

Using a Task-Based Approach for Supporting a Blended Learning Model for English as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

As Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has taken an important role in foreign language teaching and learning, not only is concrete data about the usefulness of technology-mediated environments for these purposes necessary, but also how the learning process is improved in such environments when learner training for CALL. The objective of this paper is to present an investigation which sought to explore empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of a blended learning model, and also the use of language learning strategies in this kind of learning environment in order to increase its methodological potency with language learners. Consequently, this paper shows the findings of 2 experimental studies which aimed to provide data on (1) the efficiency of a blended learning (BL) model for language teaching and learning which combined task-based instruction, cooperative learning and optimal methodological principles for online learning (Doughty & Long, 2003), and (2) the use of learner training strategies for CALL in order to support and enhance the language learning process in this blended learning environment. The results from both studies suggest that the experimental group improved their language proficiency when compared to the control group. As a result, it is possible to conclude that (1) the blended learning design that included online tasks and cooperative instruction was beneficial for the development of language skills and (2) the use of learner training strategies for the blended learning model was highly beneficial for the students' language learning experience.

Keywords: *Blended Learning, CALL, Effectiveness, Language Learning Strategies, Learner Training for CALL, Task Based Language Teaching*

DOI: 10.4018/ijcallt.2014010103

INTRODUCTION

One of the main objectives in CALL research has been the search and analysis of language learning and teaching models which are able to optimize the amount of input and practice that language learners receive inside and outside the classroom (Hubbard, 1996; Warschauer & Kern, 2000; Chapelle, 2001; Lamy & Hampel, 2007; Levy & Stockwell, 2007). Currently, with innovations such as mobile devices, it is possible for language teachers to implement methodological models which combine face-to-face teaching and technology-mediated tasks in order to support language learning using different resources for content delivery. Generally, the limited amount of practice hours tends to hinder the language learning process and the development of linguistic skills. In addition, the tasks assigned by the teacher (during or after the lesson) normally receive minimal attention due to the lack of time for feedback. Even though online learning provides valuable resources for language learning in general, it is in some cases the speaking skill which is left aside because of the lack of appropriate resources that enhance its development in virtual environments. This is why teaching in a context which combines e-learning and face-to-face instruction makes it possible to balance the development of the different language skills. The advantages of e-learning allow the implementation of eclectic models for language learning by including the best elements of these two areas (Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012; Lamy & Hampel, 2007).

Taking this into consideration, a model which includes face-to-face classes in e-learning contexts empowers this blend to improve language learning. The CALL methodological framework indicates that teachers have an important role acting as a guide in technology-mediated language learning contexts. The existing generation of technological resources offers advantages compared to the traditional class in terms of accessibility to authentic materials and experts in the field such as the case of using a computerized tutor, which may support certain

aspects of students' learning like metacognitive monitoring (Aleven & Koedinger, 2002). Moreover, including task-based language teaching - defined by Nunan (2004) as a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form - and cooperative learning - defined as the use of small groups designed to encourage students to work together to maximize their own and each other's learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998) - in a blended learning model provides many advantages to the language learning process. The use of the *tasks* (i.e. real-world-related projects) as the main pedagogical input in face-to-face or online setting connects the students with authentic situations, emphasizing communication and an appropriate psycholinguistic environment for language acquisition (Doughty & Long, 2003; Ellis, 2003; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In addition, cooperation fosters critical thinking, responsibility for learning and interaction with peers (McGroarty, 1993; Olsen & Kagan, 1992).

These teaching methodologies, however, present certain challenges for teachers as well as students in terms of developing learning strategies in order to use a variety of virtual resources effectively. As a result, learning a language using the blended learning approach requires students to develop plans of actions to make the most out of this learning experience. Several investigations in this area (Cohen, 1990; Oxford & Crookall, 1989) suggest the necessity to train students regarding the use of language learning strategies in online contexts, in order to manage technology in the language class and learn the target language efficiently in computer mediated environments. Bearing this in mind, in addition to observe the effectiveness of a blended learning model for language learning, this research intended to explore how training students to use different learning strategies in a blended learning context allowed them to

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