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Book review

Language Teaching in Blended Contexts, edited by Margaret Nicolson, Linda Murphy and Margaret Southgate, Dunedin Academic Press, Edinburgh, UK, 2011, ISBN 9781906716202. Price: £18.95

Language Teaching in Blended Contexts brings us, in a clear and useful way, into the area of "blended teaching" and "blended learning" referring to a combination of delivery modes and tools where traditional forms of learning may be used in conjunction with web-based, online approaches. The book's contributors have all worked in The Open University (OU) UK, Faculty of Language Studies on language course development and teaching and also teacher and student support. They have all been focusing and working on the production and presentation of various language courses such as French, German, Spanish, Italian, Welsh, Chinese and English. According to the book's editors, this work emerges from a clear understanding of the new requirements placed on language teachers as a result of the growing need for flexibility if language learning opportunities are to match the demands provided by technological, social and economic changes (p.10). Changes in learning patterns are a reality and allow us to face new issues regarding lifelong learning, and blended learning and teaching is a widespread approach that seems to fit well in this "changing" learning environment offering valuable tools, tips and resources for both teachers and students.

The book is divided into 5 sections, focusing on key issues for language teaching in blended contexts, each section containing several chapters. The book also offers a helpful Glossary and Abbreviations table.

Section 1 begins by exploring the teacher's development role in relation to a wide range of teaching tools, modes and resources in blended contexts. Teachers of languages working in a blended context operate in at least two different modes: synchronous (using chat-room sessions and online tools in general, face-to-face interaction and telephone) and asynchronous (using tools such as email, forums, wikis, online message boards). This section discusses the matter of developing an awareness of choosing between a variety of tools for teachers and learners, meeting learners' needs, and the role of teachers in understanding and interpreting diversity. Diversity in language learning is a key element as "probably no other field of study implicates self-concepts and self-expression to the degree that language study does" (Horwitz & Young, 1991: 31). This section shows that success in language learning is

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due not only to learners' cognitive development but also to a range of elements emerging from different needs and understanding. As Gardner (2008) suggests when addressing multiple learner preferences and intelligences, if teachers can see their learners as unique individuals with their own identity and needs, then they will come to "respect diversity as a fact of life", a crucial achievement in our contemporary educational systems. The final part of this section covers the topic of learner autonomy and motivation, showing the need for students to take control and manage their own learning and for teachers to guide and facilitate this process.

Section 2 starts by exploring the role of assessment and its nature in blended teaching and learning contexts where it often covers the dual role of assessment and teaching tool. Different types of assessment have been addressed to test and diagnose learners' achievements and the two main characteristics they should have when transferring assessment from a more traditional approach to blended contexts: Validity and Reliability. This section explores who assesses and who are assessed whilst considering the importance of feedback in developing a dialogue between teachers and learners. Particular emphasis is placed on tailoring assessment to blended contexts where teachers may work in isolation and learners may rarely, if ever, meet face-to-face. Practical examples on how to prepare and correct both written and spoken assessment feedback are provided.

Section 3 is focused on showing and explaining synchronous and asynchronous modes in blended contexts. A general outline of key elements in the planning, implementation and evaluation of structured teaching sessions in blended contexts is offered. The teacher needs to provide clear instructions explaining how the synchronous and asynchronous tasks work and why they have been designed in that specific way. Building learner confidence is one of the key elements of teacher-mediated synchronous and asynchronous sessions. The early chapters of the book particularly stress the importance of involving learners in the planning of teaching sessions and stimulating them to provide feedback afterwards. A chapter of this section is dedicated to the teaching by telephone mode, explaining how it may be a less fashionable option for teaching sessions compared to the various technological tools available today. However, it is a less challenging, more approachable and flexible mode for many teachers and learners. Synchronous online teaching sessions are explained in detail, how to plan and prepare them and, in practice, how they can maximize learner exposure to L2 whilst providing great opportunities for interaction and enhancing autonomous learning. It is important to bear in mind though that synchronous sessions may require both teacher and learner to acquire and optimize new learning skills. By exploring asynchronous online tools the authors stress that these are not a substitute for the synchronous ones and that the two work best in parallel, with each offering their specific strengths. The final chapter of this section provides an overview of asynchronous tools and teaching instructions and details of how and when to use them. The authors declare that further research is needed to establish the most suitable exploitation of online tools as their affordance and use will need to carefully match with learners' needs in order to create a coherent blended learning experience (p. 184).

Section 4 offers an overview of Community and Indigenous Celtic languages. The first chapter explores the reasons why people study community languages, suggesting different factors such as culture and identity, language regeneration, interest in specific

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skills and political identity. When approaching the teaching of community languages, a particular sensitivity is required to acknowledge the variety of needs learners may present and to manage them in the most appropriate way. It is hoped that technological development may also work to help language communities; uncovering and interacting with the wealth of linguistic diversity and allowing them to feel less isolated. The second chapter provides an overview of Celtic language learning in Ireland and the UK, examining some significant cultural factors and practical issues teachers may have to deal with when working in blended contexts. This section also provides a number of helpful resources for indigenous language learning.

Section 5 examines some key factors influencing the changes in the role of the teacher. Teachers will potentially find themselves as members of many communities of practice (Wenger, 2000) in a way that was not always the case. Teachers may be required to move through different modes and types of blends, to be expert in their subject and be confident with technology tools. They have to be facilitators, advisers offering learner support. Teacher trainers have an equally important role in helping teachers to approach, understand and engage different requirements in their practices. The second part of this section offers practical approaches for teacher development such as mentoring, tandem teaching and peer observation. The section ends by drawing on some key principles that will enable practitioners to develop good practice and pragmatic advice to engage successfully with the present and future possibilities of blended teaching and learning. The authors have stressed the importance of the relatively few skills that need to be developed, chief among them being creativity, openness and pragmatism.

Language Teaching in Blended Contexts is a book that can be read as a whole or consulted if a particular topic or issue needs to be addressed. It is clearly designed with each chapter presenting an introduction to a specific topic, a solid discussion about it and a clear conclusion. Many practical examples and useful settings have been presented to help readers. All the ideas introduced are therefore tested and well formed. According to the editors the book aims to offer an insight into the key discussion areas of blended language teaching (p.xx). For the most part, this is achieved. It also explores teachers' and teacher trainers' perspectives, always keeping the learner central to the discussion. It looks at the human, technological and methodological aspects of language teaching in blended contexts, allowing readers to recognize themselves in several aspects, and helping them to select and personalize ideas to suit their own practices and experience. It is recommended reading for those who wish to explore the main issues involved in applied blended teaching methodologies.

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