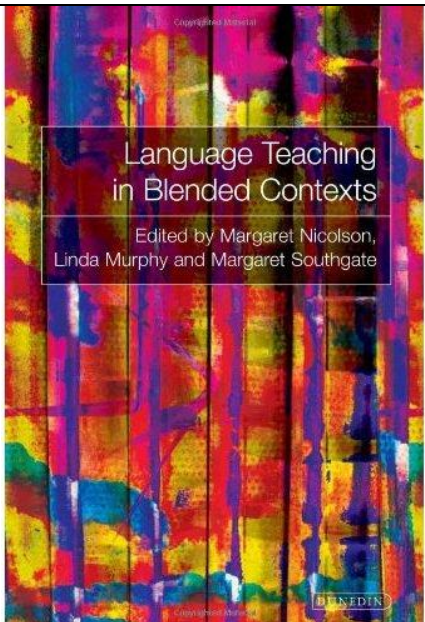# REVIEW OF *LANGUAGE TEACHING IN BLENDED CONTEXTS*

Language Teaching in Blended Contexts

Margaret Nicolson, Linda Murphy, & Margaret Southgate (Eds.)

2011

ISBN: 190671620X

US $37.00

300 pp.

Dunedin Academic Press

Edinburgh, Scotland

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Language Teaching in Blended Contexts is a welcome contribution to language educators seeking to deploy technology for the benefit of adult learners with their complex backgrounds and varying motivations for language study. Written by educators at the Open University with first-hand experience in the topic, it provides research-supported, practical guidance on program design, instructional quality, student outcomes, and professional development in blended language contexts. The book is likely to be of special interest to adult educators in community college and continuing education programs seeking to create, expand, or improve the quality of their blended language learning offerings. It is also appropriate for those who might be well versed in online teaching, but are not specifically trained in language education. Particularly helpful for this broad audience is the inclusion of a glossary of frequently cited terms and concepts, as well as substantial information on language learning theory and pedagogy. The book consists of seventeen chapters grouped into five thematic sections.

SECTION 1: THE LEARNING CONTEXT

Chapter 1 offers a definition of blended learning and teaching as both encompassing "a combination of forms of instructional technology, including traditional forms of learning used in conjunction with web-based, online approaches" (p. 5). Strongly rooted in the distance education tradition, the authors are concerned with the non-traditional adult student approaching language learning with a diverse set of skills, performance levels, and instructional goals. They recognize that as the variety of blended options increases, so does the need for teachers and their professional developers to expand their skills as both educators and users of the many new technologies available.

The second chapter begins with an overview of various instructional modes and technology tools along with the language skills they support and includes a much-valued feature of the book, sample materials and checklists. Two themes that persist throughout the book are introduced here. First, the teacher's role is described across modes and tools, as are ways to combine both online and face-to-face components. Second is the focus on learner autonomy, which in this chapter is exemplified by the authors' suggestion that low-technology options be made available to students across lessons and activities in order to

mitigate potential resistance to online work.

In chapter 3, the authors are concerned with student diversity, arguing that language learning among adults can be strongly influenced by individual, cultural, and psychological barriers. It is incumbent upon language teachers, therefore, to challenge their own understandings and assumptions about diversity and seek to create unique spaces for learning and teaching that will suit each student's unique characteristics. The authors delve into typical markers of diversity (e.g., age, language background, gender), as well as those less often addressed in the literature (individual strategy preferences, task types, and learning modes).

Chapter 4 focuses on learner autonomy, self-regulation, and motivation in blended contexts. It is anchored in theoretical and empirical work that connects autonomy and motivation in language learning. The authors are also candid here about the drawbacks of a learning environment that is designed to meet vastly diverse student needs. Through case studies, they illustrate some of the benefits and pitfalls of blended learning situations in which teacher support is needed to navigate a corresponding myriad of learning options. The teacher, thus, serves primarily as a facilitator who advises students on their learning options, prepares them to use various tools, provides and models feedback, and leads them toward activities that suit their individual motivations.

SECTION 2: ASSESSMENT

Chapter 5 begins with an accessible description of assessment theory followed by the caveat that traditional classroom assessments should not be applied to the online setting without substantial modification. When developing an assessment strategy, they advise that teachers develop multiple forms of assessment that maximize on the affordances of the tools used. A course assessment strategy that provides students with enough opportunity to receive feedback and gauge progress is recommended. Teacher feedback, they explain, should feed "forward" (p. 63) and give students advice that will shape future performance instead of simply giving grades or evaluative feedback. With respect to assessment design, they warn that the skills assessed need to match the affordances of the online tools selected. In such cases, the authors recommend that teachers generate student buy-in by creating authentic tasks and assessments that simulate real-world applications of web-based or written communication.

Chapter 6 explores assessment in greater depth and presents it as a vehicle for language instruction. Following up on earlier comments, the authors stress the need to provide feedback that is useful to the student and can improve future performance. This chapter further discusses the nature of usable feedback, specifically addressing teacher's tone, depth of comments, as well as feedback on productive language tasks specifically. Although cognizant of its time demands, they point to the value of individualizing instruction by combining computer-based assessments with spoken and written feedback.

SECTION 3: SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS TOOLS IN BLENDED CONTEXTS

In chapters 7–12, the authors focus on different aspects and modes of the blend. Chapter 7 focuses on planning, delivering, and assessing teaching sessions in face-to-face contexts and at a distance using a variety of tools. Time demands and skills supported across different modes are discussed. For example, synchronous sessions, which require significant preparation, are considered more conducive for speaking practice, whereas the less planning intensive asynchronous sessions lend themselves better to grammar and writing practice. The chapter also stresses the importance of integrating skills along a developmental progression by connecting instructional tasks. This is a particularly important point to make given that the temptation to use technology for its own sake, without a clearly articulated plan, may exist in the face of pressure to integrate tools with which one has limited experience.

Chapter 8 is devoted to telephone teaching. While it may seem antiquated in the age of digital technology, distance learning programs—particularly those where online tools and training on such is limited—still

rely heavily on the use of the telephone, particularly for one-on-one sessions and tutoring. In rural areas or where Internet access may be inconsistent, telephone land lines are often used. Many adult students who do not have home Internet have cell phones with data plans that allow them to communicate with teachers via email and enter course sites (The Parthenon Group, 2003). Challenges posed by the absence of visual cues in telephone teaching are discussed along with strategies for maximizing on this tool. A sample lesson plan of a telephone session is included to illustrate specific ways teachers can prepare students, build community, and guide a class through a variety of communicative activities in the telephone context. Consistent with the book's practical focus, the stages of the telephone session and common pitfalls are subsequently presented in detail.

Chapters 9 and 10 explore synchronous teaching. For the language educator striving to create an online environment in which language interaction and negotiation of meaning can take place, student participation is often a top concern. Chapter 9 focuses on planning to teach through several synchronous online conferencing tools with attention to pedagogy, task design, and teacher roles during the session. As in previous chapters, the authors emphasize the importance of a less dominant teacher role and provide advice on how to maintain this balance. The authors note that students who might otherwise fade into the background can become empowered by taking on leading roles with technology even when their language skills do not match those of their in-class peers.

Chapter 10 takes a more practical approach to the delivery of synchronous teaching online. Guidelines and principles for effectively managing groups, interactions, technology, and time during synchronous sessions are offered. Noting the artificiality to which online interactions can become captive, the authors discuss options for communication flow and provide ideas and techniques for giving feedback and technical support with minimal intrusion. In their view, the teacher should be the architect of the learning space working behind the scenes to ensure that students are able to interact with one another with few interruptions or glitches. Other important topics covered here include the role of silence, peripherality, and learner identities in the online context.

Chapter 11 presents the face-to-face component as a way to help overcome the shortcomings of technology-mediated distance learning modes. Whereas online and telephone sessions can require a great deal of planning and attention to detail, the face-to-face session is characterized by its fluidity. It can serve as an important medium for reducing student anxiety levels through direct social interaction and language games and can help establish a foundation for and lend authenticity to follow-up activities online. Sample teaching plans are provided, and models that encourage the use of the physical space, movement, spontaneous groupings, and the use of props are emphasized.

Chapter 12 focuses on asynchronous teaching, as many blended courses are taught using learning management systems in which students complete assignments and interact primarily through asynchronous discussion boards. Aiming to increase learner autonomy and expand opportunities for language use in this mode, the authors propose blogs and wikis, providing explanations of each of these tools and how to motivate students to take part in them. They also express concern for the social isolation that is common in the asynchronous mode and advise that teachers create online spaces for students to interact informally. The authors seem to understand the challenge that unstable student participation can pose to language teachers in adult and continuing education programs where traditional grades or credits may not be offered or used as an incentive and students' motivations are often susceptible to shifts in personal or external circumstances.

SECTION 4: COMMUNITY AND INDIGENOUS CELTIC LANGUAGES

A cursory look at the title might tempt the non-Celtic language teacher to skip section 4, but chapters 13 and 14 are among the most relevant to educators teaching a lingua franca, a heritage language or a community language to adults with various non-academic motivations for pursuing language study. As is

typical in adult education programs, these classes are sometimes diverse not only in student language level, but also in native language and educational background.

Chapter 13 includes a rich discussion on language varieties and ways of leveraging technology to access language resources and individualize input for diverse, multi-leveled learner populations. Even chapter 14, in which the history and nature of Celtic languages in the UK are discussed in further detail, there is much that can be applied to a broader blended language teaching context, particularly with respect to learner motivations and instructional design. There is also a section suggesting ways to further enrich the blended language learning experience through community resources and volunteer participation.

SECTION 5:TEACHER DEVELOPMENT AND FINAL REFLECTIONS

In the last section, the authors once again assert that language teachers in blended contexts need to become "facilitators of learning in a multiplicity of learning platforms" (p. 219). As is typical in other adult education learning contexts, unfortunately, the professional development needs of language teachers in blended contexts often go unmet (Smith & Gillespie, 2007). Placing the responsibility for professional growth squarely on teachers, this section discusses the skills and knowledge that are needed to work effectively in the online component of the blended course, with particular emphasis on reflection as the catalyst for growth. The authors encourage action research and recommend "a dynamic approach to teaching methods and approaches that best responds to the individual context…rather than rigid adherence to a method" (p. 227). These chapters also offer specific direction for teacher developers with practical approaches and specific examples on mentoring and providing feedback. The final chapter distills much of the information, concepts and recommendations about blended teaching into an evolving set of principles: teacher responsiveness, creativity, openness, and pragmatism. It concludes with resources for further development in blended language learning and a useful bibliography and index.

Language Teaching in Blended Contexts is quite comprehensive. Attention is given to an impressive array of language learning considerations and solutions for blended contexts. At times, it reads more like a handbook for blended language education, with one noteworthy omission. For all of its practical, detailed information, a clear discussion of different blended learning models is absent. A description of the various permutations that are possible between the online and face-to-face components of the blend would have been useful, for example, to language educators who are seeking to increase language learning options and promote greater autonomy in traditional language courses. Despite this minor limitation, the authors consistently offer workarounds and solutions to help make blended learning work for the adult student who might not be able to access language learning opportunities otherwise. This book is a must-have for teaching languages at a distance. It can be used by novices wishing to gradually incorporate more technology into their language instruction and by those who have been involved in online learning for some time but are seeking ways to improve support for language learning in these evolving contexts.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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