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Learning  
for  
Language  
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Edited by  
**Michael McCarthy**



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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [cambridge.org/9781316505113](http://cambridge.org/9781316505113)

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First published 2016

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: McCarthy, Michael, 1947– editor.

Title: The Cambridge Guide to blended learning for language teaching /

Edited by Michael McCarthy.

Description: Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, [2016] |

Series: The Cambridge Guide Series | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015029490 | ISBN 9781316505113 (pb) |

ISBN 9781316505137 (google ebook) |

ISBN 9781316505144 (apple ibook) |

ISBN 9781316505151 (kindle ebook) |

ISBN 9781316505168 (ebooks.com ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Language and languages – Study and teaching. |

Blended learning. | Teaching. | Language and education.

Classification: LCC P53 .C26 2016 | DDC 418.0071–dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015029490>

ISBN 978-1-316-50511-3 Paperback

ISBN 978-1-316-50514-4 Apple iBook

ISBN 978-1-316-50513-7 Google ebook

ISBN 978-1-316-50515-1 Kindle ebook

ISBN 978-1-316-50516-8 eBooks.com ebook

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### THE EDITOR

I would like to thank Debra Marsh for her editorial support and close collaboration during the early stages of the book's development. I would also like to thank Bryan Fletcher for his pioneering work on blended learning courses and for inspiring me to learn more and to become involved in the world of BL. Jo Timerick played an especially important role in bringing the manuscript together; without her dedicated work the book would not be what it is today. Thanks also go to Karen Momber, Helen Freeman, and Sue Ullstein for their expert guidance and support through the whole project.

*Michael McCarthy*

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### THE EDITOR AND PUBLISHERS

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### TEXT ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A. Aycok, C. Garnham, and R. Kaleta for the text on p. 18 adapted from 'Lessons Learned from the Hybrid Course Project' by A. Aycok, C. Garnham, and R. Kaleta, *Teaching with Technology Today*. Copyright © 2002 by A. Aycok. Reproduced by kind permission of A. Aycok; John Wiley & Sons Inc for the text on p. 38 adapted from 'From Language Proficiency to Interactional Competence' by Claire Kramsch, *The Modern Language Journal*. Copyright © 1986 John Wiley & Sons. All rights reserved. Distributed by the Copyright Clearance Center; International House London for the text on p. 46 adapted from 'Teacher Training DVD Series' by David Carr. Copyright © 2006 International House London. Reproduced with permission of International House London; SAGE Publications for the text on p. 55 adapted from 'What We Know About Second Language Acquisition: A Synthesis From Four Perspectives' by L. Quentin Dixon et al., *Review of Educational Research*, 01.02.12. Reproduced with permission of SAGE Publications; Taylor and Francis Group for the text on p. 70 adapted from *Understanding Language Teaching: from Method to Post-Method* by B. Kumaravadivelu. Copyright © 2006 Taylor and Francis Group. All rights reserved. Distributed by the Copyright Clearance Center; Dunedin Academic Press Ltd. for the text on p. 72 adapted from *Language Teaching in Blended Contexts* by Margaret Nicolson, Linda Murphy and Margaret Southgate. Copyright © 2011 Dunedin Academic Press Ltd. Reproduced with permission of Dunedin Academic Press Ltd; Routledge for the text on p. 110 adapted from *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course* by

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#### PHOTO ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# INTRODUCTION

## Blended Learning

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*Michael McCarthy*

For centuries teachers the world over have sought to provide the conditions in which their learners can learn. Opinions and practices may differ; what constitutes ‘good’ conditions and effective learning has long been a matter for lengthy discussion and debate. Today, with the rapid development in the use of technology in our everyday lives and increasingly in teaching and learning, the debate continues to be long and protracted. This said, there is some agreement that technology and globalisation have changed the way people – especially young people – think and learn. There is also agreement that technology does, and indeed should, have a role to play in learning and teaching. However, there are some who see technology as the only solution to all current educational problems, while there are others who are completely opposed to this view and see technology as the major threat to civilisation as we know it and an agent of the ‘dumbing-down’ of quality education.

This book is about blended learning, and attempts to place the use of technology in language learning and teaching within a context which we hope reassures the sceptics but at the same time illustrates the benefits. This book also aims to curb the, at times, over-enthusiastic embrace of technology and stresses the need to revisit the pedagogical foundations of our understanding of what it means to learn and teach a language.

In a sense, various blends of ways of learning languages have existed side-by-side for a very long time. Learners and teachers look for the best conditions in which to foster learning. Ever since the first student carried around a notebook and continued working outside of class hours, we have been engaging in blended learning. The notebook, the pen and paper were the technologies which enabled learning to continue outside of class time. The components of the blend were called ‘classwork’ and ‘homework’, and this type of blended learning has served us well for generations. In the mid-twentieth century, new technologies came along which made it possible to extend learning in different ways outside of the classroom. In the 1960s, language laboratories came to the fore, enabling students to practise listening and speaking in the private environment of the laboratory booth, to imitate models and to work at their own pace. This mix of learning modes had much in common with

what we now term blended learning. Later, the development of portable video technologies added the potential of visual learning to existing audio technologies in the multimedia lab. But, generally speaking, these technologies were bolt-on extras that did not have any major effect on what happened during class time.

It was the massive growth in the use of computers in the 1980s and 1990s, and more particularly the arrival of the internet, which took blended learning into completely new territory. The emergence of CALL (computer-assisted language learning) was game changing. The early days of simple programmes allowing learners to complete closed tasks and practice exercises of various kinds soon transformed into the world of sophisticated screen displays, high-definition video, enhanced audio and the ability to do things online, either in real time or in a fashion whereby the student's work could be recorded and monitored electronically (the update, as it were, of the notebook). The expansion of computational power and the ubiquity of the internet subsequently led educational practitioners to envision fundamental and radical changes to the way teaching and learning could be delivered. No longer was it necessary to cram everything in the curriculum into the precious hours of class time. In the case of foreign and second language learning, courses could now be planned in a way that maximised the potential of face-to-face classroom interaction. Elements of 'classroom' work which could equally well or, perhaps even more effectively, be carried out in a computer-mediated environment, were identified and shifted, most typically online and outside of class hours. Thus, what we now understand as blended learning (and hybrid courses, as they are often termed) is not simply a technological issue. Depending on the blend chosen, that is to say depending on the balance between what students do in class and what they do outside of class on computers and online, the pedagogy itself is being rethought.

It is this last preoccupation which is at the heart of this book. Technologies develop at breathtaking speed, particularly in the world of computers and their allied programmes and applications. Human beings also change in their ways of doing things, though probably at a slower pace than the changes which take place in computer technologies. Some things remain stubbornly (or perhaps reassuringly) constant: human beings struggle to learn foreign languages, to break the habits of a lifetime ingrained by their first language, to overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles of confronting a new grammar and thousands of new words in the target language, along with new ways of pronouncing words and new challenges in communicating through the medium of the target language and its associated culture(s).

Fortunately, language educators have at their disposal centuries of collective expertise, and, as a student, if you're lucky enough to have a good teacher, such expertise can considerably ease the burden of mastering a new tongue, and the classroom is a good place to concentrate your efforts. Good classrooms are places where human beings collaborate and support each other, where expertise is shared in a humane environment, where pedagogical intervention can offer real shortcuts to knowledge and skill. They are places where teachers and learners react to one another in a moment-by-moment fashion as social animals. The computer and the internet have no such delicate feelings and, at the time of writing, operate dispassionately and with little regard to whether the user is feeling tired, has a headache, is daydreaming, is bored rigid or is struggling and really needs a great deal of sympathy as well as practical help and informational input. Such is the messy, all-too-human world of learning a language in the face-to-face classroom. This brings us squarely to the thorniest of our preoccupations: can the computer-mediated world of online study replicate either partly, wholly or not at all the interactive and social world of a good classroom lesson? To answer this question, we must clearly go beyond an obsession with technology and not spend all our time in hot pursuit of what the 'next big thing' or technical buzzword might be.

First and foremost, to achieve best practice in blended language learning, we need to understand, insofar as we can, the complexities of how people acquire second and foreign languages. We may well conclude that some of the aspects of acquiring a second language are best left to happen within the walls of the face-to-face classroom. We may equally conclude that some types of learning, for example the more transmissive types, where new knowledge dominates (for example, accessing the meaning of a new word, reading a set text) can be done quite well outside of the classroom. After all, we have already witnessed widespread abandonment of paper dictionaries in favour of electronic and online dictionaries and people are becoming more and more accustomed to doing their reading on a screen. On the other hand, key elements of acquiring a second language successfully, such as developing strategies for effective learning and the nurturing of motivation and positive attitudes towards the language may be something which the human teacher can do best in direct, face-to-face interaction with students. Yet even here, technology has partly caught up. The advent of social networking in the online environment has meant that teachers and students can continue the conversations which they have in classrooms in online forums, blogs, chat rooms and the like, without time running out and putting an end to things just when they are becoming interesting. All of these issues feed into the decisions which have to be made in designing blended learning programmes. What we stress throughout this book is that such decisions should be pedagogy-led rather than technology-led. We see the technology as facilitating pedagogy, not vice-versa.

Classrooms, therefore, are one of the main focuses of this book, not only from the perspective of teachers and learners interacting but also from the fact that most language learning, whether in class or outside of class, is mediated through language teaching materials of some kind or another. It is therefore not just a problem of recreating in the online environment the kinds of verbal interactions that take place between teachers and students in classrooms, but also one of recreating materials and their use, and, above all, exploiting technology to create new types of materials, new types of interaction and new types of learning experience. In this regard, mobile technology and adaptive learning systems are good examples. On the one hand, smartphones and tablets could simply function as the latest version of the notebook or as a platform for the on-screen display and manipulation of coursebooks and other printed materials. On the other hand, a more fruitful way of viewing mobile technology is to see it as an opportunity for taking learning into new environments, new activities, new ways of generating learning resources, new ways of experiencing the world and new ways of learning. Similarly, adaptive learning systems are becoming more than just automatic error-correcting programmes that instruct the user to do this or that next, but are learning about their users and becoming more and more sensitive to their situations, emotions and needs. The machine is no longer the cold, soulless metal box or hand-held device, but becomes a ‘participant’ in the interaction that generates new and enhanced learning experiences.

We hope that the chapters of this book will both inform and reassure language teaching professionals of the benefits of blended learning and will offer food for thought for those involved in the design and implementation of blended learning programmes. The book cannot hope to cover everything: if your particular preoccupation is absent from its pages, we apologise, as we do for any shortcomings that remain within it.