Blending Language Teaching for Effective Language Learning

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Abstract:

Teaching Portuguese as a foreign language in an American university can be challenging, particularly when most students take the language course simply to meet university requirements. In an attempt to motivate the students to actually learn the new language, I redesigned my Port 101 course following the blended learning model. In the new course three face-to-face weekly meetings were reduced to two and the third meeting was substituted by activities the students were required to do out-of-class. A thorough course evaluation was conducted among the students at the end of the semester. The instructor’s reflections and students’ reactions to this new teaching approach are discussed in this paper, focusing on blended course design, technology tools for language learning, and course delivery issues.

Key words: Portuguese, foreign language teaching, blended learning

1 Introduction

Blended (or hybrid) learning has been defined in many ways. In this paper it is defined following Picciano (2006), as “courses that integrate online with traditional face-to-face class activities in a planned, pedagogically valuable manner and where a portion (institutionally defined) of face-to-face time is replaced by online activity.”

In recent years blended learning has received much attention from educators in all disciplines and the number of publications on the topic is on the rise (Bonk, Graham, Cross, & Moore, 2006; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). In addition, according to the SLOAN-C 2007 annual report on the state of education in the U.S., “[b]oth fully online and blended course offerings [] have grown dramatically in American higher education in recent years.” (Allan, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007).

Many studies have argued that because blended instruction takes advantage of the best of both face-to-face and online “worlds” they tend to offer better results than either totally face-to-face or totally online courses. Some studies also have shown how blended courses have increased students’ grades (McFarlin, B., 2008). However, well-designed blended courses not just make use of both the out-of-class and face-to-face environments. In order to be successful, the blended course activities done in one environment must be interconnected or built upon the activities conducted in the other environment. In other words, the delivery
methods must be organized in ways to promote the best blend of skill development to ensure most effective learning.

Although foreign language teaching is one of the fields of study that can benefit most from a blended model, not enough research has been conducted exploring the theory as well as the practice of foreign language blended courses. This paper intends to contribute to the literature in the field, by discussing a blended course of Beginning Brazilian Portuguese offered to American undergraduate students.

2 The old course

Port 101 is the first of a series of four-semester Portuguese language courses, which can fulfill the basic foreign language requirement of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). Traditionally, Port 101 was offered through three 50-minute lectures per week and required a textbook, a simplified grammar and a dictionary, in addition to a course pack made up of handouts created by the instructor and distributed to the students.

The course lectures included both presentation and practice of new vocabulary and grammar, listening activities (mainly reading and dictation exercises), pronunciation activities (with students repeating after the instructor), in addition to tasks designed for students to try using the new language meaningfully (e.g., role-plays). However, more often than not the 50-min meetings would be easily consumed with preparatory activities of vocabulary building, grammar explanations and pronunciation practice, leaving very little space for the interactive tasks. Due to the varied language proficiency and interest in the course, it was always very hard to determine the right amount of practice needed in class, that is, to identify the thin line between boring the students who were more advanced and providing enough for the less advanced students.

The course assessment included a mid-term and a comprehensive final exam, both with a written and an oral portion, in addition to a weekly journal. A small percentage of the students’ grade was allocated for class participation but students didn’t hesitate to miss classes whenever they were busy with other projects. They often complained that the language course, although "just an elective", took too much time of their busy schedule.

Students were also assigned weekly homework, usually handed in to the instructor on Fridays for correction and returned to the students in the next class. However, by the time the students got the instructor’s feedback the focus of the class had already moved to something different from that of the homework, and the students tended to ignore the instructor’s comments.

Summarizing, the three 50-min contact hours per week never seemed enough to cover the course content in a comprehensive way and most students’ performance was below the instructor’s expectation. In seeking to overcome the factors that were hindering the students’ learning, I decided to try a new teaching approach. My challenges as instructor were mainly:

1. To motivate the students to actually learn the new language and to continue taking the other Portuguese courses the university offered.
2. To facilitate the students learning process by providing prompt feedback and more opportunities for interaction and engagement with the language.
3. To help students develop time management skills and responsibility for their own learning.
4. To decrease the weight of the traditional mid-term and final exams in favor of low-stake formative assessments throughout the semester.

3 The new course

In order to address the above challenges, the course was redesigned as follows:

One of the three weekly meetings was replaced with activities the students would do out-of-class, at a time of their convenience, although within specific time frames. This allowed the instructor to reduce lecturing and mechanical use of the language in the classroom and to increase the opportunities for the students to use the new language in meaningful interactions with the instructor and classmates. As in all blended courses, the major challenges here were twofold: First, to identify the type of tasks that are better done out-of-class and those that work better face-to-face. Second, to implement the ideal balance between face-to-face and out-of-class learning activities to attain the planned educational goals.

In general terms, the out-of-class portion of the course focused on exposing the students to factual information that needed to be learned and that may actually benefit from repetition and drilling such as learning new vocabulary and grammar, viewing and listening to dialogues, doing self-correcting exercises, and practicing pronunciation. It also included checking important Websites and watching online videos and other media. The face-to-face meetings, on the other hand, included activities that required spontaneity, interaction and exchange of information, as well as issues that asked for more detailed explanation.

The new Port 101 course was structured around the content of the first of the two CD-ROMs of the Beginning Brazilian Portuguese course (Silva, 1998). It fully integrated the CD’s ten lessons, each one including dialogues, grammar and cultural notes, various exercise types, and other interactive activities. The material of the CD was supplemented with handouts created by the instructor with guidelines for the face-to-face activities in class and for using the material on the Internet.

The course assessment included the weekly journal in addition to the mid-term and final exams required by the university but now with a significantly reduced weight. Class participation, on the other hand, had higher percentage of the students’ grades than in the old course. The weekly homework was substituted by other tasks, as I will describe below.

Each unit in the CD included self-correcting exercises in various forms, such as multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-blanks, and dictation. Students were assigned these exercises to be done out-of-class, and in preparation for the classroom activities. They could repeat the exercises as many times as needed until they got them 100% correct. At this point they would print the results and bring them to class. At the beginning of each class the instructor would collect the homework, and would clarify any doubts the student should have.

In addition, each lesson, or unit, had a major dialogue offered in text, audio, and video formats. The texts included links to relevant pictures, as well as grammar and cultural notes. The vocabulary of the unit was also available in flash cards for vocabulary building practice. To help students in their speaking skills, the pronunciation exercises allowed the students to record their voices and compare them with the native speaker’s voices in the CDs.
Thus, in order to be prepared for the classroom activities, the students were carefully guided on when, how and which tasks to do at home, usually targeting vocabulary building, pronunciation practice, and learning new grammar rules. In class, the instructor would simply clarify any aspect of the tasks not fully understood by the students, thus saving the valuable class time for interactive activities.

In the face-to-face meetings students were guided in applying their new knowledge or skill in simulated situations, which required them to use the new language either to provide or to collect real information.

As already mentioned, the success of a blended course is directly proportional to how well integrated the face-to-face and the out-of-class activities are. They have to always feed each other, one being required for the effective execution of the other. In addition, they need to be tied in a way that the students do not see the two environments as disconnected, as if they were taking two parallel courses, one out and one in class. This important issue was seriously considered during the Port 101 course redesign and the students were made aware about how the activities done in one environment affected those done in the other. The outside and the in-class activities were given equal weight and were equally graded.

4 The students’ reactions

The students’ reactions to the new course are based on objective indicators, noted by the instructor, such as the concrete increase in the average of the students’ grades as compared to the previous Port 101 courses, as well as subjective indicators, mainly collected through the end-of-course evaluation. The students’ excitement with their learning was tangible throughout the course and all students indicated that they intended to continue learning Portuguese. In addition, the students always showed a very positive attitude towards the course and in general did their out-of-class tasks on time, closely following the instructor directions.

The reduced number of classroom meetings was very welcomed by the students, in most cases taking several other courses at the same time. However, less fixed class meetings did not mean that the students worked less than in the traditional courses. They actually studied harder and for longer periods of time but at times convenient for them. In the end-of-semester evaluation 33% of the students mentioned they studied with the CD at least 2-3 hours a week, 33% studied at least 4 hours, and the other 34% mentioned they studied at least 6 hours a week. Thus, the third weekly 50-min meeting was in fact exchanged with many more hours of study outside class.

The students’ comments in the course evaluation clearly demonstrated that they enjoyed working with the multimedia tools out-of-class, and appreciated their being able to control their time and pace of work. When asked which course resources were the most useful, one student said: “the video + hearing the pronunciation any time I wanted.” Another student commented: “It helped to hear the words rather than just look at them.” Yet, another students wrote: “Hearing the dialog is amazing. I’m still not good at the verbal but I’m much better than I would be with a textbook. Hearing the language makes all the difference.”
5 The instructor’s reflections

How did the new teaching approach address the instructor’s concerns and challenges to motivate the students to learn and continue learning Portuguese, to facilitate and enhance the learning process and to help students develop responsibility for their own learning and time management skills?

One of the goals of the new course was to take some of the weight of the summative assessments (mid-term and final) and distribute it through various formative tests throughout the semester. Formative assessment allows the instructor to provided feedback when the students need it, when they can benefit from it. The out-of-class activities were mostly self-corrected thus providing the students just-in-time feedback, which was very important in preparing the students for the classroom meetings.

These low-stake formative assessments also helped the students learn about time management. Because the out-of-class activities are crucial for the success of the classroom work (and vice-versa) they need to be done properly and in a timely manner. Sands (2002) includes a practical list of strategies that can help the instructors connect the online and the face-to-face activities. One of them says: “Be explicit about time-management issues and be prepared to teach new skills.” Indeed the traditional teaching approach does not help students with time management and responsibility for their own learning. However, these important skills can be learned. When teaching a business and technical writing blended course Spilka (2002) found out that although with some initial difficulty, students do learn “to do the independent, systematic, timely work that the hybrid requires.”

In the traditional course the students were never uniform in their readiness to practice in class what they studied at home. In the new approach the instructor guided the students on how and what to study on their own in order to come to class prepared to carry out interactive tasks in the new language. Of course in all courses some students are more dedicated than others and thus come to class better prepared. However, after going through the set of self-correcting exercises, vocabulary building and pronunciation practices at home all students acquired a basic common knowledge necessary to make even the weaker students comfortable enough to engage in the face-to-face interactions in class.

The new course obviously required students and instructor to play new roles. While the instructor role became more of a guide of what/when/how to learn, the students’ roles included more responsibility for their own learning. The blended course also directed the students to a more active learning and gave them more opportunities to ‘construct’ their learning. The constructive approach claims that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. (Murphy, 1997; Dougiamas, 1998).

One of the major concerns of instructors in teaching blended courses is the amount of time involved in the process of redesigning the course to fit this teaching format. In the particular case of the blended Port 101, the course preparation required an amount of time, but not much more than any other course to be taught for the first time. One major advantage of this particular course was that the instructor did not have to develop the interactive course material to be used out-of-class but used the ready-made material of the Beginning Brazilian Portuguese course. The instructor major work involved the creation of activities to promote the use of the language in the classroom, in interactive and meaningful ways. It also involved
identifying Internet resources to enrich the units and further motivate the students, by offering them current, authentic material written in the new language.

Although the students were recommended to buy a Portuguese dictionary and grammar, those items were not mandatory. All vocabulary in the CD had its equivalent in English and all grammatical points covered in the lessons were explained in the footnotes.

6 Recommendations and conclusion

6.1 Recommendations

The CD-ROM was seen by some students as very convenient because they could work without worrying about being connected to the Internet. Other students, however, thought it would help to have the material available online so they would access it from anywhere with an Internet connection. One student suggested to make the CD “web-based so we don’t have to carry around a CD. Although carrying a CD is much better that carrying a textbook.” Thus, one of the recommendations for the future is to have both options available to accommodate different students’ preferences. The use of the CDs is particularly important in situations where Internet connectivity and bandwidth are not reliable.

Another recommendation for future Portuguese blended courses is to use an LMS (learning management system), e.g., Moodle ([http://moodle.org/](http://moodle.org/)), for better course organization by keeping in a single location all material not available on the CD, e.g., the course syllabus, grades, calendar and useful Internet links. Furthermore, the LMS will be very useful for both students and instructor for management of the assignments. Instead of printing the assignments to hand in to the instructor, students could simply upload them using Moodle’s assignment tool. In a similar way the weekly journals could be uploaded to Moodle making it easier for the instructor to follow up on the progress of the student’s writing skills.

The LMS can be convenient for students to submit not just written but also oral assignments online. Using Audacity ([http://audacity.sourceforge.net/](http://audacity.sourceforge.net/)), a free audio recording and editor, students can record their voices and submit the recordings to the Moodle course for feedback and grading. Oral exams are part of most beginner foreign language courses and traditionally they are part of the midterm and the final exams conducted in class. This tool would let students to carry out short oral assignments throughout the semester thus increasing their learning opportunities, improving their pronunciation, and enriching their learning experience.

Finally, the LMS would also allow the instructors to keep all important links organized for easy access at any time. One thing to remember when using an LMS is students’ computer literacy and familiarity with the tool. It is important to make sure all students are comfortable with the technology before they actually need to use them.

6.2 Conclusion

Because this was not a controlled experiment I cannot make any effectiveness claim beyond my own observations as instructor and what the students commented in the end-of-semester evaluation.
However, the new course format gave students a more flexible schedule and promoted more active learning. It required from the students more responsibility with their own learning, and helped them develop time management skills and self-discipline to work outside of the classroom walls. At the same time it was a fun course. One student said: “This was an awesome class – very effective learning. I feel I am the most prepared I could be for only taking the language for less than 4 months.”

The new course also granted the instructor greater flexibility in managing the course material and allowed the delivery of pedagogically sound content in class, in addition to promoting students’ accessibility and engagement of the learning material. By cutting down from three to two weekly classroom meetings the instructor actually increased the amount and the quality of meaningful interactions in the new language.

Finally, the interactive activities students did in class related to students’ real world scenarios, were fun, and built in community as well as self-esteem. Some students compared the Portuguese blended language course with other language courses they had taken in the past. One student said: “I think the greatest advantage of the CD-ROM was being able to listen to portions again and again for pronunciation. I feel that I learned the pronunciation more quickly with the CD than I have in past Spanish/Italian classes I took.”

There is no perfect way of delivering a language course. Yet, the possibilities that are created by the blended learning can definitely improve teaching as well as motivate and enhance student learning.

References


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