Incorporating Technology into Curriculum from Teacher's Perspective (Blended Language Learning)

Fatemeh Joharifard[1], S. A. Shanavas[2], Masoumeh Joharifard[3]

[1]Research Scholar, Department of Linguistics, University of Kerala

[2]Associate Professor, Department of Linguistics, University of Kerala

[3]Master of Education, Department of Education, Pune University

Abstract: *Technology and media play striking roles in todays' personal and professional lives, and they have dominant roles in classrooms. The present study intends to place teacher at the heart of educational research in which they make decisive decisions on what, how and whom to teach and also produce changes to confirm or resist existing practices of the wider society (Lo Bianco, 2010; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). It should be noted that several references to ICT and Online Learning attempts that being included to frame the general discussion as observed by Compton (2009). One can note that very little has been published specifically on Blended Language Learning and the language teacher. Throughout this paper, it is attempted to give a review of literature on incorporation of technology into the curriculum, specifically in relation to the implementation of blended programs from the perspective of a teacher. The study can be concluded that teachers are influenced by a wide variety of contextual and personal aspects that affect their perception on technology and in turn the kind of learning opportunities they provide to their students.*

Keywords: Blended Language Learning, ICT, Online Learning, Technology corporation

1. Introduction

The infusion of Information Communication Technology (ICT) into learning and teaching has transpired all sectors of education. It has changed the nature of Face to Face (FTF) teaching and enabled to a rapid growth of Blended and Online courses. ICT not only offer new opportunities but also new challenges for both instructors and students. As the number of online courses grows, it is essential that one has to have an understanding of the roles and practices an effective online teacher uses or can use. Laurillard (2002) asserted that ―if there is to be innovation and change in university teaching— as the new technology require, as the knowledge industry require, and as students demand— then it follow that academics must become research oriented in teaching and learning.

Blended learning is a model that combines face-to-face and online learning. It has thus become one of the strategies adopted by EFL/ESL university departments, institutes and schools to meet the demands of language learners as well as educational authorities. Researches based on different theoretical and methodological grounds have been conducted in order to uncover their benefits and shortcomings. Nonetheless, though studies conducted by language and technology experts illustrate that the complex nature of the implementation of such technology-mediated innovations, to date; has been no systematic analysis of language teachers' roles, perceptions and practices in blended learning and online learning models. As Shelley, White, Baumann and Murphy (2006) note:

The emergence of a host of new ways of organizing language learning over the past two decades (distributed learning, blended learning, hybrid learning, and online learning) has not been met with a similar development of enquiry into what is actually required to carry out teaching roles in such contexts. (p.2)

As suggested by educational researchers, it is deemed necessary to place teacher at the heart of educational arena so that the decisions make on what, how and whom to teach is not only produce changes but also confirm or resist existing practices of the wider society (Lo Bianco, 2010; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). Unfortunately, as stated by White (2006), research on blended learning has been conducted to compare learning outcomes in traditional and blended foreign language classes, yet the various sociocultural (external) and psychological (internal) aspects that mediate teachers' as well as learners' transition from face-to-face to online learning, and which provide a richer understanding of this phenomenon, seem to go unexamined. There is also insufficient information about teachers' perceptions and the roles they play in these mixed environments, and without understanding of those features, it is difficult to create new and effective blended models (Grgurovic, 2010).

This paper makes a review of the literature on the incorporation of technology into the curriculum, especially in relation to the implementation of blended programs. Teachers' perceptions, roles, and practices as well as the external aspects that influence how they respond to the changes motivated by online instruction, as will be evidenced below, should be carefully examined by researchers and curriculum planners so as to better prepare for the execution of both blended and online programs. It should be noted that several references to ICT and online learning has to be included to frame the general discussion since, as observed by Compton (2009), very little has been published on blended language learning and specifically the language teacher's perspective. This attempt therefore addresses the scarcity of resources in the mentioned area by drawing on research and theory from related educational scenarios such as from the mainstream classroom practices.

2. Blended Learning: Origins

Blended learning (BL) is defined as a combination of face-to-face (FTF) and online learning, is a model that is increasingly being used in higher education institutions in response to some of the social, economic and pedagogical challenges that they are currently facing. Bach, Haynes and Smith (2006) argue that the arrival of online learning (which is part of blended learning) is the result of the modern transformation of higher education alongside other aspects such as globalization and the expansion of higher education in many countries. Consequently, blended learning, a model aimed at effectively using and combining Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and web-mediated tools (WMT) with face-to-face instruction, is also being implemented in language programs in tertiary institutions to enhance both language learning and teaching processes and meet some of the needs faced by the higher education today (Grgurovic, 2010).

As Jonassen, Howland, Moore & Marra (2003) contend, it is clear that to be competitive in the global market, there is a growing pressure for university students to not only learn English, but also develop the technological skills that allow them to be successful on the world they precede. The challenges, however, as in any other education sector, are 'to make sure that the focus on technology does not distract from the focus on knowledge, knowledge creation, their evolution and application' (Bach, Haynes & Smith, 2006, p.16). As argued by Laurillard, 'a university is defined by the quality of its academic conversations, not by the technologies that service them' (2002, cited in Motteram, 2006, p.19).

3. Defining Blended Learning

Definitions of blended learning range from so broad that practically any learning experience that integrates use of educational technology has to qualify, to others that focus on a specific percentage of combination of online curriculum and instruction in a face-to-face setting. One among the many definitions of blended learning includes:

"The integration of face-to-face and online learning to help enhance the classroom experience and extend learning through the innovative use of information and communications technology. Blended strategies enhance student engagement and learning through online activities to the course curriculum, and improve effectiveness and efficiencies by reducing lecture time."

Owing to the problems faced with fully virtual environments (e.g. sense of isolation and low motivation), many people started to reject the "either or view of learning online versus face to face" (McDonald, 2008, p.3), and instead, resorted to the creation of blended spaces so as to generate more satisfactory outcomes.

According to Tayebinik and Puteh (2012), Driscoll (2002) provides the broadest definition of all authors since she defines blended learning as a combination of instructional methods or pedagogical approaches. Authors like

Gülbahar and Madran (2009), Rovai and Jordan (2004), Thorne (2003), and Yildirim (2007), however, define blended learning as a mixture of online learning or web-based training with face-to-face communication and more traditional methods of learning and teaching.

Neumeier (2005) defines BL as a combination of face-to-face (FF) and computer assisted learning (CAL) in a single teaching and learning environment. Sharma and Barrett (2007) generalize their understanding of blended learning as a course which combines face-to-face classroom component with an appropriate use of technology:

The term technology covers a wide range of recent technologies, such as the Internet, interactive online sites, CD-ROMs and interactive whiteboards. It also includes the use of computers as a means of communication, with applications such as chat and e-mail, and a number of environments which enable teachers to enrich their courses, such as VLEs (virtual learning environments), blogs and wikis. (p. 7)

4. Aim of Blended learning design

The most important aim of a BL design is thus to create a learning environment that combines the best of both models and that works as a whole and to find "the most effective and efficient combination of the two modes of learning for the individual learning subjects, contexts and objectives" (Neumeier, 2005.p. 165). BL seeks to generate a coherent and harmonious balance between online access to knowledge and face-to-face human interaction by taking into account learners' and teachers' aptitudes and attitudes. BL therefore remains an important concept in language teaching as "its overall focus is concerned with the attempt to identify the optimum mix of course delivery in order to provide the most effective language learning experience" (Sharma, 2010, p. 457).

5. Blended Learning Design

Despite the benefits that blended learning offers, it must address challenges related to the course design. Tackling the question of design is one of the most salient and difficult, as a "threat of an out-of-balance, discordant blend ...[could] frustrate both student and teacher" (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003, p.229). According to these authors, to find the right mix between FTF and online modes, designers, curriculum leaders and teachers must address various pedagogical and logistical questions, such as:

- How often students and teacher meet face-to-face versus how often they will complete assignments online,
- What will be accomplished during these face-to face meetings versus during the online experiences,
- How often students and their teacher will interact in the virtual environment,
- What the purpose of such interaction will be, and
- How community will be built during both types of contact.

Educators must also assure that they provide pedagogical richness, access to knowledge that goes beyond the information given in textbooks, social interaction, and opportunities for personal agency (self-directed learning).

According to Comas-Quinn, the success of any model lies especially in the hands of teachers, and in the case of BL, on how well they can make the transition from their role in the face-to-face classroom to the complex roles that online learning demands: "The success of any innovation in education, such as the introduction of online teaching and online technologies (e-learning), is in great part due to how will teachers deal with the new ideas and implement them with their learners" (p.219). Teachers' understanding and use of ICT modes greatly impact students' acceptance of online learning as well as their perceptions of how useful online tools are.

In the same way, teachers' willingness to changes is powerfully influenced by learners' expectations as well as by traditional ideas shared by colleagues and students about "what language learning is, and what their respective roles in the process are" (p.228). They are equally influenced by their own individual dispositions (beliefs and values) and other internal and external motivators. Some of the current professional development programs, however, do not bear in mind theses various influences, making change less likely to happen.

A transmission of knowledge approach to training fails to acknowledge and properly support the transformation of teachers' identity that results moving from traditional classroom based teaching to online teaching. The shift goes beyond the acquisition of ICT skills and requires a pedagogical understanding of the affordances of the new medium and an acceptance by the teacher of his or her new role and identity.

Results confirmed that students who were taught by teachers who actively use CALL modes exhibited more positive attitudes toward the online component in BL than those students taught by teachers who incorporate CALL tools to a lesser extent. Thus, as Comas-Quinn noted, teachers' attitudes and uses of technology certainly have an impact on students' acceptance of online learning and their attitudes towards the use of certain tools. According to Hong and Samimy (2010), factors like higher literacy computer skills and experience with a blended environment were not as influential in students' positive attitudes as it was teachers' active use of CALL modes.

As can be noticed, research on the implementation of blended models has yielded different results. Some researchers contend that language learning is enhanced through the exposure learners have to the blended learning model, while others indicate that there is no significant improvement in comparison with more conventional (FTF) means of instruction. In terms of levels of satisfaction, different opinions have also been reported. One of the most significant aspects noted in the studies, however, despite their variance in methodological grounds and results, is the need for students and teachers to learn to adapt to study/ teach online. Although BL implies the combination of both face to face and online instruction, the implementation of online component is the one which seems to cause more difficulties for teachers and learners in that it implies a change in roles and the acquisition of new skills and knowledge.

As argued by Bennett and Marsh (2002, cited by Compton, 2009), there are two important pieces of knowledge that go beyond the technical level. Teachers who teach online need to:

a) "Identify the significant difference and similarities between face-to-face and online learning and teaching contexts, and
b) Identify strategies and techniques to facilitate online learning and help students exploit the advantages in relation to both independent and collaborative learning".

Findings reveal both positive comments and criticism. The convenience of access, the learner-centered approach and the communicative practice that the blended courses generated were valued positively by teachers as the learners were able to work consistently and independently. Nevertheless, the lack of face-to face contact was reported as the most negative factor, as there were students who always need more assistance and guidance with their tasks. Teachers also saw students' lack of motivation to participate in the virtual forums and chats as something problematic. According to the authors, teachers valued those aspects of blended learning which were related to students' autonomous learning, while those aspects of blended learning which focused on the input of the teacher were regarded as questionable.

On the one hand, these findings may show that while acclaiming the factor of independence and autonomy in blended learning, the teachers still prefer the traditional face-to-face interaction for a teacher-learner contact. On the other hand, the teachers might feel lack of competence and experience in e-communication and therefore be rather unsure about the usefulness of this form of contact with their students.

Some of the studies that have been conducted in the mainstream classroom and which are related to more conventional uses of technology provide important insights. In 1999, Ertmer (cited in Ertmer, Ottenbreit-Leftwich, Sadik, Sendurur & Sendurur, 2012), established two types of barriers that impacted teachers' use of technology in the classroom. First-order barriers, defined as those that were external to the teacher and that included resources, training, and support, and second order barriers, which were internal to the teacher and included teachers' confidence, beliefs about teaching and learning, as well as the perceived value of technology to the teaching/learning process. "Although first-order barriers had been documented as posing significant obstacles to achieving technology integration, underlying second-order barriers were thought to pose the greater challenge" (Ertmer et al. p.423).

According to Borg (2003), social, psychological and environmental realities of the school and classroom, which include parents, principals' requirements, the school, society, curriculum mandates, classroom and school layout, school policies, colleagues, standardized testing, and the availability of resources, etc. are factors that "may hinder language teachers' able to adopt practices which reflect their beliefs" (p.95).

6. Conclusion

As evidenced above, teachers are influenced by a wide variety of contextual and personal aspects that affect their perception about technology and in turn the kind of learning opportunities

they provide their students with. These external and internal factors would often come to shape teachers' experiences with technology whether they take part in blended courses or in other programs where technology is used in more conventional ways. Some of the studies on blended learning, although suggest important practical and pedagogical implications for language learning and teaching, do not take into consideration the various personal and professional factors affect the transition that teachers experience when move from fully face-to-face environments to blended environments where a high online learning component is often present. It is therefore important for researchers to focus their attention not only on the observable and measurable (language performance and levels of satisfaction) implications of hybrid innovations, but also on the internal and external realities that are part of teachers' lives, since they also have a bear on how BL is "In the realms of BL there is still a lot of undiscovered territory to be explored and mapped out. BL will play an important role in the future of CALL and its implementations in everyday teaching practice. Therefore, we need to learn more about its workings" (Neumeier, 2005, p176) interpreted and put into action.

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