

## *Book review*

*Blending Technologies in Second Language Classrooms*, Paul Gruba and Don Hinkelman (Eds). Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 200. ISBN 9780230232617.

In a decade in which the concept of ‘blended learning’ has gradually seeped into the consciousness of educators, there have been a number of publications discussing its use in language learning. Gruba and Hinkelman’s is one of only two books on blended learning for languages (to my knowledge) to be co-authored rather than edited, immediately giving it an edge in terms of cohesion, coherence and progression.

The title itself is telling; ‘blending technologies’ – rather than ‘blended’. This reveals the authors’ concern in this book with *process* rather than product, i.e. with how practitioners can achieve desired technology-face-to-face integration. This practical approach characterises the book whose intended aim is to explore the theory and practice of blending technologies in L2 settings. In a parallel publication, the authors define blended learning elegantly as ‘the principled mix of online and classroom-based activities’ (Gruber and Hinkelman 2012b, p.46) and it is this insistence on a ‘blending’ rooted in sound pedagogical principles, that runs through the book. Part of the book’s appeal is that the authors strenuously avoid ‘evangelising’ about the blended approach but are accepting of the varying levels to which practitioners admit technologies into their teaching. Indeed, they recognise that ‘innovations and effective teaching [...] are not necessarily based on new technologies’ (p.xi).

The book consists of eight chapters which, as can be seen in the breakdown below, take the practitioner through a ‘course’ in blended learning, starting with the theoretical basis, through design considerations (ranging from the level of task to that of curriculum) to step-by-step descriptions of blended lessons.

- Chapter 1 Theoretical Foundations
- Chapter 2 Understanding Technologies
- Chapter 3 Designs for Blended Language Learning
- Chapter 4 Blended Language Learning Assessment
- Chapter 5 Action Research in Blended Classrooms
- Chapter 6 Blended Language Lessons in Practice
- Chapter 7 Blended Programs in Practice
- Chapter 8 Further Considerations

Theoretical Foundations (**Chapter 1**) is initially disappointing in that it provides very little of the promised basis (in the *Preface*) in the ‘collaborative approaches that rest on socio-constructivist models of instruction’ and in second language learning theory (page xvi), for which we actually have to wait until Chapter 3. Instead, in Chapter 1 we go over the rather tired ground of the ‘stages of CALL’ (how the use of CALL intersected with contemporary theories of (language) learning), building blended learning onto this. The ‘foundations’ are practical considerations rather than theoretical underpinnings: the rationale, appropriateness, multimodality and sustainability of blended learning that need to be examined for its successful implementation in any given language learning context.

**Chapter 2** lays the necessary groundwork for a book on blended learning, seeking to define ‘technology’ as a broader more multi-dimensional concept that will enable eventual ‘blends’ to be as organic and varied as possible. Like other current work on blended learning, the authors look to Laurillard’s framework in her seminal ‘Rethinking University Teaching’ (2002), in which she strings types of pedagogical actions along dimensions and cross references these to typical teaching and learning activities along with sample technologies. So the first type, ‘narrative’, is the basic ‘transmissive’ form of pedagogy, conveyed via lecture, printed material or audio-visual sources. At the other extreme of the pedagogy spectrum is the ‘productive’ type of activity (this pertains to learner output) and which tends to be ‘facilitated’ as opposed to presented, via technologies such as webpages or discussion boards. The authors make the key distinction between the meaning of *technology* versus *tools* which ‘are often viewed as technology itself, rather than a dimension within a technological ecology’ (p.28) in order to avoid an overpowering ‘tool-centric perspective’ (ibid.)

**Chapter 3**, *Designs for Blended Language Learning*, is to my mind, one of the two core chapters in this book (the other one being Chapter 6, *Blended Language Lessons in Practice*). For in Chapter 3 we find some of the language learning and general pedagogical theory anticipated in Chapter 1, feeding into design considerations for Blended learning at three levels. These extend from the ‘micro’ level (task and lesson planning) to ‘meso’ level (considerations of curricular and institutional goals) and ultimately to macro level, where considerations for designs align with national and international standards.

Addressing assessment head on (**Chapter 4**) is crucial for Blended learning contexts especially as there has been somewhat of a discord between assessment and technology ever since it began to be absorbed into pedagogy. Indeed, the authors refer to Elliot’s (2007) equating of technological integration into assessment with stages that echo the development of Web 1.0, 1.5 and 2.0 (p.66). Traditionally conceived assessment is in many ways incapable of encompassing the multidimensional potential of technology. Conventional modes of assessment (essays, presentations, written examinations) lose face validity and authenticity if used to assess technology-based or blended learning modes, especially as these develop extensive sets of transferable skills: ‘students need to see that assessment tasks in the blended classroom are linked, and transferable, to the development of skills in activities beyond the classroom’ (p.48).

A characteristic of this book that gives it an empirical ‘edge’, is that it regularly draws on action research (in fact devoting an entire chapter to it, see below), and

Chapter 4 devotes a section to a research project led by one of the authors, on the use of technologies in language assessment. Unsurprisingly, blended assessment was found to be in its infancy in terms of development and user acceptance. Another aspect of assessment and technology is of course, computer-based and online language proficiency testing *per se* (for IELTS and TOEFL for example) although this is rather beyond the scope of this volume.

In this book on Blended Technology in the language classroom, the next chapter, **Chapter 5**, is somewhat 'in parenthesis' in its at times highly theoretical exposition on Action Research in general, applying the approach to Blended Learning not until a full eight pages into the chapter. The authors nonetheless make a compelling argument in favour of Action Research, justifying the approach within teaching contexts in post-positivist terms, whereby the researcher is viably part of the research study and whose presence does not skew the data (as the 'scientific method' or positivism would have it). Indeed, the chapter would make a useful 'stand-alone' introduction to the theory and practice of Action Research.

Juxtaposing theoretical and hands-one chapters, the following chapter presents three case studies of blended language learning activities in third-level institutions, the first an oral communication skills task, the second a process-writing task and the third an inter-class exchange. The case studies are detailed and replicable with step by step 'lesson flow' plans showing the interweaving of face-to-face and various technological applications. On the other hand, the authors' somewhat idiosyncratic bending of terminology in this chapter may ruffle some purist feathers:

Earlier, in Chapter 3, we defined a task as a teaching plan that emphasises purposeful use of language where an outcome factors in the assessment. Within that plan, a task is a series of processes or methods (technologies) that result in the accomplishment of task aims. A technology, however, is not the same as a task. It is a generic process or technique within a task which a teacher or a learner may employ to achieve the tasks's goal [...] in our experience, we commonly view a task as a unit or set of lessons (p.100).

Similarly, a comment about the field of CALL tending to be 'overly tool focused' (p.104) is jarring in a book on an approach which incorporates technology, even if Blended Learning is offered as a remedy to offset this perceived tendency.

The penultimate chapter illustrates how blended learning can be enfolded in institutional practice and looks at the cases of three institutions in Japan where this has been done. Three aspects of BL in practice – what the authors term 'themes' – are examined; infrastructure, teaching teams, and materials development, these are cross-referenced to the four core considerations stated in the first chapter; purposefulness, appropriateness, multimodality and sustainability. Like the previous chapter, the choice to give us details rather than generalities, provides a genuine flavour of running Blended Learning programmes. The first aspect, infrastructure, is arguably of least significance, and while purpose-designed blended learning classrooms including moveable furniture, notebooks, central projector etc., would be on practitioners' wish-lists, budgetary constraints vary hugely internationally and most teachers would compromise on this in favour of support for the other two.

The second aspect pertains to training and teamwork. Unsurprisingly given their commitment to Action Research, the authors conclude that an action research approach 'is necessary to support a blended language learning approach' (p.144) and that 'when conducted systematically in a collaborative action research community and published beyond the institution, it has the potential to impact the whole field of second language learning' (ibid.). The final aspect, materials development, was the least successful in these case studies. It can be surmised that this was at least in part a result of adhering to a conventional concept of materials as being print-based (80% of class time still used print materials), rather than making the natural move to courseware/technology-based tasks etc. to match blended environments.

The concluding chapter reprises key concerns that have arisen throughout the book and sets the agenda for a blended learning future. The authors see blended learning practices as both an inevitable development as universities increase investment in technology and, ultimately, as part of the normalisation of technology; in the end, a natural representation of 'a web of relations that view our human/material world as a hybrid of human/material action' (pp.158–9).

Written in a clear, academic yet accessible style, *Blending Technologies in Second Language Classrooms* is, in sum, an extremely handy and useable book, which I would recommend as a core textbook for the principled blending of technology into L2 learning, for use by language practitioners, researchers and student teachers alike.

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### References

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- Laurillard, D. (2002) *Rethinking University Teaching: A Framework for the Effective use of Learning Technologies* (2nd edn). London: Routledge Farmer.