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BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Creating effective blended language learning courses: A research-based guide from planning to evaluation*

Ayşen Tuzcu, *Michigan State University*

Creating effective blended language learning courses: A research-based guide from planning to evaluation

Mizza, D., & Rubio, F.

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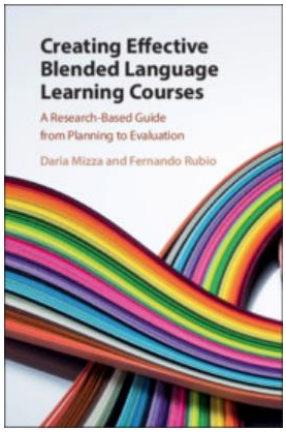

The integration of technology into language classes, especially in the form of blended language learning (BLL), has received considerable attention in recent years (Grgurovic, 2017). The popularity of blended learning has mostly stemmed from the logistical benefits of this type of instruction. However, blended learning offers pedagogical benefits as it can enhance learning and teaching opportunities and outcomes (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Moreover, when designers consider learning theories while developing and implementing technology-integrated courses, the novel implementation of those theories can increase the effectiveness of otherwise long-standing courses (Chapelle, 2009). In this vein, Mizza and Rubio's book *Creating Effective Blended Language Learning Courses: A Research-Based Guide from Planning to Evaluation* is focused on providing a theoretically and pedagogically driven road map to readers who are interested in learning about BLL and designing BLL courses.

The book consists of eight chapters and is divided into three parts of one, three, and four chapters, respectively. Each part starts with an introduction wherein the authors provide a general overview of the chapters included in that part, as well as a list of specific abbreviations and the definitions of specific terminology used in that part. Each chapter starts with a list of objectives outlining what is discussed in the chapter and ends with a chapter summary. In this way, the book is highly organized and easily approachable by a wide audience of readers with varying levels of experience and background knowledge in research on blended language learning. Moreover, Mizza and Rubio provide additional resources and follow-up activities to the readers in an online catalog. These resources can be particularly useful for readers who use this book as a main textbook in a graduate-level course in applied linguistics or modern language studies, as the resources provide further information to the readers and prompt them to think reflectively about BLL. The book's follow-up activities are particularly helpful for the readers because each activity taps into a different aspect of Bloom's taxonomy (which includes the cognitive processes of remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating) and prompts readers to identify, analyze, reflect, discuss, and share the points being brought up.

Part 1, entitled *Theoretical Background*, provides a theoretical overview of seminal and recent work in the field of blended language learning. As mentioned above, this part consists of one chapter. In this part, Mizza and Rubio provide different terminology related to blended learning (i.e., blended learning, hybrid learning, web-facilitated or web-enhanced learning) and discuss how this variety in terminology and their definitions

cause confusion. The authors emphasize that blended language learning is more than simply adding online elements to face-to-face (F2F) instruction or transferring the materials used in F2F instruction to online environments. Instead, as they explain, blended learning requires careful planning and the integration of F2F and online instruction as each environment has different strengths and contributes to different aspects of language learning. Moreover, blended learning should promote interaction and collaboration between student-instructor, student-student, and student-content in both environments. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to consider the affordances of each environment and create an interactive BLL course in the light of these affordances. Moreover, Mizza and Rubio introduce the pedagogical, logistical, and financial benefits of BLL courses compared to traditional courses. The authors conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of the studies investigating BLL courses. By noting a dearth of qualitative studies (i.e., studies based on interviews and focus groups) in the field, Mizza and Rubio also call for more qualitative, rather than quantitative, research to provide nuances and depth to the discussion on BLL.

Part 2, entitled *Route, Process, and Structure*, contains various examples of blended language classrooms at higher education institutions in North America and Europe. In this part of the book, Mizza and Rubio discuss how BLL can be best conceptualized and planned. Part 2 consists of three chapters (i.e., Chapters 2–4). Chapter 2 starts by comparing fully online courses and fully F2F courses to BLL courses and discusses the rationale for adopting BLL courses. Mizza and Rubio argue that, similar to fully online courses, BLL offers many advantages, such as flexibility and accessibility. In addition, BLL integrates the F2F component which offers social and communicative features such as oral communication, live gestures, nuanced and interpersonal pragmatics, and peer-to-peer feedback that richly enhance or compliment the online component. The authors state that the reasons for choosing BLL courses over traditional or fully online courses are context specific. In other words, each institution has different infrastructural, pedagogical, administrative, and curricular reasons for transitioning to BLL. Mizza and Rubio share with the reader several successful BLL examples from universities in the United States and Europe which adopted BLL. They follow these examples up by arguing that for a successful BLL environment, all stakeholders (i.e., teachers, students, administrators, and IT personnel) should be involved in every stage of BLL from planning to implementation.

Chapter 3 within Part 2 provides an overall picture of the blending process. Mizza and Rubio highlight the importance of creating an environment where F2F and online components are balanced and interdependent so that each component supports and expands upon the other. Moreover, the authors argue that this blending process should be informed by theories of learning (e.g., constructivism), factors central to blended learning (e.g., student autonomy and reflection), and second language acquisition (SLA) principles (e.g., input, interaction, and feedback). In the second half of the chapter, Mizza and Rubio present two main blended paths based on descriptors for input loading, namely input front-loading and input back-loading. In input front-loading, the input is introduced in the online environment with the use of various resources, activities, and tasks. The follow-up activities and tasks are completed in the F2F class. In input back-loading, however, the presentation of input starts in the F2F component and is followed by online activities and tasks. The authors argue that the blended path to be chosen depends on the learners' proficiency and awareness and is to be determined by the teacher. The authors conclude the chapter by helpfully providing one scenario for each path to help readers understand what a BLL course may look like.

In Chapter 4 of Part 2, Mizza and Rubio elaborate on the example BLL classes at different universities in the United States and Europe that they briefly described in Chapter 2 to help readers reflect on the decision-making and blending processes for BLL. All examples are given in a reader-friendly table format and involve information about the institution, the sources of information, contact reference, course level, course duration, average course enrollment, background information and rationale for blending, first implementation of the blended course, and blend and blended path. The authors encourage readers to consider the aspects and criteria of BLL explained in Chapter 3 while examining these examples. In addition to this encouragement, Mizza and Rubio also provide checklists for the readers to help with the reflection process. At the end of the chapter, the authors summarize the examples in terms of their rationales and pedagogical reasons for adopting BLL, the technological tools used by these example universities, and the

roles these tools play in the BLL process.

In Part 3, Mizza and Rubio propose a framework for designing effective blended language courses. The innovative framework incorporates four phases: *design*, *build*, *teach*, and *revise*. Mizza and Rubio explain each of these phases in a separate chapter (i.e., Chapters 5–8), all of which comprise Part 3. This part of the book is an excellent practical resource for guiding instructors who aim to design or redesign BLL courses. Chapter 5 is dedicated to the first *design* phase, which consists of two steps. The first step requires identifying contextual factors surrounding the course with the use of a needs analysis. Mizza and Rubio provide some guiding questions to the readers for both learner-needs analysis and context-needs analysis. The second step involves determining the course goals, teaching objectives, and learning outcomes. One central concept in the second step of the design phase is *backward design*. According to Mizza and Rubio, in backward design the goals, objectives, and outcomes are determined *before* planning how to teach. In addition to the backward design, the authors advocate the use of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives for creating and classifying teaching objectives and learning outcomes. In a nutshell, as explained by Mizza and Rubio, the purpose of Bloom's taxonomy is "to classify teaching objectives and verbs that correspond to each task level on a continuum of complexity and specificity along three domains: cognitive, affective, and sensory" (p. 130). The authors recommend focusing particularly on the cognitive domain (which includes six basic objectives mentioned above, namely, remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating) to create achievable objectives for students at different proficiency levels. Mizza and Rubio conclude the chapter by emphasizing that the design or redesign is a continuous, iterative process that occurs throughout the course.

In Chapter 6, Mizza and Rubio focus on the second *build* phase of their BLL framework. The authors recommend readers to start the build phase by creating course and unit outlines in alignment with teaching objectives and learning outcomes. After explaining unit and course outlining, Mizza and Rubio discuss three features that are important in determining whether the activities and tasks will be used in online or F2F components of a blended language course: mode of delivery (F2F or online), mode of communication (synchronous or asynchronous), and interaction type (teacher-student, student-student, or student-content). In the second half of the chapter, Mizza and Rubio give suggestions to the readers on how to sequence the activities and tasks depending on the tasks' levels of difficulty. In this part, the authors cite two task complexity models from the literature: Skehan's (1998) Limited Attentional Capacity model and Robinson's (2001) Cognition Hypothesis model. These are rather complex models that the two authors explain succinctly and expertly, rendering them understandable to readers at all levels. The authors emphasize that the difficulty or complexity of a task depends on the context and the audience; therefore, these aspects of context and audience should be taken into account when developing activities and tasks. Finally, Mizza and Rubio explain how technology can be integrated into BLL courses. Instead of giving a list of technological tools, the authors provide information about how technological tools can be integrated in BLL courses by providing example activities and explaining the roles of students while using the tools. This chapter can be particularly beneficial for instructors who use technological tools in their classes.

In Chapter 7, Mizza and Rubio provide guidelines for the third *teaching* phase of their framework. They identify four high-leverage practices (HLP) that instructors of BLL courses can integrate into their teaching. These HLPs comprise (a) maintaining an effective blended path; (b) fostering autonomous learning; (c) enhancing teaching presence through design, facilitation, and direction; and (d) creating opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning. For each HLP, the authors firstly provide research findings reflecting its importance. To make these HLPs more "generalizable, useful, and teachable" (p. 194), Mizza and Rubio deconstruct them to their basic components, discuss relevant research findings, and provide an example implementation for each HLP. This chapter will be especially helpful for instructors who are new to either teaching or designing BLL courses.

The final chapter of the book, Chapter 8, is devoted to the overall evaluation and revision of the BLL courses, which is the final and fourth phase of their framework to *design*, *build*, *teach*, and *revise* BLL courses. Mizza and Rubio argue that the assessment of the BLL courses should be in line with the teaching

practices in these courses. The first part of the chapter discusses the assessment of students' performances in terms of course objectives and learning outcomes. The second part, on the other hand, focuses on the evaluation of the BLL course at three levels: institutional level, course level, and user level. Even though there is a relationship among these levels, the evaluation might not necessarily yield the same results for all three levels. In other words, while a BLL course can be found to be successful at the institutional and course levels, it may not be as successful at the student level. Careful BLL planners would necessarily consider all three levels when evaluating the effectiveness of a BLL course.

This book is a valuable contribution to the field of blended language learning as it combines theoretical discussion with practical guidelines on BLL. The book is also most appropriate for the times, especially now (as I write this review toward the end of 2020), with COVID-19 forcing more BLL due to school closures and pandemic-related health and social distancing measures. Anyone faced with designing BLL courses in a pinch due to the pandemic or classroom space shortages would benefit from using this book as an immediate and tremendously accessible guide. The example BLL courses, the checklists, and the BLL framework help readers visualize how an effective BLL course can be created, implemented, and evaluated. These models and tips will be current for a long time and thus the book will, predictably, have a long shelf-life and be a worthy adoption for graduate-level courses on foreign and second language classroom methodology and language teaching principles. The glossary of key terms at the beginning of each part, and the tables and figures given in each chapter, make the book reader-friendly and accessible to anyone who is interested in learning about BLL. The book, especially the four-part BLL framework proposed by Mizza and Rubio, is a pleasure to read and serves as a great resource for various stakeholders who are involved in the design/redesign process of BLL courses. The book is also recommended as a textbook for teaching BLL to pre-service teachers, as the additional resources and tasks are excellent teaching tools for this group of readers. The authors should be commended for gifting the field this valuable resource and primary text on BLL.

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About the Author

Ayşen Tuzcu is a PhD student in Second Language Studies at Michigan State University. Her current research interests include second language vocabulary acquisition and instructed second language acquisition.

E-mail: tuzcuays@msu.edu