Chapter 13
Comparing Face-to-Face with Blended Learning in the Context of Foreign Language Education

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ABSTRACT

The discussion presented in this chapter is based on the findings of a post doctoral research, which compared face-to-face with blended learning in the field of foreign language education and the learning of English in Europe. The studying conditions that are present in each of these two modes are explored and juxtaposed in order to draw the reader’s attention to a number of benefits that spring from blended learning, namely the development of skills and strategies, the cultivation of positive attitudes towards learning, the promotion of literacies, and the unfolding of communicative competence. Specifically, as we assert in this chapter, it follows from our research that the combination of blended learning with cross cultural online collaboration supports the construction of foundational and new literacies, enhances the development of linguistic, pragmatic, strategic, sociolinguistic, and intercultural competences, and boosts students’ cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies, as well as their critical thinking skills. Overall, the chapter emphasizes the need for blended learning in foreign language education.

INTRODUCTION

Integrating computer assisted language learning (CALL) in the teacher led lessons in the classroom has been an issue of study in foreign language education over the last few years. The proponents of CALL claim that ubiquitous computing is an integral part of modern life and, consequently, computers cannot be seen simply as tools that facilitate learning; they are to be viewed as sources of linguistic knowledge and as the means that allow students to communicate, internalize previous knowledge and set the foundations for acquiring new. On the other hand, teacher led tuition is considered to be critical, especially in the school context, due to the fact that foreign language learning needs to be organized and well-structured if it is to be effective. Blended learning, which combines online and
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off-line learning modes, provides students with chances for computer mediated language learning at school and/or at home, while at the same time teacher led classes guide and encourage them to take the next step to knowledge.

In this chapter we argue for blended learning and discuss the language learning and pedagogical benefits that spring from its application in foreign language education. We draw evidence from a post doctoral research, in which we compared and contrasted face-to-face with blended learning. Collating and exploring the two specific learning modes shed light on a number of critical to language learning issues, such as the construction of a social learning environment in class that simulates real-life communication and the development of a methodology that offers students ample opportunities, on the one hand, for exposure to authentic input and production of output and, on the other, for consolidating and expanding new knowledge. The comparison between the two modes allows us to examine in depth the new goals that have emerged in foreign language education and information communication technologies (ICT), i.e. the construction of new literacies, communicative competence and learning strategies, and to investigate the extent to which these goals can be accomplished.

Apart from the introduction and the conclusion, the chapter includes four main sections. The first, the background section, introduces the reader to some basic concepts regarding blended learning and foreign language education and discusses the goals of English language learning in the present ICT era. The second section acquaints the reader with our research, whereas the third one presents and discusses our findings, by means of making close reference to the theoretical principles and concepts presented in the first section. The fourth section analyses our proposals for future implementation, while the conclusion includes some recommendations for future research.

BLENDED LEARNING AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS, THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Definition, Practices and Pedagogy

Blended learning has been explored the last few years. Scholars, researchers and practitioners have been studying the inherent characteristics which compose effective learning and teaching practices and analyzing the benefits that emanate from its application. A broad definition could be that blended learning is viewed as the procedure where more than one learning/teaching modes are being used and different learning styles are supported, with a view to improving learning (Singh & Reed 2001). This chapter refers specifically to the combination of face-to-face tuition in the classroom and online teaching methods to facilitate language learning. In this educational process of combining classroom work with technology mediated learning, the realization of the teaching goals and the learning benefits are of primary importance. Although a major advantage of educational technology lies in its ability to motivate students, the teacher’s prime consideration is first, to set specific learning goals and then decide on the delivery modes and the technologies that will realize these aims.

Specifically, as it is supported in the relevant literature, tutors and course designers who adopt blended learning practices need to take a number of factors into consideration, before deciding which learning modes and technological applications they will use (Ausburn 2004; Bonk & Graham 2005; Chapelle 2001). First, it is suggested that they make a needs analysis research and take into account their students’ preferred learning styles, interests and intelligences. Second, it is recommended that they consider the conditions and parameters that constitute their learning context and teaching situation: Factors, such as the teaching time they have at their disposal, the resources that are available in their institution and the students’