

## Review of *Blended basic language courses: Design, pedagogy, and implementation*

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### **Blended basic language courses: Design, pedagogy, and implementation**

Hope Anderson

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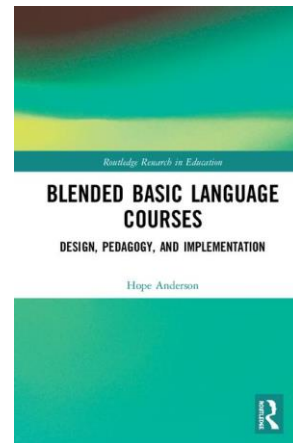
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In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, language educators have been faced with the challenge of determining how best to utilize available technologies to provide students with quality, web-based instruction. That is precisely what Hope Anderson discusses in *Blended basic language courses: Design, pedagogy, and implementation*. Through a mixed-methods study on blended (i.e., partially online) language programs, the book provides readers with a comprehensive overview of not only current practices, but also stakeholders' (i.e., students, graduate teaching assistants, faculty, and administrators) perceptions of blended learning. The book is part of the Routledge Research in Education series, which aims to present research findings from all areas within the field of education. Anderson's study presents data from a 2015 nationwide survey of 52 blended basic language programs at 40 different institutions in the U.S. Although the book focuses on blended learning, the information will also prove insightful for language educators and administrators looking to migrate all instructional content online.

The format and scope of the book are reminiscent of a doctoral dissertation. It is divided into 15 chapters: Chapters 1–3 provide the background and rationale for the study, the methodology and results are described in detail in Chapters 4–11, and the last four chapters (12–15) essentially discuss the findings and implications. The complete surveys and interview questions are provided in the appendices.

In Chapter 1, the author discusses various definitions for key terms, namely *blended*, *hybrid*, and *flipped*, which are sometimes used indistinctively by scholars and educators. Anderson clarifies that for the purposes of her study, blended learning implies that “some of the online material replaces a portion of face-to-face instruction” (p. 3). The chapter also provides a summary of the affordances of blended learning, according to the literature, as well as challenges in adopting a blended model for language courses. The author underscores the importance of maintaining a student-centered communicative approach to language learning, as opposed to following a traditional flipped learning model with recorded lectures and mechanical practice online. The chapter concludes with the motivation for the study. The author points out some of the drawbacks of previous investigations, mainly the lack of detailed information about the pedagogical approaches or instructional design choices, as well as fundamental differences in programs and models that make comparisons across studies difficult.

Chapters 2 and 3 offer a thorough review of existing literature on multiple aspects of blended learning.

Chapter 2 is organized into two main sections: The first half focuses on course planning and selection of materials, while the second part focuses on the implementation and evaluation of blended courses and programs. The studies reviewed represent a wide variety of contexts, ranging from ESL programs abroad to beginning-level Spanish courses in the U.S. Given the significant disparities in models, programs, and contexts, it is difficult to form a clear picture of existing trends or unanswered questions, which serves as the motivating force behind Anderson's study. Chapter 2 also includes a brief review of literature on student assessment strategies, which summarizes various summative and formative technology-enhanced assessment options, such as portfolios and computer-adaptive testing. Chapter 3 reviews research on instructor and students' views on blended language learning, shedding light on challenges such as adequate training, integrating course components, and lack of familiarity with educational technologies. Anderson also discusses a handful of publications that describe ways to help learners succeed when taking a blended course, many of which are also applicable for fully online courses: monitoring students' progress, training them on using tools, and providing strategies to develop independent learning skills.

Chapters 4 and 5 describe the methodology, participants, and data analysis protocols. A total of 121 instructors and administrators and 35 students in first- and second-year blended courses completed an online survey about course components, materials, assessment practices, and available support, as well as their perceptions on the effectiveness of blended learning. The majority of instructors and administrators were in Spanish and French programs, although there were 11 other languages represented in the final pool. The survey data were supplemented with 23 interviews, most of which were conducted asynchronously via email, and a few were done through video chat. The number of interviews reported in Chapter 5 varies: In the introduction, the author states there were 22 interviews but later indicates a total of 23. It is unclear whether this discrepancy is a typographical error or if one of the interviews had to be discarded. In addition to the survey and interviews, syllabi provided by some of the participants were also examined; however, there is not enough information provided about that aspect of the investigation.

Chapters 6–11 provide a meticulous account of findings, organized into six broader topic areas: program design and models (Chapter 6), technology use and materials (Chapter 7), adaptations of communicative language teaching (Chapter 8), assessment practices (Chapter 9), perceived effectiveness and satisfaction (Chapter 10), and support for instructors and students (Chapter 11). Each of the chapters presents first the statistical analyses of the quantitative data obtained through the survey, followed by supporting comments made by interview participants. Among the noteworthy findings, both instructors and students appeared to be generally satisfied not only with the effectiveness of the courses, but also with the ease of use of the various technologies. The main source of frustration for instructors of blended courses was the students' lack of preparation for in-class sessions, which leads Anderson to ponder whether the issue might actually stem from instructors' somewhat unrealistic expectations regarding the role of the online activities in language development. In other words, expecting students "to develop as much command of the grammar through the online lessons" (p. 93) on their own might be what is causing dissatisfaction on the part of both students and instructors.

On a related note, another interesting trend revealed in the results was the existence of two models of blended courses: one in which online activities focus on grammar instruction and class time is reserved for interaction, and the other where the online environment serves to provide opportunities for interaction and communication. It would appear that many of the unsatisfied instructors were teaching in a program that followed the first model, although Anderson does not delve into the potential correlation between program type and satisfaction levels. More importantly, since the data focused only on perceptions and self-reported practices, the question of which model is most facilitative for language development remains unanswered.

The final part of the book (Chapters 12–15) is perhaps the most valuable to help language educators and program directors understand what to emulate and what to avoid based on the results of the study. In Chapter 12, Anderson summarizes the factors that should be taken into consideration when selecting materials for blended courses. The author also outlines several recommendations for deciding the best delivery format for different types of content and activities, such as having students engage with input-based activities online at their own pace, and subsequently integrating or recycling that content in the

face-to-face component of the course. With respect to assessment, the main recommendation is to ensure consistency across all components of the blend: Both in-class and online activities should be similar to the types of tasks used for assessment purposes. Chapter 12 also sheds light on a problematic trend revealed in the administrators' responses: the lack of systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of blended programs, other than student or instructor evaluations. Anderson suggests having more curricular revision throughout the development of blended courses, as opposed to solely after their implementation.

Chapter 13 discusses pitfalls and possibilities when it comes to support for educators and students. Anderson draws attention to the lack of pedagogical and technical support for instructors designing or teaching blended courses. More specifically, it appears that existing training opportunities are not sufficiently helpful for educators to "figure out how to make the best use of class time and how to manage the blend" (p. 141). The author emphasizes the need to expand intra- and inter-institutional collaboration efforts so that experienced colleagues may assist those who are embarking on the process of developing blended courses. Another way of supporting instructors is through careful consideration of their workloads; for example, administrators should be mindful of the number of blended sections that each instructor is asked to teach. Considering the lower satisfaction expressed by instructors with limited involvement in course design, Anderson suggests that program coordinators strike a balance between providing materials for instructors and letting them take ownership of their courses. Continued professional development should also focus on other aspects of teaching blended courses, such as assessment alternatives and maintaining instructor presence both online and face-to-face. The section on providing student support is not as fully developed and mainly offers general recommendations such as making sure students receive training on how to use required tools and informing them on what it takes to learn in a blended format, particularly with respect to self-discipline and autonomy.

Chapters 14 and 15 serve as the concluding remarks. Anderson reiterates the need for collaboration and continuous evaluation of program effectiveness taking into account the stakeholders' perceptions and experiences. I applaud the author for emphasizing the importance of second language acquisition principles in guiding course design so that the rationale behind material selection is clear to everyone involved in designing or teaching the courses. Returning to the question of how to make the most out of the blend, the main takeaway is that instructor presence should not be limited to in-class activities. I echo Anderson's concerns when it comes to blended instructional models that may inadvertently make students feel unsupported, as if they were "teaching themselves the language" (p. 153).

Overall, the book is a valuable contribution to the research on blended language learning. Its main strength is the impressive amount of data from language faculty and administrators from a wide variety of programs. On the other hand, the data concerning students' perceptions are relatively weaker. The number of student participants was fairly small and representative of only one institution. Despite this limitation, the study helps educators understand the intricacies of integrating technology as an extension of class time by exploring every possible aspect of blended learning. Anderson successfully organizes and analyzes the results so that the reader can gain a nuanced understanding of what has and has not worked for various programs in their implementation of blended learning. Given the research-oriented nature of this book, it is best suited for audiences with a solid background in language pedagogy and academic research. Although the book does not provide a step-by-step guide on how to develop blended courses, it does afford readers the unique opportunity to learn from the experiences of over a hundred colleagues.

## About the Author

Florescia Henshaw has a PhD in Second Language Acquisition and Teacher Education from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where she is now the Director of Advanced Spanish. Dr. Henshaw has published and presented on technology integration and research-based pedagogical practices at national and international conferences.

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