

Gruba, Paul & Don Hinkelman.

2012. *Blending technologies in second language classrooms*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave McMillan. Pp. 181

This book deals with the theory and practice of blended language learning in tertiary education, although many of the suggestions offered for its implementation could easily be applied to other educational contexts. The volume is divided into eight chapters and it also includes an extensive bibliography, an itemized index and a list of tables & figures. All chapters present the most important information in tables and provide a summary of the main points at the end, which facilitates comprehension considerably. In the preface the authors offer a definition of what is understood by blended approaches to learning and teaching and then focus on the complexities of integrating these approaches into the language learning process, despite the fact that these approaches offer mul-

iple benefits, including the creation of rich and engaging learning environments. The study is grounded in both reading and experience, and the authors underpin many ideas with research in CALL, second language learning theories, blended learning and educational technologies. After a short introduction the authors present an overview of the content of each chapter in the book.

The book is divided into two main parts, a theoretical part (Chapters One to Five) and a practical part (Chapters Six and Seven). The final chapter (Chapter Eight) is very brief and presents a series of additional considerations.

In the theoretical part, the authors discuss the evolution of the concept 'blended learning' in tertiary education, the change in the role of technologies (from a tool-centric view to environment-embedded) and suggest ways of assessing blended learning in the classroom, including action research. In these chapters the authors emphasize the importance of process-oriented approaches to blended learning and advocate the full integration of technology in the language classroom as a normal part of everyday practice. In order to ensure that successful integration takes place, they propose a multidimensional approach to technologies and offer four considerations (purpose,

multimodality, appropriateness and sustainability) that need to be considered when implementing this process. The authors also advocate a wide definition of technologies and stress the need for a pedagogical basis for technology use, an aspect which has not always been emphasized in the literature on technologies and language learning (Laurillard, 2002; Koehler & Mishra 2005; Vinagre, 2010a). Other aspects of interest include design considerations (models) for tasks, lesson plans and syllabuses in blended learning environments, together with ethical aspects and risk management strategies. However, any reference to already established models of blended learning such as the skill, attitude and competency-driven models of learning suggested by Valiathan (2002) is blatantly missing. The exclusion of these models is particularly significant in the chapter on assessment (Chapter Four). In this chapter, blended forms of assessment are encouraged through the use of rubrics which can be designed either by the teacher, the students or both. Despite ostensive and clear discussion of specific aspects that can be subject to assessment in these learning environments (i.e. achievement of learning goals, collaboration, quality of contribution, participation, interaction, frequency, linguistic proficiency, etc) the

reader misses more ample reference to the evaluation and assessment of specific interpersonal, instrumental and systemic competences and skills (González & Wagenaar, 2008) and would have appreciated being presented with an all-encompassing rubric that included these aspects, together with general guidelines on how to assess them. In particular, there is no mention of how to assess more difficult learning objectives such as students' attitudes (for example towards the foreign culture of the language they are learning, see Vinagre 2010b). In concluding the theoretical part of the book, the authors have included a chapter on classroom research, which some readers may find challenging. Thus, chapter five deals with different aspects of qualitative analysis and introduces concepts such as triangulation, inter-rater reliability study, coding procedures, data sets and variable analysis, all of which are familiar to researchers, but unheard of among many teachers. However, for those teachers who enjoy carrying out research as a means of integrating feedback into their blended teaching practice, this is a very enlightening chapter. I particularly appreciated the authors' suggestion for institutions to reward those teachers who undertake action research in blended learning environments "with workload considerations,

conference funding and other recognition” (Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012: 97).

The practical part of the book includes Chapters Six and Seven and it deals with the practice of blended language learning in tertiary institutions. In Chapter Six, the authors analyse three blended lessons or tasks in EFL classrooms (an oral communication task, a written communication task and an inter-class cultural exchange) and discuss different ways in which technologies can be integrated into the language learning process. It is precisely in this chapter where the authors elaborate on the broad definition of technologies they advocated in the introductory chapters. Thus, according to the authors, classroom activities and techniques such as writing stories using photos, role-playing, brainstorming, pair dictation, poster sessions or a teacher’s lecture are defined as ‘face-to-face technologies’, which in blended learning approaches are used in combination with other digital and online technologies. I feel that even those practitioners who are in favour of developing wider conceptualizations of blended learning may object to this definition. First of all, the term is misleading and could even be counterproductive, since teachers who may feel under pressure to innovate by integrating electronic technologies (ICT) in the classroom could always

claim that they already use face-to-face ‘technologies’. Alternatively, those teachers who are willing to support and integrate electronic technologies (ICT) in the classroom may consider that their efforts are not being recognized, since every teaching activity is considered a form of technology. Second, it is also possible that those teachers who use video-conferencing in their lessons (through Skype or Google+ hangouts, for example) may describe such tools as (online) ‘face-to-face technology’, a definition that would clearly clash with that of Gruba & Hilkemann’s (p.104).

Chapter Seven illustrates examples of blended learning at institutional level in two universities in Japan. It analyses all aspects of the integration process (ranging from room design and use of furniture and equipment to curricular considerations and institutional support), examines best practices and it also elaborates dispassionately on those aspects that were less successful. Finally, Chapter Eight offers a brief summary of further considerations to be taken into account regarding training, policy, research and theory development in blended learning.

Notwithstanding the possibly controversial aspects commented upon above, this book offers the reader a wealth of ideas and possibilities concerning the integration of blended

learning in the (tertiary) classroom. From this perspective, it sheds considerable light on a still incipient field and it will greatly engage teachers and researchers who may be interested in the implementation of blended learning in the future.

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