independent and motivational learning. While most instructors who have been teaching for more than a few years will by now have experience using these kinds of technology, those with limited teaching or technology experience would benefit from *Blended Learning*. While the book contains some helpful website suggestions, those with more experience in the use of technology probably already have a plethora of websites they employ. Each chapter contains concise and accessible explanations of how to use software programs and the Internet, as well as some practical activities that can easily be adapted to fit other second language proficiency levels.

The worksheets in Appendix 1 provide a good starting point for new teachers. Many of the chapters also contain links to websites that instructors can access to get started. Most of these websites, however, should be considered as springboards to personal exploration of the resources available to each instructor for a specific class or lesson. For example, in chapter 3, Sharma and Barrett offer websites such as [www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish), which include ESP vocabulary. A teacher might visit the website and create a communicative lesson plan suited for his/her students based on the information provided.

In *Blended Learning*, Sharma and Barrett focus on using blended learning techniques in English as a Second Language classrooms; however, the tools that they suggest are applicable to other language classrooms as well. The benefits and pitfalls of each of the suggested lessons and methods of using the technology apply to any classroom, regardless of the target language. In addition, the worksheets Sharma and Barrett include in Appendix 1 could be modified and used in a classroom of any language. Teachers in non-ESL classes would, however, need to find their own Web resources since all of the references in *Blended Learning* are for ESL and EFL classes.

Even though each chapter contains elements that could be helpful to instructors of different technology proficiency levels, this book is most useful to those with moderate or limited experience using technology in the classroom. Many of the points, especially the “how-to” sections of each chapter, are too basic for those with more experience: these sections tend to explain in detail how to start using a program but do not continue and explain how to manipulate the program to take full advantage of it. For example, Sharma and Barrett explain in Chapter 5 how to create a very basic PowerPoint slide, but do not explain how to record the audio track of the presentation onto the slides, which is a very helpful tool for teaching students about transition signals and practicing presentation timings. While the majority of the explanations in this book are general, Sharma and Barrett are nevertheless able to clearly communicate their overarching message that technology should be an *addition* to the second language classroom and

should not be used as a *substitute* for the instructor or the necessary lesson planning involved in creating a successful language lesson.

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## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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