

Book Review

Creating Effective Blended-Language-Learning Courses: A Research-Based Guide From Planning to Evaluation

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Creating Effective Blended Language Learning Courses: A Research-Based Guide from Planning to Evaluation

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Creating Effective Blended Language Learning Courses: A Research-Based Guide from Planning to Evaluation (2020) is a Cambridge University Press publication by Maria Mizza and Fernando Rubio. It is presented as a research-based guide aimed at language educators interested in the design process of blended language courses, an area which many find challenging. The book was released during the Covid-19 global pandemic which resulted in national lockdowns and social distancing restrictions around the world, thus forcing educators to abruptly shift from traditional classroom teaching to online teaching (Chan & Wilson, 2020). This sudden change in content delivery has further accelerated the process of integrating teaching and technology (Gacs et al., 2020). It is likely that educational institutions and educators will make use of this online teaching experience to implement effective blended learning courses once the restrictions are lifted and learners are able to return to the classroom. Consequently, this publication will continue to remain relevant for the foreseeable future.

Mizza and Rubio divided the book into three parts containing eight chapters. Part I consists solely of Chapter 1, which begins by reviewing the brief history of the integration of technology into language education, and then summarizes the different definitions of the term “blended” that have been used in educational fields to date, before clarifying the definition of “blended” adopted in this

book. Afterwards, five rationales for blended learning in language courses are discussed, followed by a literature review of previous studies on blended language learning (BLL). Notably, the authors point out that the results from current quantitative studies are largely non-generalizable because of different methodologies and populations. They conclude that more qualitative and non-comparative research should be explored to close this research gap, which is the major focus in Part II of this book.

In Part II, Mizza and Rubio elaborate on the theoretical basis of (Chapters 2 and 3) and pedagogical evidence (Chapter 4) for BLL. After examining the development history of blended learning in higher education (HE) language courses and analyzing the rationales for designing and redesigning BLL courses, Chapter 2 further emphasizes the importance of concerted efforts from all stakeholders—administrators, teachers, students, and IT staff—to ensure BLL success. Later, the authors demonstrate that the balance and interdependence of face-to-face (F2F) and online components are crucial aspects of the pedagogical plan to ensure a successful blending process. Accordingly, they suggest that blended paths should be based on the constructivist approach and, as such, should provide opportunities for autonomous learning, reflection and metacognition, and adhere to the principles of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) with regards to input and interaction, negotiation of meaning, and exposure to feedback. In order to unify these various aspects of the blending process, two fundamental approaches to a blended path, input front-loading and input back-loading, are examined; each based on different introductory phases of the input source. To conclude Part II, Chapter 4 moves away from the purely theoretical focus of the previous two chapters, and instead describes and evaluates some examples of BLL courses, as well as recommending follow-up activities for readers to consolidate the content discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. This shift from the theoretical to the practical is completed with the step-by-step instructional design process for BLL courses in the final part of the book.

In Part III (Chapters 5 to 8), Mizza and Rubio construct their *BLL Course Development Framework: Design, Build, Teach, and Revise*. This framework provides guidance that is SLA theory-based, yet remains simple to follow for BLL instructors, designers and administrators. Firstly, it offers multi-faceted and comprehensive BLL guidelines from course planning and building to instructional practice and course evaluation. Secondly, it is practice-orientated by presenting some reproductive examples and evaluation criteria for each phase. Thirdly, since it is a circular and iterative framework, it is also able to cater to various target groups by allowing them to decide which phase in the process they should begin creating their course. For example, beginners could begin from the initial phase, while those who have already established course goals and objectives and aim to convert existing F2F courses to BLL could choose to start from the *Build* phase; Thus, the unique features of this framework enable educational practitioners, especially those lacking online teaching experience to effectively switch their instructional roles during the higher education sea change that the Covid-19 crisis has brought about.

Mizza and Rubio name the first framework phase as the *Design* phase in Chapter 5, which contains two consecutive steps. The first step is to conduct learner and learning context needs analysis, both prior to course design and as an on-going process for potentially changing needs and course improvements (Section 5.1). Based on the information gathered in the first step, the second step is to establish general program goals, achievable teaching objectives and measurable outcomes first, and then to determine acceptable evidence to assess previously set objectives and outcomes (Section 5.2). Afterwards, Mizza and Rubio describe their updated backward design approaches that are based on Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) "Backward Design Model" and aim to avoid "the twin sins of traditional design." Specifically, the first "sin" of traditional course design is activity-orientation, which might mislead learners into feeling that simply engaging with activities is learning. The second "sin" is the coverage-focused model in traditional design, which is "like a whirlwind tour of Europe" in that it has neither clear goals nor detailed plans to reach those goals. Instead of focusing on learning inputs in traditional course design, however, Mizza and Rubio's newer backward design model is outcome-focused. They recommend starting by identifying desired learning outcomes and objectives, then choosing appropriate assessments that can verify these learning results, and finally

working backwards from the first two stages to develop learning activities for F2F and online delivery formats. Comparatively, Mizza and Rubio's more recent backward design model appears to build and improve on Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) model and their view that "we cannot start planning how we are going to teach until we know exactly what we want our students to learn."

Chapter 6 delves into the second phase of the BLL framework, the *Build* phase, which aims at providing readers a well-thought-out BLL roadmap on both macro (course and unit) and micro (activity and task) levels. Based on the established teaching objectives and learning outcomes, Mizza and Rubio recommend mapping out courses as well as unit outlines. Next, they advise that appropriate selection and sequencing of activities should give consideration to the model of delivery (F2F or online), communication (synchronous or asynchronous), and interaction (teacher-student, student-student, student-content). Noticeably, the suggested steps toward course mapping are research-based and follow well-established theories and principles of SLA (e.g., content-based instruction on p.142, Robinson's (2001) Cognition Hypothesis on p.170, and Skehan's (1998) Limited Capacity Model on p.171). This feature provides BLL teachers and designers with a solid scientific basis and reference when planning and arranging their own course or unit outlines. In addition, Mizza and Rubio provide abundant examples and recommendations. These beneficial features, such as the unit outline examples presented in Table 6.2 and 6.3 on p.149, front-loaded and back-loaded question examples elaborated on from page 160 to 166, and task complexity categorization guidelines listed in Table 6.4, assist users in following the trail to design their own courses. Finally, another significant boon for BLL practitioners is that ample technological resources are provided in the last section of this chapter. Mizza and Rubio propose a user-centric taxonomy of technology to guide readers in effectively integrating technological tools into language courses. Specifically, they not only offer an essential classification of technologies for the traditional four language skills (as shown in Table 6.5), and some key considerations for technology-integration in a BLL course (Figure 6.15 and Table 6.9), but also summarize and categorize various asynchronous and synchronous technologies according to different learning contexts, such as student-content expert technologies (Table 6.6), student-student technologies (Table 6.7), and student-context technologies (Table 6.8). In sum, the *Build* phase introduced in this chapter allows practitioners to be well prepared both theoretically and technically before starting a BLL course.

Having defined teaching objectives and learning outcomes by following the backward design model in the *Design* phase, and selected appropriate activities, tools and resources to facilitate achieving those outcomes in the *Build* phase, the "*Teach*" phase proceeds to arguably the most critical step in the BLL process, when the preparatory steps made in those first two phases are implemented. Consistent with the research-based approach employed in previous chapters in this part, Chapter 5 introduces the concept of incorporating "High-Leverage Practices" (HLPs) into BLL courses. It concentrates on four HLP guidelines to ensure that complex blended formats can still be SLA principle-based, easily teachable, and applicable to different contexts and learners. These four HLPs are: maintaining an effective blended path; fostering autonomous learning; enhancing teaching presence through design, facilitation, and direction; and creating opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning. In the explanation of each HLP, Mizza and Rubio begin by clarifying the theoretical justification for each HLP, and then deconstruct each HLP into smaller and more viable teaching components. Lastly, they finalize each HLP explanation by providing a specific example with adequate and feasible micro-practices. By following the HLP guidelines proposed by Mizza and Rubio, it is beneficial for course teachers, especially those lacking BLL experience, to deconstruct teaching practice into smaller and more easily teachable components, and then to facilitate the achievement of specific teaching goals in both F2F and online contexts with learners at different levels.

The last framework phase, *Revise*, is established in Chapter 8. In this phase, the authors advise taking full advantage of the respective benefits of both F2F and online formats to realize a process-driven, project-oriented, and product-oriented BLL assessment. Specifically, they encourage authentic and task-oriented performance assessment, which aligns with the teaching objectives and learning

outcomes established in the *Design* phase, the activities and tasks outlined in the *Build* Phase, and the teaching practices employed in the *Teach* Phase. To make this proposed assessment approach more explicit, Mizza and Rubio showcase the “Travel Expo” project on p.230. This project requires students to imitate a real-life travel expo by presenting a city of their choice to attract potential tourists. The whole project comprises of three individual processes: creating a questionnaire, teamworking on a proposal, and finally producing a city-promotion blog which is similar to an actual printed brochure at a real travel expo. Throughout these three sub-processes, the instructor can assess students’ accomplishments in collaboration, writing, oral communication, and other targeted skills based on authentic forms of assessment. Last, Mizza and Rubio conclude their four-part framework by proposing criteria and standards to evaluate the overall success of BLL courses from three perspectives: the institution, the course, and the user. As is evident, this book clearly manages to incorporate a significant quantity and variety of information into its 282 pages. It is important to mention that Mizza and Rubio refer to this phase as “Revise” when it might have been more appropriate to call it “Assess.” Although they do not explicitly state the reasons for this, it might be inferred from their consensus on some scholars’ viewpoints. To be more specific, they acknowledge that ongoing and dynamic evaluation of BLL courses is crucial for their success and continuous improvement, “where subsequent implementations can build on and extend successful features of the blend (Boyle et al., 2003: 177)”. Therefore, blended learning needs evaluation during the development process, rather than exclusively at the end of it (Pombo & Moreira, 2012).

When evaluating the significance of Mizza and Rubio’s contribution to the ever-increasing discourse on blended learning, part III’s BLL development framework is one aspect of the book that is undoubtedly an unmitigated success. This framework comprises just over half of the whole book, and is the crux of its considerable usefulness to anyone embarking on the design of a blended course. This framework successfully manages to interweave theory with practical advice and real-world examples that together form a step-by-step guide through the process of designing, building, teaching and evaluating blended courses. Some of the steps that the authors suggest will likely result in more than one “Eureka” moment for the reader. Of particular use in facilitating this are the clear, well-designed tables that are used to illustrate some of these points, such as the organisation of, and relationship between course goals, teaching objectives and learning outcomes in tables 5.1 and 5.2, or the steps towards course mapping that are illustrated in table 6.1. Both of these tables, as well as several others, manage to encapsulate fairly complex thought processes so that they may be understood at a glance. In fact, this encapsulation of complexity into practicality is emblematic of what part III as a whole manages to achieve, with the end result being a pragmatic guide to blended course creation.

As well as the practical framework, another beneficial outcome of this book is the clarity Mizza and Rubio provide to the reader in terms of the over-arching approach that should be taken when embarking on the design of a blended course. Throughout Parts I and II, the concept that is compounded repeatedly is that the online elements of the course must be interwoven with the classroom elements, and vice versa. This is exemplified by the advice on p.9 that the dysfunctionality of the “course and a half” that is often the result of merely bolting online elements onto an existing course should be avoided at all costs. This advice may be particularly pertinent during the Covid-19 pandemic that has, by necessity, resulted in widespread, rapid adaption of existing F2F courses and the adoption of a wide range of delivery methods, often by those with little or no previous experience of utilising the requisite tools.

While this book is without doubt an invaluable resource for those considering embarking on the design and implementation of a blended course, especially those who have suddenly found it to be an unexpected requirement, one possible criticism is that its explanations and examples are focused almost entirely on learning and teaching scenarios in Western institutions. This has led to the omission of discussion of, or advice on some vital issues that practitioners operating in other cultures may have to overcome. One such notable omission occurs when the authors refer to the notions that successful blended learning may require an active (p.14), autonomous (p.57) learner, but

offer no guidance or possible solutions for engaging learners that are unlikely to fit this description. This is of particular relevance in most East Asian countries for instance, where learners are generally accustomed to a passive, teacher-centred learning style (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Subramaniam, 2008). A second example of the book's somewhat narrow contextual focus is that the case-studies are almost exclusively courses designed for learners of a foreign language at institutions in their home countries, where their native languages are the medium of instruction. Therefore, there is little consideration for the meta-linguistic challenges that may occur when designing a blended language course where the language being learned is also the institutional medium of instruction, which is generally the case for the several million students who are enrolled at higher education institutions overseas or at transnational institutions. All this being said, while a wider, more global contextual focus that considers variances in cross-cultural learning and teaching needs could perhaps broaden the book's appeal even further, the content that is currently included should provide a solid basis for a well-designed blended course in any context, with the caveat that those practitioners looking to offer blended courses in non-Western, non-native contexts may need to consult further literature to assist them in confronting their own specific challenges.

Overall, Mizza and Rubio's wide-ranging treatment of the topic is noteworthy. However, while this comprehensive coverage is without doubt a creditable achievement, in the lengthy literature review that is part I, brevity may have improved the overall readability. While the author's initial clarification of their over-arching definition of BLL is vital, the extended justification of the use of blended learning feels somewhat of an anachronism in the information age, where web usage is so ubiquitous that the incorporation of an online element in an educational context requires little or no validation. This tendency towards verbosity is compounded in the first chapter of part II (chapter 2) where the authors go on to list and describe multiple examples of blended learning programs at various HE institutions; seemingly with the purpose of exemplifying the first chapter's theoretical explanation of the topic. Again, given the ubiquity of blended courses at contemporary HE institutions, this seems largely superfluous for experienced course creators. That being said, all of this exposition may well be useful for anyone with little or no experience of blended learning, and accessibility for just such readers is one of the authors' stated goals in their own description of the book. Furthermore, for those with somewhat more knowledge of the subject, at least a perfunctory skim of this section is justified as all of the detail lays a comprehensive foundation for the framework laid out in part III.

In conclusion, Mizza and Rubio's *Creating Effective Blended Language Learning Courses* (2020) publication meets its goal of providing educators with a step-by-step research-based guide on designing language courses, or guiding the transition from face-to-face or fully online courses to blended instruction. It effectively provides a significant amount of useful content, which includes an in-depth theoretical overview of blended learning, a wide range of authentic examples of its implementation, and a framework for educators to use when designing blended language learning courses. Although some of the content is arguably redundant (e.g. the overly descriptive nature of the definition of "blended learning"), and its contextual focus is rather narrow, which limits how some of the suggestions could be practically applied in certain learning environments, the book does prove to be a valuable resource. It is, however, recommended that language instructors working in the environments not explicitly specified in this publication to use it as a starting point, and to consult further contextually relevant literature during the course design process.

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