# Blending Technologies in Second Language Classrooms
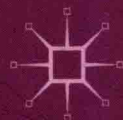
## Paul Gruba and Don Hinkelman

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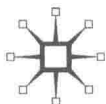
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# Blending Technologies in Second Language Classrooms

*To our families*

# List of Tables and Figure

## Tables

## Figure    .

# Acknowledgements

# Preface

Blended approaches to learning and teaching consist of integrating technologies in face-to-face environments through a principled selection of actions, tools and networks that are situated in particular groups, times and locations with an aim to meet specific educational goals. Throughout this book, we argue that blending technologies in second language classrooms can be facilitated through purposeful, appropriate, multimodal and sustainable considerations.

Motivated by the possibility of creating rich and engaging learning environments, second language classrooms have long been encouraged to adopt digital technologies in their programme (Higgins & Johns, 1984; Boswood, 1997; Levy & Stockwell, 2006; Egbert & Hanson-Smith, 2007) and, importantly, are being urged to move them from the periphery to the core of language programmes (O'Dowd, 2010). Nonetheless, many language teachers struggle to integrate these new technologies into their teaching: professional development, institutional leadership and curriculum design issues may hamper efforts to incorporate technologies into otherwise everyday instructional practices (Chambers & Bax, 2006). Why does the use of technologies in the classroom, and to applied linguistics in general, tend to present such a formidable challenge? One reason may be that the techniques and technologies in face-to-face instruction need greater emphasis and acknowledgement.

Clearly, the blending of technologies into language learning is complex, and it involves a range of internal and external influences (Oxford & Jung, 2007). A decade after the push to implement educational technologies began throughout higher education, cyclical models now show us that successful integration involves factors that include time commitment, competence development, course design, teaching experiences and reflection (Moser, 2007). Other factors compound barriers to adoption, particularly attitudinal factors, such as fear and awe, that can often stifle the uptake of new technologies among language educators (Bax, 2003). These barriers arise when we come to see digital devices as omnipotent, for example, or when we

believe that online technologies alone can solve the problems facing an otherwise static curriculum. Our enthusiasm and mistrust of technology have led dozens of institutions to initially buy, and subsequently neglect, the use of expensive computers (Cuban, 1986, 2001).

Too often, it appears that innovations involving these high-tech technologies have been done by 'lone wolves' whose work fails to be sustained because of a focus on the 'novelty effects' of computers (Hubbard, 2005). Our own experiences may be familiar: an individual or a few teachers think of a great idea, gather resources and materials, develop tasks and lessons, and work hard to integrate new technologies into the curriculum. Despite some setbacks, the innovation results in a fantastic learning experience for the students. But 'something happens' and the innovative project is difficult to maintain as energies and resources dry up. In the end, the innovation is abandoned and fails to make much of an impact in the language programme.

So what goes wrong? Reflecting on our own experiences, several mistakes come to mind: we had not anticipated class sizes growing (that is, our designs were not scalable), or perhaps we encountered sceptical colleagues (we failed to build a community of innovation), we had difficulties explaining our work (an insufficient warrant for the change) or we failed to face up to the realities of dwindling teacher time or institutional resources (underestimating the implications of our decisions). No doubt other factors were present in the eventual demise of our own projects, and other researchers have attributed poor performances to the lack of experience, on-site support, time and access to technologies (Mumtaz, 2000; Moser, 2007) and issues to do with logistics, stakeholder abilities, syllabus integration and training, development and support (Chambers & Bax, 2006). In this book, we assert that technologies are already integrated and evolving in classrooms that are blended. We acknowledge that face-to-face tools and techniques are equal to and often more effective for teachers to use in creating productive second language using environments.

One point that we stress throughout this book is that blended approaches rely on purposeful collaboration with colleagues, students and institutional leadership. Instructors, no matter how innovative or determined, operate within complex institutional environments that contain a wide range of factors, policies and personalities that strongly influence the adoption of educational technologies (Orlando, 2009). One part of the process, for example,

involves explaining to institutional leaders what blended approaches involve rather than simply noting that individual teachers are to blame for the lack of uptake (Somekh, 2007). For Somekh, effective innovation comes about as the result of exploratory play. Sometimes, if the tool complements an established teaching approach, it is taken up; if not, it is discarded. Policy and evaluative practices must allow for 'trial and error' to take place, according to Somekh, and that is best fostered by policies that underpin a climate of encouragement.

To stimulate the adoption of new practices, Dodds (2007) emphasizes the need to build 'communities of innovation' that can only flourish if institutional barriers are minimalized, possibilities for collaboration are opened, and communication processes are made continual. It is essential, too, that a spirit of mutual trust is fostered among colleagues. Eventually, if properly constructed and supported, the work of such 'communities of innovation' can result in substantial improvements in quality, participation and productivity (Martin-Kniep, 2008).

The aim of our book is to explore the theory and practice of blending technologies in second language classrooms. Throughout, we develop a single thesis: the integration of technologies is best achieved if it is purposeful, appropriate, multimodal and sustainable, and it is developed within a community of innovation.

Our work here is grounded in both reading and experience, and we underpin many ideas with research in computer-assisted language learning (CALL), second language learning theories, blended learning and educational technology. Both of us have taught English as a second, or an additional, language in diverse tertiary institutions for over three decades. From this, we have come to understand that there is little reason to evangelize about a blended approach: that is, we know it is counter-productive, if not alienating and disrespectful, to argue that our colleagues make rigid choices between on- and off-line teaching, or that digital technologies 'must' be integrated, or indeed that using newer technologies underpins an approach that is superior to any other way of fostering second language learning. Innovations and effective teaching and learning, we know, are not necessarily based on the use of new technologies.

We also understand that colleagues may see themselves as either 'for' or 'against' new technology. Such polarizations are stifling. In this book, we promote a view that blended approaches can establish

xvi *Preface*

a 'third space' or 'middle ground' (Cuban, 2009) that can open the way educators can make sense of new media and technologies (Jewitt, 2006; Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006) to better foster robust discussions concerning the role of technologies in university language programmes.

## Overview

From the start, we argue for a balance in the use of technologies for language learning. In our view, blended learning is increasingly grounded in collaborative approaches that rest on socio-cultural or social-constructivist models of instruction, as well as behaviourist and cognitive theories of learning.

In Chapter 1, we start with a review of the work that has been done to date that points to blended approaches to learning. A number of models have been proposed and frameworks developed to analyse what is blended learning, what factors make it work and what issues are unresolved. We also review how second language learning theory has impacted on blended learning. We explain that recent theories see the social environment as paramount, while metaphors that reduce education to 'input' and 'output' are less appropriate. Ecological metaphors that describe a web of actors and affordances in a rich, supportive environment are more useful; new views of cognition look at ways thinking is situated in real world contexts and emerges from enacted purposes and goals. Knowledge, we show, is embedded in learner-designed projects. Further, we examine how a pre-formatted syllabus can be changed into a more fluid one, as learners negotiate the roles and tasks they wish to play in the community. Fluid syllabus design requires facilitators who can organize, mentor, support and encourage all members in the common project. Contribution and participation are measurements of success. Our framework provides a view that productive blended learning embraces a holistic view of the role of technologies, and humans, in modern second language education.

In Chapter 2, we propose a multidimensional view of technologies. Beginning with work by Laurillard (2002) that emphasizes pedagogical actions, we then argue for a wide definition of technologies that includes variations in groupings (pair, small group, whole group, individual spaces), timings (simultaneous/separate, periodic/intensive

pacing), texts (verbal and non-verbal media), spaces (online/offline), and tools (equipment, furniture, networks and software). In Chapter 3, we discuss the issues that can emerge in the design of a blended curriculum. When adopting a blended approach, a curriculum may need to be rewritten and reshaped in fundamental ways as students, teachers and technologies may each come to occupy different roles. In this chapter, we examine the goals and objectives of a blended learning programme from three perspectives: macro (global and institutional), meso (programme and syllabus), and micro (lesson and task). In a macro view, we note the influence of international and institutional standards. At the meso level, we see how a programme curriculum may impact on a blended approach. In a micro-level view, we consider how instructors may make considered decisions about technologies for particular activities. Finally, we describe the process of integrating a variety of technologies *via* a learning management system.

Effective assessment for learning, as shown in Chapter 4, is crucial to the success of blended learning approaches. To start, we review concepts in assessment to build a solid understanding. In our view, assessment is one way to support blended learning. The first component of this support is to align assessment tasks with learning goals. We then discuss the variety of ways that technologies can be blended in assessments, and then highlight the development of criteria, or rubrics. We then turn to an example of research concerning assessment with technologies and consider assessment development for a language programme.

In Chapter 5, we explain the conduct of action research for the investigation of blended programmes where iterative change occurs. This chapter answers the concerns of critics about the rigour of action research and justifies its use especially for collaborative teaching teams who are tackling a host of learning problems simultaneously in school settings. One of the key questions about action research is how to handle positionality, the role of an insider or an outsider conducting a study. Here we argue for a mixed positionality that combines a deep insider position in one case, with another outside case to provide triangulation, or greater trustworthiness in the research. In addition, we examine the design of cycles of inquiry and how collaborative research teams can create questions or problems to focus the inquiry. Finally, we provide guidelines for conducting

action research, including ethical considerations, instrument design, data collection and analysis and dissemination of research.

Chapter 6 provides a detailed ethnography of three blended learning lessons or tasks in EFL classrooms held in a university setting. When teachers prepare lessons, they balance the given factors (rooms, furniture, materials, common equipment) with their working principles (curriculum, syllabus, beliefs about good teaching) and the flexible factors (patterns of interaction, sequence of activities, management and technology configurations). The first description is an oral communication task, which was designed to incorporate online and classroom activities over three sessions of classes. Nineteen technologies were identified within this task, and each one was configured in regards to pedagogical actions, groupings, timings, texts, and tools. Then in a less detailed fashion, two additional blended learning tasks are described, one on written communication and one as an inter-class cultural exchange.

Chapter 7 illustrates several examples of blended learning programmes from an institutional view. We argue that a 'best practice' view of describing cases of blended language learning has limitations, and adopt a framework that attempts to view technologies from many dimensions. This macro view chapter first describes the blended learning infrastructure design and implementation in two Japanese universities. Classroom infrastructure was created from the ground up in a new building on one site and after renovation on another site. These required a broad consensus on types of furniture, common electronic devices and patterns of interaction in the rooms. The next case examines the structure of research and management among 50 teachers in one institution. The system of eight teams of researchers building materials and training each other in technologies led to a learning organization that depended on bottom-up teacher initiatives. A third case reviewed how action research was employed as a research and innovation strategy at another university. A six-year set of interventions by a small team of teachers met a variety of successes and failures.

In Chapter 8, we draw the book to a close, reviewing our exploration of blended learning and suggesting areas of further consideration.

# Contents