DEVELOPING A BLENDED-LEARNING MODEL IN AN L2 CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The study analyzes the pedagogical model of the blended-learning delivery format that may be incorporated in an L2 classroom. The study begins with the introduction of current developments in the area of blended-learning in higher education and in second-language acquisition research in particular. The focus is on scholarship that empirically informs the instruction and acquisition of language competence in an L2 classroom with an added computer-assisted language-learning component, blended-learning in particular. The model studied is a combination of face-to-face instruction as the basis of learning experience and an online teaching and learning tools. The focus is on specific tasks to be incorporated into the design of activities for both methods of learning and instruction. Five types of tasks, interactive, adaptive, communicative, productive and instructional, are studied as the main building blocks of an L2 learning environment. The discussion focuses on ways the blended-learning model allows reconfiguration of specific tasks in the two, face-to-face and online, components, leading to changes in the dynamics of an L2 classroom, shifting also the role of student and instructor in the studied blend. The analysis shows that the incorporation of the studied model may contribute to the increase of students' engagement in the learning process at both learning spaces, face-to-face and online, fosteringa learner-centered L2 environment. The study concludes with a discussion of benefits the blended-learning approach offers in an L2 classroom and suggests directions for further empirical investigations.

1. Introduction

The world today is undoubtedly technologically enhanced in every aspect of our being. Technology has become inseparable from day-to-day routines, including education. Our students are e-generation learners, who need to be provided with e-learning opportunities within the fast paced transformations in learning and teaching environments. They are rejecters of passive learning, who strive for active learning experiences, in which "technological sophistication is perceived as an opportunity rather than a challenge" (Chakraborty, 2015, p. 137).

This study discusses the incorporation of e-learning into an L2 classroom. Specifically, the focus is on the pedagogical considerations of a blended-learning model for L2 teaching and learning at the post-secondary level. Blended learning[1] is understood as "the continued use of face-to-face teaching as a basic building block of the learning experience, enriched and enhanced by the integration of the Internet and other teaching and learning technologies into studies undertaken both in and out of the classroom" (Marsch, 2012, p. 3). More specifically, the blended model[2] is a combination of traditional, in class, face-to-face [FTF] instruction, and online teaching and learning tools. The FTF component naturally includes social interaction and the physical presence of an instructor, while the online components constitute a computer-assisted language-learning mode, in which students self-engage in the learning process and occasionally with each other or an instructor in virtual space. The blended method of instruction has become quite popular in education and the number of blended-courses continues to grow.

2. Blended-learning in an L2 Classroom

The incorporation of blended-learning models in higher education and in second-language acquisition in particular, has been considerably well researched. Studies that empirically inform the instruction and acquisition of language competence in an L2 classroom with an added computer-assisted language-learning component, indicate that when properly designed and applied, blended learning models can significantly improve students' learning experiences (Marsch, 2012; Pena-Sanchez and Hicks, 2006; Stracke, 2005; Stracke, 2007). Several studies

[1] "The term 'blended learning' first gained widespread currency in corporate training situations to describe the combination of teaching and learning approaches that included coaching, mentoring, online interactions, face-to-face classes and on-job training" (Gruba and Hinkelman, 2011, p. 1).

[2] Other terminology is also used in reference to blended-learning formats, for example hybrid learning, and flipped classroom, among others.

address specifically the advantages and disadvantages of blended-learning courses. Many analyses show that a blended-learning model "offers to learners affective and linguistic advantages over both e-learning and FTF modes" (Bueno-Alastuey and López Pérez, 2013, p. 2).

The advantages of blended-learning models have been noted as the following: 24 hour access to course materials (Krasnova, 2015), "greater flexibility (Macedo-Rouet, Ney, Charles, and Lallich-Boidin, 2009), reduced costs (Sanders, 2005), unlimited time outside the classroom to complete online tasks which students believe helps them meet their language learning goals (Murray, 1999), and the extension of materials and learning scenarios outside the classroom (Gimeno Sanz, 2009)"(Bueno-Alastuey and López Pérez, 2013, p. 2). With respect to linguistic benefits of blended-learning models, the following have been identified: "a positive effect on students' performance (Scida and Saury, 2006) and language skills (Beauvois, 1998), reinforcement of students' autonomy and reflection, the facilitation of the review and control of learning, more meaningful and individualized feedback (Gimeno Sanz, 2009), high ratings in enjoyment and usefulness (Peters, Weinberg, and Sarma, 2009) and higher time on-task (Stepp-Greany, 2002)" (Bueno-Alastuey and López Pérez, 2013, p. 2). Interestingly, the use of technology in an L2 classroom has been viewed as useful for communication and collaboration between students and instructors (Krasnova, 2015) and has been credited for assisting with differential learning in a classroom, with large class sizes, as well as with artificial communicative situations necessitated by a foreign language classroom setting (Bueno-Alastuey and López Pérez, 2013, p. 2).

In addition, the incorporation of the blended-learning model has been shown to be successful for student's language learning outcomes and students' satisfaction. Bueno-Alastuey and López Pérez (2013) investigate students' perceptions on the introduction of the blended-learning model in Spanish and English L2 language classrooms with varying degrees of online tools used in each. Overall their results show positive perceptions of technology use in language instruction. Importantly, their results confirm that an increased introduction of technology leads to perceptions of its usefulness for productive skills, specifically the development of speaking in blended learning models (Bueno-Alastuey and López Pérez, 2013, p. 15). Students show appreciation for the use of technology, which contributes to increases in motivation towards language learning.

The disadvantages of the blended-learning format have been noted as the following: a lack

of connection between computer-assisted language learning tasks and those of FTF (Carrió Pastor, 2009; Chenoweth, Ushida, and Murday, 2006), a decrease of control over learning, a lesser amount of guidance and monitoring in blended environments, especially for students lacking self-discipline towards learning (Conacher, Taalas, and Vogel, 2004), a number of distractions created by technologies themselves (Gimeno Sanz, 2009), an overwhelmingly fast pace of learning (Stepp-Greany, 2002), an intensification in work-load for students, a plentitude of materials online which makes navigation through the virtual space challenging (Bueno-Alastuey, 2009b), as well as students' inadequate computer skills (Bueno-Alastuey, 2009a; Burguess, 2003).

Clayton, Blumberg and Auld (2010) study factors that contribute to students' choice of a particular learning environment: online exclusively, combined or hybrid (blended), or traditional FTF. Their results indicate that students who prefer the traditional form of instruction stress "the level of engagement of the student, the various instructional strategies used to accommodate the learning styles of participants and the opportunity for spontaneous and live discussion" (2010, p. 361). With respect to non-traditional courses, Clayton, Blumberg and Auld find that those students who choose them perceive themselves as able to academically succeed in them. The results, therefore, suggest that an online environment increases students' self-efficacy, which has been shown to be beneficial in the learning process (Clayton, Blumberg and Auld, 2010, p. 361). Overall with respect to students' wishes for the learning process, the results show that "learners want engaging learning environment that promotes 'direct interaction with professor(s) and students', 'spontaneity', 'immediate feedback' and 'relationships with faculty and students' "(Clayton, Blumberg and Auld, 2010, p. 362). However, students also want to have personal control over their learning process that fits their lifestyle (Clayton, Blumberg and Auld, 2010, p. 361). The premise of the present study is that such students' wishes may be effectively achieved by incorporating the blended-learning model into the learning process, bridging gaps that exist between an 'online only' or 'FTF only' models.

3. Analysis of the Blended-learning model in an L2 classroom

The primary emphasis of this study is on the pedagogical elements of teaching and learning of L2 by post-secondary students via the blended-learning model. The analysis outlines pedagogical considerations of the designed model aimed at developing a learner's language

competence (speaking, writing, reading and listening). The discussion focuses on a reconfiguration of the teaching and learning processes in the blended model, including shifts in the instructor's and student's role in the blend.

As noted above, the blended-learning course is a combination of FTF and online teaching and learning components. In order to illustrate the model, an elementary L2 classroom, with five instructional hours per week, is used in the analysis.[3] The structure of the studied model is illustrated in Table 1:

Table 1:The blended-learning module structure

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Weekend
FTF: 1	**Online:** **Station 1**	**FTF:** **2**	**Online:** **Stations 2**	**FTF:** **3**	**Online:** **Transfer** 

Table 1 illustrates a prototypical one-week long course module, which is a continuum of FTF and Online components, as shown in Table 1. In the discussed model, the course components are termed 'stations', which allows for viewing the learning process as a scaffolding journey, that is a continuum. At the end of each one-week module (over the weekend), students work at the online 'transfer' station before proceeding to the next module, which begins again in the following week with the FTF component. In this one-week module, the FTF component amounts to three FTF or contact hours per week, supplemented by two online 'stations' and one

[3] The model discussed is being utilized for the development of Beginners Ukrainian as L2 language course at the University of Alberta. At this university, elementary language courses traditionally have been five contact hours per week (prior to the implementation of the blended-learning format). I am grateful to two of my research assistants who are skilled collaborators on the development of this blended-learning model for Ukrainian: Olena Sivachenko is to be credited for the contents of the FTF components, and Oksana Perets contributed greatly to the online 'stations' of the model discussed.

'transfer'[4] (in comparison to five contact hours of instruction per week in a traditional method of L2 teaching and learning at an elementary level).[5]

The FTF component of the model is a teaching and learning experience in which both instructors and students are physically present in a shared space, which is a post-secondary classroom in the studied case. The online components of the model are placed in virtual space, to which students have access while not physically present in class (note that students are encouraged to follow the FTF class with a respective online station in order to ensure successive learning, as shown in Table 1 above).

Any L2 learning space, FTF or online, is a combination of various activities with tasks that contribute to certain teaching and learning experience for both the instructor and the students. In the present study, the following tasks are deemed as crucial for a successful language learning experience: (1) interactive, (2) adaptive, (3) communicative, (4) productive, and (4) instructional.[6]

In the FTF component of the designed model, in this case an elementary L2, the following tasks are used in the design of activities: (1) interactive tasks, which are initiated by the instructor and then gradually transferred towards students individual or collaborative participation, during which they investigate and explore with the language; (2) adaptive tasks, in which students follow a model, practice and experiment with their language skills; (3) communicative tasks, in which students practice language and share results in pairs or groups, having discussions in the language; (4) productive tasks, when following an example or a model students produce their own similar texts, written, oral or visual, expressing and articulating themselves in the target language; and (5)instructional tasks, which are presentations of grammar and new vocabulary by the instructor, with students apprehending the information. Importantly, all of these FTF tasks stress the interactivity, students' adapting the information learnt, their engagement in communicative and productive activities, creating a social process in which students learn from an instructor and, importantly, from each other. In the FTF components of the discussed model, the 'instructional' tasks (5) with the instructor presenting information

[4] It is expected that students would spend approximately 1-1.5 hours of self-study at each of the online components.
[5] Please note that the discussed model contains also various assessment components, such as quizzes and tests; these are not at focus here.
[6] Terminology is partially adapted from Laurillard (2002).

overtly, is downplayed (see discussion below). Please also note that in the activities that display the five tasks discussed, students have an opportunity to practice all four language skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking.

At the online components, or 'stations' of the model, the same five types of tasks outlined above form the core of designed activities.[7] For instance, an example of an interactive task (1) is a 'scatter and match game', in which students match words with respective images. These activities are timed, bringing a sense of a game and thrill into the online learning environment.Additionally, they promote students' engagement and interactivity with computer-mediated course components.[8] In order for learners to experiment with and practice their language skills, adaptive online tasks (2) are achieved, for instance, by the use of podcasts. Specifically, a podcast presents a pattern, which students need to reproduce independently (orally or in writing), thus practicing the language skills according to the provided model. Communicative tasks (3) are represented by online forums, on which students are encouraged to share their thoughts, using their target language skills, at least once per week. This communicative online activity extends the social learning community to the virtual learning space. Productive tasks (4) in the online 'stations' are achieved for instance with the game 'speller'. In this type of activity, students listen to an audio recording and simultaneously see a respective image. The task for the learners is to type what they hear in the target language, that is, produce the correct spelling of a required word or phrase. The instructional tasks (5), that focus on presentations of grammatical explanations and introductions of new topics and vocabulary are incorporated into the online stations. Video and audio technology is used for these mini-lectures.Additionally, online flip-card activities are found to be efficient tools for presenting new information: the flip cards demonstrate the spelling of a word, accompanied by an audio-recording of its pronunciation with the flipping option allowing learners to visualize the meaning. Importantly, the online stations prominently feature activities with instructional tasks, allowing students to access the mini-lectures or presentations as much and as often as needed. Overall, in the online student-centered activities students engage in self-study, in a structured

[7] In order to arrive at the design of online activities that capture all five types of tasks, the Moodle learning management system with an embedded Blendspace platform, Quizlet, Screencast-O-Matic and ScreenFlow technology have been utilized in the discussed model. All of these technological tools allow attending successfully to the pedagogical design of the discussed model.

[8] See Sykes and Reinhardt (2013) for the analysis of the potential of digital games in L2 teaching and learning.

manner, interacting with computer-mediated tools and activities, practicing and developing all four language skills.

4. Discussion

In the designed model, activities from both FTF and online components demonstrate various combinations of tasks (1)-(5) employed in each component. Both FTF and online 'stations' display the major tasks outlined above. However, the new blended-learning model allows us to reconfigure the distribution of activities, with certain tasks being more prominent in FTF space, and others in the online components. Specifically, in the blend discussed, both FTF and online stations contain activities structured around interactive, adaptive and productive tasks. However, the instructional tasks (presentation of grammar and new vocabulary) are featured predominantly in the online components, thereby freeing the physical learning space to more communicative activities. Communicative tasks are more difficult to implement via online activities, therefore, these are given prominence in the FTF space, allowing students to maximize practice of their communication skills in an actual physical learning space and a collaborative setting. This reconfiguration, specifically with respect to instructional and communicative tasks, leads to a redefinition of roles of both students and instructors in the presented model. This redefinition contributes to the increase of students' engagement in the learning process, which is paramount for any learning context. Over the past few decades, the traditional FTF L2 classroom has seen a move towards more learner-centered approaches. In reality, such approaches remain difficult to implement in a traditional classroom, as many instructors still believe in the need to deliver information to students during class time. The blended-learning model, by allowing the instructional tasks to be carried in the online space, assists with implementing the truly learner-centered approach. With instructions mostly online, the FTF time is freed to more learner-centered activities, with prominence on communicative tasks. The instructor's role is therefore being fundamentally transformed from a lecturer or a source of information to that of a facilitator and mediator in the students' learning experience in the FTF classroom.

Overall, in both learning spaces students' engagement in the learning process is maximized. The blend allows for the student-self, student-student, and student-instructor engagement in the FTF space, and student-self, student-student and student-computer-mediated task engagement in the online stations. This allows for a more efficient and increased allocation

of time and space for students' participation in both learning environments. These conclusions echo with Krasnova's (2015) statement that "[i]nformation technologies... allow to organize the interaction between instructors and students in a different way. They transform ordinary transfer of knowledge into cooperative learning, help to bring together the positions of instructors and students, activate their creative potential" (p. 400).

5. Conclusions

The present study analyzed one case of a blended-learning model for an L2 classroom at the post-secondary level. Specifically, the pedagogical considerations of the design of this model have been studied. The focus was on five different types of tasks to be considered in the design of both FTF and online components of the model. The main conclusion is that when designed and implemented successfully, both the FTF and online tasks can serve as an appropriate method of learning and instruction. An important finding of the study is the reconfiguration of tasks in the FTF and online components, which the blended-learning model allows us to achieve. Specifically with instructional tasks presented mainly in the online 'stations', the FTF space becomes more conductive to communicative and collaborative activities, promoting and securing learners' greater engagement in the learning process, fostering the true learner-centered L2 environment. In other words, the model discussed has the potential of harmonizing pedagogical activities with specific tasks and maximizing the impact of each on the teaching and learning process.The shift in the redistribution of learning and teaching tasks that lead to a reconfiguration of learning spaces analyzed above contribute to maximizing students' engagement in the blended-learning model.

After launching the discussed model, an analysis of students' engagement and motivations for learning in this new format certainly needs to be studied. Specific questions to be addressed are, but are not limited to the following: What do students think about the blended format? Which model(s) do students prefer? What could be done to improve students' satisfaction with the blended-learning model? In what ways may the discussed model impact students' L2 learning experience? How and in what ways does the blended-learning model contribute or not to the development of the different skills and language proficiency in different language areas?

Answering these and other relevant questions will provide valuable input into the blended-learning design, its implementation and research associated with this field of inquiry. We can

therefore conclude that there is considerable anticipation and eagerness in further researching and implementing this contemporary teaching and learning model.

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