

Chapter 57

A Blended Chinese-as-a- Foreign-Language Short Course: Design and Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated learners' perceived effectiveness of a blended Chinese non-credit bearing short course designed for engineering students with no prior knowledge about Chinese language. Few studies have examined how to design blended Chinese courses for beginning learners. The design of this study was based on the framework of parameters proposed by Neumeier (2005). Bloom's taxonomy of learning objectives in the cognitive domain was adopted in deciding on the time distribution to the two modes (Face-To-Face and online), and on sequencing the two modes. FTF was the lead mode with activities that help learners apply and practice what they learned creatively. Online activities were designed mainly to help learners memorize vocabularies, analyze word order, and comprehend culture. Data were collected through a survey and an informal interview. The findings show that the design is effective but improvements are needed.

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning (BL) has been drawing increased attention in the field of language learning. It has changed the ways that students experience language learning. The main principle of BL design is to make foreign language teaching and learning effective by taking advantage of the strengths of the two different modes: face-to-face (FTF) and online (Neumeier, 2005). Research shows that BL can benefit language learners in different ways, such as improving learner autonomy (Murray, 1999; Luke, 2006) and linguistic achievement (Hegelheimer, 2006; Payne & Whitney, 2002; van Deusen-Scholl, Frei, & Dixon, 2005), promoting learner attitudes and motivation (Ushida, 2005), and increasing learners' awareness of the target culture (Dubreil, Herron, & Cole, 2004; Zeiss & Isabelli-Garcia, 2005)

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Due to the appeal and benefits of BL in foreign language education, more and more foreign language educators are adopting BL in their regular curriculum to achieve various instructional goals (Coryell & Chlup, 2007; Bond & Graham, 2006). Despite its popularity, however, many questions remain unanswered: How should a blended language course be designed with consideration of the features of the target language and the background of the learners? How should the online and FTF components be integrated well so as to maximally help achieve the instructional goals? Answering these questions in the context of teaching Chinese language will not only contribute to Chinese teaching and learning, but also, will shed light on, and contribute to, deepening our understanding of language learning in a blended learning environment.

The purpose of this study, then, is to examine learners' perceived effectiveness of the design of a blended Chinese course on their learning. The blended course was designed using the framework of parameters proposed by Neumeier (2005). While designing the course, the following were taken into consideration: the special features of Chinese language, the unique group of learners, and the learners' learning purpose. The study will provide a description of the detailed design process and the learners' perception of its effectiveness. The ultimate purpose is to help other foreign language teachers develop their own blended courses based on the learners' special needs and learning purpose, and the features of the target language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Unique Features of Chinese Language Should Be Addressed in Course Design

Chinese language has special features that are very distinct from other languages. *Putonghua* (Mandarin), the standard modern Chinese language is unique in: its tones and pronunciation, its importance of word order in conveying meaning, and the writing system.

Chinese is a tonal language. Standard Chinese has four tones plus a neutral tone. The same syllable with different tones is represented by different characters and has different meanings. For instance, /ma/ means differently with different characters if it has different tones: it could mean “妈” (mother) with the high tone /má/, “麻” (linen) with the mid-rising tone /mǎ/,

“马” (horse) with the medially-low tone /mà/, and “骂” (to scold) with the high-falling tone /mâ/. With a neutral tone, /ma/ could be a question particle “吗” used at the end of a sentence. Furthermore, five sounds exist in Chinese, but not in English. They are /tʃ/, /tʃʰ/, /ç/, /tsʰ/, and /y/. These among other things make learning Chinese pronunciation even more challenging.

Chinese writing presents another challenge in learning Chinese. The Chinese writing system is not alphabetic, but logographic in nature. Looking at the characters, learners are not able to see what the characters sound like, or what they mean. The association among the character, the pronunciation and tone, and the meaning must be established by memorization. Furthermore, all Chinese characters are composed of strokes. The stroke order is a crucial element in writing Chinese. Writing characters in the right stroke order not only makes the writing process efficient, but also makes the characters look pretty. Thus the rules for stroke order need to be correctly learned (Lew & Lim, 2007). It takes a lot of effort, energy and time to memorize Chinese vocabulary since students have to: (a) learn the correct stroke

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