Implementing Blended Learning in Foreign Language Education: Reasons and Considerations

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As information technology becomes more and more advanced, an increasing number of foreign language instructors are utilizing blended learning in their teaching contexts. Blended learning (BL) is the out-of-class use of online and mobile learning tools to supplement traditional classroom environments. In this paper, reasons for incorporating BL in foreign language contexts will be explored, and principles for utilizing BL from literature will be examined. The paper concludes with a description of a BL EFL course that I designed and taught based on these principles. It is hoped that this paper will contribute to readers' understanding of how to incorporate BL elements into their teaching contexts in a pedagogically sound way.

情報技術がますます高度になるにつれ、外国語教育においてBlended learningを活用する教師の数も増加している。Blended learning（BL）とは、伝統的な教室環境を補完するためにオンラインやモバイル学習ツールを授業外で使用することである。本稿では、外国語環境でBLを導入する理由を検討した後、BLを用いる際の原則を先行文献から明らかにする。最後にこの原則に基づいて筆者がコースデザインし、実践したBL　EFLのコースについて述べる。本稿はBL要素を教育場面で効果的に取り入れるための確固とした基盤を提供する。

IN THE current digital age, the ways in which people convey and acquire information, ideas, and opinions are rapidly changing. In response to these changes, education too must evolve away from teacher-centered, one-way transmission of information. Rooney (2003) and Young (2002) have noted that one of the major educational trends to result from this transformation in communication styles is the rise of blended learning.

Blended learning (BL) can be defined as "a combination of face-to-face (FtF) and computer-assisted learning (CAL) in a single teaching and learning environment" (Neumeier, 2005, p. 164). Graham (2006) noted that FtF and CAL have been historically separated from one another, particularly in terms of the dimensions of *space*, *time*, *fidelity*, and *humanness*. Put another way, while FtF classes feature live, synchronous interactions between humans, CAL courses provide virtual, asynchronous interactions between humans and course materials. BL is essentially a hybrid of these two extreme learning models, in which learners utilize online tools and materials out of class to complement the FtF interactions that they encounter in a traditional classroom environment.

The purpose of this paper is to provide readers with a basic guide for utilizing BL in foreign language classrooms. In order to accomplish this, recent literature on BL will be examined, and

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reasons and principles for incorporating it in foreign language instruction will be explored. An example of a BL EFL language course from my own teaching experience will also be presented, with the intention of better elucidating the integration of BL systems in foreign language contexts in Japan.

Incorporating Blended Learning in Foreign Language Teaching Contexts: Reasons

On account of continual rapid advancements in information technology and growing familiarity with that technology among younger generations, several scholars on BL have rationalized complementing traditional classrooms with online tools and materials. Graham, Allen and Ure (2003, 2005) put forth three reasons for utilizing BL:

1. Through BL teachers can improve their pedagogy by creating a more interactive, student-centered learning environment for students.
2. Using BL provides learners with the increased access and flexibility of online materials and tools without sacrificing the human interaction of FtF contexts.
3. BL is much more cost effective than traditional classrooms.

According to Graham (2006), "blended learning systems provide an opportunity for reaching a large, globally dispersed audience in a short period of time with consistent, semipersonal content delivery" (p. 10).

Studies on BL (Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Tayebinik & Puteh, 2012) also seemed to indicate that BL courses create a stronger sense of community among learners in a particular context than both completely online learning environments and traditional classrooms. BL can provide learners with the FtF human interactions that online courses lack; at the same time, through BL instructors can create a virtual learning space for more introverted

students to express themselves, a space which they may not get in FtF classrooms dominated by more extroverted peers.

In terms of foreign language education, Marsh (2012, pp. 4-5) has argued that blended learning can provide the following benefits to learners over traditional classrooms:

1. BL "provides a more individualized learning experience" by enabling learners to find and study materials of their own choice online.
2. BL "provides more personalized learning support" to learners by allowing instructors and peers to provide more immediate feedback on student work.
3. BL "supports and encourages independent and collaborative learning" through the use of interactive online tools.
4. BL "increases student engagement in learning."
5. BL "accommodates a variety of learning styles" by providing access to a virtually unlimited amount of multimodal materials online.
6. BL "provides a place to practice the target language beyond the classroom," thereby increasing contact hours.
7. BL provides a potentially "less stressful practice environment for the target language," since learners are not always in the physical presence of peers.
8. BL "provides flexible study, anytime or anywhere, to meet learners' needs."
9. BL "helps students develop valuable and necessary twenty-first century learning skills" such as word processing, web searching, and online communication.

In addition to these benefits, there seems to be little pedagogical detriment to utilizing blended learning in foreign language classrooms. In a case study of an ESL class, Grgurovic (2011) reported that all language skills can be successfully integrated in the face-to-face and online aspects of a BL course when these

aspects are combined. In other words, it seems that BL systems can provide all of the benefits of both FtF and CAL classrooms without adversely affecting the acquisition of any foreign language skills.

Because of these advantages, application of BL systems in education is on the rise. However, there seems to be a lack of theoretical conceptualization, research agenda, and qualitative research of BL (Kerres, 2001; Neumeier, 2005; Reinmann-Rothmeier, 2003). Neumeier stated that "the most important aim of a Blended Learning design is to find the most effective and efficient combination of the two modes of learning for individual learning subjects, contexts, and objectives" (p. 164), and this requires a careful analysis of learner needs and abilities in the potential BL as well as a principled approach.

Incorporating Blended Learning in Foreign Language Teaching Contexts: Principles

In her seminal work on BL design, Neumeier (2005) provided the following parameters for instructors to consider when determining whether to incorporate blended learning in their teaching contexts: (a) mode, (b) model of integration, (c) distribution of learning content and objectives and assignment of purpose, (d) language teaching methods, (e) involvement of learning subjects, and (f) location (p. 167). *Mode* refers to the determination of mode (either FtF or CAL) choice and distribution, as well as the tasks within each mode, based on learner, course, and institutional requirements and restrictions. *Model of integration* refers to the sequencing of modes and tasks within the course as well as their level of integration (i.e., whether they are obligatory or optional). In terms of the distribution parameter, instructors must determine if the target language skills will be practiced in both modes in parallel or isolated in one or the other mode. When considering the parameter of *language teaching*

methods, instructors must keep in mind that learning methods in each of the employed modes may vary due to differing nature of interactions in FtF vs. CAL environments. The parameter *involvement of learning subjects* refers to the varying interactional patterns, learner and teacher roles, and level autonomy of each mode. Finally, *location* means the instructor must seek to create learning spaces both inside and outside of the classroom (e.g., in computer labs or at home) to accommodate the selected modes.

In addition to Neumeier's (2005) parameters, Stracke (2009, pp. 6-7) recommended that instructors contemplate these practical considerations when implementing BL:

1. Complementarity: Selected modes and tasks within each mode must complement each other; mismatches can lead to learner confusion, frustration, and demotivation.

2. Variety of media: The instructor must present a variety of media for students, which they can select from to match their learning needs.

3. Class community: The instructor must provide FtF contexts which emphasize human interaction.

4. Flexibility as regards to time and space: Flexibility must be provided as much as possible to fit individual learner lifestyles.

5. Choice: Providing choices allows learners to take responsibility of their own learning, that is, develop autonomy.

6. Change of roles: Learners and instructors will need to be able to negotiate roles changing over different modes.

7. Technology-enhanced materials: Multimodal materials that are methodologically sound and interactive must be made available to learners.

8. Technical support: Technical support is necessary for instructors to encourage learners to continue using new and potentially unfamiliar technology.

9. Time to develop: "Teachers and students need time to adapt to and develop in a new teaching and learning environment" (Stracke, p. 7).

The importance of this last point cannot be overemphasized, in that the time required to acclimate to BL environments may limit effectiveness of BL at the beginning of a course or in shorter, more intensive classes.

Taken together, Neumeier's (2005) pedagogical parameters and Stracke's (2009) practical considerations provide a useful framework for teachers to consider when incorporating BL in foreign language contexts. In order to better illustrate these principles, an example of a simple BL course in the Japanese EFL context will be examined in the next section.

Example of an EFL Blended Learning Course in Japan

I designed and taught the following BL course in the winter of 2012. The course was a pre-intermediate level class of 13 Japanese working adults that met FtF for 10 weeks, once a week for 4 hours at a time. Some of the lesson content was drawn from a predetermined, general English textbook mandated by the language institution.

At the beginning of the course, I issued an open-ended, short answer survey to determine the learning goals of participants, their accessibility to BL materials online, and their potential time commitments to language practice outside of class. From this survey, it was determined that a BL learning model that focused on developing all four language skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) as well as specialized vocabulary and utilized asynchronous online communication to complement learners' FtF classroom interactions would best suit their learning needs and desires.

The primary tool for facilitating out-of-class, online communication in this course was the course website. Google Sites, a free wiki platform sponsored by Google, was selected to host the course website because of its easy accessibility by all of the participants. Participants were asked to post their course work on the website regularly, which their peers and instructor could freely access in order to view, comment on, and provide immediate feedback. Outlines of FtF sessions were also posted on the course website, so that participants could easily preview upcoming sessions and review ones from which they were absent.

One of the main tasks for participants of this course was to upload media summaries to the course website on a weekly basis. Participants searched for and viewed an online periodical, podcast, or video (related to news or a topic of interest) of their choice and composed a short summary of the article for their peers on the website. This activity provided participants with the opportunity to frequently practice locating information online and summarizing it, two of the most-used skills among new Japanese office workers (Lambert, 2010). In addition, because participants selected media of their own choice, this activity afforded learners with a fair degree of personalization in terms of content and learning style preferences.

After posting their summaries and links to the source media, participants were also asked to read and provide feedback on the work of their peers, as well as review and comment on feedback given to their own summaries. This served two purposes: First of all, it facilitated asynchronous communication between participants and therefore increased their contact with the target language; secondly, it prepared participants for linked FtF oral activities where they would lead discussions on their articles, often continuing conversations begun on the course website in class. Thus, participants were able to communicate and use the target language purposefully, both asynchronously online and synchronously in class. Finally, because the discussions were based on the interests and materials of the participants themselves, their engagement with the discussion content was high.

Another BL task utilized in this course was the self-generation and study of vocabulary cards, one of the most effective activities for building vocabulary (Nation, 2009). Participants were asked to record unknown words in the target language that they encountered, research those words online, create a vocabulary card for each word, and upload their words onto vocabulary lists on the course website. In class, students would engage in peer-teaching and peer-quizzing activities using their own cards, both of which are activities that facilitate learning (Dale, 1969; Roediger & Karpicke, 2006). In addition, vocabulary tests were generated from the online lists, and the participants could use the lists to study for tests.

Finally, on top of FtF exercises participants used the website *English Central* <www.englishcentral.com> to practice their listening, pronunciation, and spoken fluency skills outside of class. *English Central* is a gamified online platform where participants select videos of their own choice to view. After viewing the selected video, they also have the opportunity to orally recite the lines of that video and receive points for their recitation depending on the similarity of their pronunciation with that of the source material. *English Central* also features a built-in monitoring system for instructors, which allows them to determine weekly goals for participants (in terms of points to complete) and observe the progress of the class at will.

At the completion of the course, a feedback survey was issued to students in order to gauge their impressions of the BL portions of the class. Using a 5-point Likert scale, students were asked to rate how they felt about each of the following BL aspects: the course website (which received an average rating of 4.5), media summary task (4.14), vocabulary task (4.125), English Central (4.75), and an overall rating for the course (4.5). Based on these results, the participants as a whole seemed very positive about all BL portions of the course, as well as the course as a whole. These results echoed those of studies by Stracke (2007a, 2007b)

who found that participants were overall favorable towards BL learning, particularly because of its independent learning features and their ability to develop self-awareness of learning goals and preferences through this type of educational model.

Conclusion

BL, the systematic combination of FtF and computer assisted educational models, is a swiftly growing trend in this age of rapid advancements in information technology. Language teachers can utilize BL systems to provide personalized learning experiences and support to learners, furnish them with increased access and flexibility of materials, foster learner autonomy but also collaboration and a sense of community among students, accommodate a variety of student learning styles and personalities, and assist learners with developing valuable technical skills concurrently with language development. BL can also benefit the instructors themselves by improving their pedagogical practices and raising the cost effectiveness of their classes. However, utilizing BL effectively requires careful needs analysis of the learners, as well as a principled approached to course design. Neumeier's (2005) parameters of *mode, model of integration, distribution of learning content and objectives and assignment of purpose, language teaching methods, involvement of learning subjects,* and *location* (p. 167) and Stracke's (2009) considerations of *complementarity, variety of media, class community, flexibility as regards to time and space, choice, change of roles, technology-enhanced materials, technical support,* and *time to develop* (pp. 6-7) can inform such an approach to BL, as discussed in this paper. Previous studies (Stracke, 2007b, 2009), as well as the participant feedback of the sample course presented earlier, seemed to indicate that BL systems are effective and learner friendly education models for improving foreign language education.

Much research remains to be done on BL. All of the studies cited in this article seemed to have focused on university-aged

learners and older. An interesting avenue of further research would concern the effectiveness of BL in young foreign language learners, in particular the so-called "digital native" generation. Another potential vein of inquiry could compare the interactional patterns of synchronous online interactions (e.g., chat rooms) with those of asynchronous interactions (e.g., blogging), and their respective potential effects on linked FtF communication.

Bio Data

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