Dilemmas of Blended Language Learning: Learner and Teacher Experiences

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ABSTRACT
Rapidly advancing technology continues to change the landscape of blended foreign language education. Pinpointing the differences between blended language (BL) learning environments and understanding how stakeholders experience such spaces is complex. However, learner experiences can provide a roadmap for the design and development of BL courses. Using a multiple case study approach, this paper reports on stakeholders’ experiences and comparisons of two different types of blended Spanish courses, one that harnesses ample technology and another that uses it much less. Using ethnographic data triangulation and systemic functional discourse analysis, four conflicting themes were constructed with respect to two types of BL courses and online versus face-to-face (f2f) classes. The first type of dilemma pertained to (a) the time commitments and (b) relationships developed in each course. The second type of dilemma surrounded the capacity of online and f2f classes for fostering (c) speaking skills development and (d) student understanding. Implications of these four conflicts of opinion for BL course developers, teachers, and researchers are discussed.

KEYWORDS
Foreign Language Learning, Blended Language Learning, Discourse Analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics

INTRODUCTION
Blended (or hybrid) foreign language (FL) courses, commonly defined as those that include both a face-to-face (f2f) and a technology-enhanced component, continue to change the ways that students experience language learning. Allen and Seaman (2008) estimated that approximately 29% of the higher education population in the US was enrolled in a fully online course. A new market in the arena of blended/distance FL learning has emerged, one in which an array of different technological tools are available. These technologies, not to mention their implementations, are undergoing constant change. Student and teacher experiences in BL environments shape their perspectives about the role of technology in language learning. As new options for online modes emerge, these beliefs can guide BL design choices.

Despite the extensive amount of research on blended language (BL) learning, most studies either quantitatively compare blended and traditional academic outcomes or qualitatively focus on a select piece of the BL classroom. A review of the literature has identified a gap in the body of theoretically backed qualitative inquiry, which would help to explain what goes on within such academic spaces. Ethnographic research, in particular, offers the potential to provide more in-depth contrasts of the contextual features of different BL courses and participants’ texts produced therein.

By delving deeper into the discourse that students and teachers used to relate their ideas about BL learning, the present study examined two blended Spanish courses, each
harnessing different technologies in different ways. In the first course, termed online-hybrid, two days of f2f time were supplemented by a third day using a synchronous online platform. In a second course, dubbed f2f-blended, three days of f2f time were supplemented by a fourth day in the language lab.

By interviewing stakeholders to come to a deeper understanding of their “theories” and “practices” surrounding BL learning, data analysis for the present paper focused on participants’ views of BL learning as shaped by these courses. Part of a larger ethnography on blended Spanish classrooms, this paper foregrounds students’ and teachers’ expert knowledge of BL learning and the role of technology in different BL courses. Several resultant dilemmas surrounding BL learning are presented, which hold implications for teachers and course designers by providing insight into how students and teachers experience different BL modes.

**Blended Language Learning**

Research in the technology-enhanced classroom has shown that BL and online language learning can be beneficial for language learners in a number of ways. It can positively impact learner autonomy (Murray, 1999), improve student attitudes and motivation (Ushida, 2005), and provide flexibility of resources, such as time and space allocation (Blake, Wilson, Cetto & Pardo-Ballester, 2008).

In a primarily quantitative study involving 160 undergraduates at a large Midwestern university, Echavez-Solano (2003) compared student performance, motivation, aptitude, and proficiency in traditional and blended sections of introductory Spanish. The author's findings showed that there were no statistically significant differences in performance or affective factors between both groups. Listening and oral proficiency both remained comparable. Using questionnaires and focus groups, the author claimed that none of the measures, including performance and affective variables such as motivation, anxiety, and familiarity with computers, could predict success in blended courses.

In another comparison study, Blake et al. (2008) specifically investigated the development of oral proficiency as measured by the Versant™-for-Spanish test in traditional, blended, and distance courses. The fully online course used a detective story DVD, content based web readings, Flash activities, and a collaborative CMC tool for synchronous and asynchronous textual communication and Voice-over Internet Protocol. The blended course used the same protocol in addition to three weekly f2f meetings and synchronous dialogues in Adobe Breeze™. Students from the traditional courses met f2f five days a week and used a traditional paper textbook. Findings from this study supported Echavez-Solano (2003), showing that distance and blended students were not disadvantaged in terms of oral proficiency development in comparison to their traditional counterparts.

Chenoweth, Ushida and Murday (2006) and Murday, Ushida and Chenoweth (2008) also compared blended to traditional courses in their study of Spanish and French classrooms. Citing decreased interaction as one of the major drawbacks of online courses in general, the blended courses they studied reportedly circumvented this problem by providing increased teacher support to help students stay focused. Specifically, their blended courses met f2f for approximately one and a half hours per week, students participated in an online chat, and all other course materials were provided online. Traditional courses met three days per week for 50 minutes. Results showed that the students from the online courses demonstrated an increase in satisfaction over time. The reduced schedule afforded by the online courses and the problems surrounding web-based technology were two setbacks. Interestingly, despite similar class sizes, teachers from blended courses felt they got to know their students better.
A large amount of quantitative research has compared BL and non-technology-enhanced language learning (Chenoweth et al., 2006; Echavez-Solano, 2003; Murday et al., 2008; Scida & Saury, 2006), emphasizing similar outcomes between BL and traditional language courses. A meta-analysis of 176 studies on distance and f2f learning, for example, showed that students in online learning conditions performed only slightly better than their f2f peers (US Department of Education, 2010).

Compared with quantitative research, qualitative studies have provided more detailed depictions of BL classrooms, including aspects of design implementation (Bañados, 2006; Neumeier, 2005), teaching assistant perceptions (Zapata, 2002), and learner performance (Larson & Sung, 2009). Burston (2003) calls for more ethnographic research to provide details of the learning environment, such as teacher and student beliefs about their roles, relationships, and interactions. Ethnographic research has the potential to paint a much more vivid and complete picture of the BL environment, providing “thick” description of the relationship between contexts and situations of language use (Geertz, 1973).

While the reported effects of BL learning are mixed, little research has delved deeper into the potential dilemmas surrounding BL learning. Stracke (2007) documented learners’ reasons for dropping out of a BL course, including: (a) a perceived lack of support and connection or coordination between the f2f and computer-assisted portions of the class, (b) dissatisfaction with the lack of print materials for the reading and writing components of the course, and (c) rejection of the computer as a medium for language learning.

Further investigation in this area will not only document students’ reasons for leaving a BL course, but also illuminate how their experiences shape their theories of BL learning. For example, how do students’ and teachers’ experiences influence their beliefs about online-hybrid and f2f-blended Spanish courses? How do students’ interactions in online versus f2f classrooms impact their thoughts about learning in physical and virtual spaces? In order to help answer these overarching questions, a theoretical framework rooted in systemic functional linguistics was chosen to help interpret participant discourse.

**Systemic Functional Linguistics and L2 Learning**

A theory of language can help throw light on not only what learners actually do with language in BL modes but also what they know and believe. Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is a theory of language that has evolved in response to questions about how people use language to make meaning in applied settings (Eggins, 1994; Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004). SFL parallels a language socialization view of learning with a person learning language, through language, and about language. In studies involving language acquisition, SFL takes the perspective of language as a resource for making meaning, which users develop over time within different contexts and cultures.

SFL conceives of language as organizing three main functions or ‘metafunctions’: to present experience (the ideational), to establish and sustain interaction (the interpersonal) and to create connected and coherent discourse (the textual). Within the ideational metafunction, three main types of processes conform to one of the major components of a clause. Typically realized by a verbal group, processes can emphasize meanings involving ‘being’, ‘doing’, or ‘sensing/thinking’.

Since the 1950s and 60s, SFL has been used in fields such as education, sociology, literature, and computational linguistics. In educational arenas, especially that of first and second language learning, SFL has answered questions about how language is best taught and learned (Early, 1990; Early, Thew, & Wakefield, 1986; Tang, 1997). Slater and Gleason (2011), for example, argued that the Knowledge Framework (KF), an SFL-based heuristic,
provides a springboard for the development of pedagogical tasks that bridge language and thinking skills so students can learn content and academic language simultaneously.

**The Knowledge Framework and Social Practices**

The Knowledge Framework (KF) (Mohan, 1986, 2007, 2011) is a teaching and research tool that shows how language constructs knowledge. The KF uses the idea of social practices (SPs) as the contexts in which various discourse features, termed Knowledge Structures (KSs), are used to construct and recreate experience. Social practices have been used as units of analysis in the fields of linguistics, anthropology, psychology, and sociology. The KF takes a discourse approach to social practices, integrating the linguistic traditions of Halliday (1999) and anthropological ethnographer, Spradley (1979, 1980).

Common to the notion of SPs across disciplines is their action and reflection component, which provides a way of relating social action to interpretation. All human behavior, from the way we discipline our children to the way we greet one another on the street, involves both action and reflection. Social practices determine the way in which we articulate tacit knowledge and dictate our social behavior and language. They provide us with an implicit list of ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ to act and interact with the world around us (Mohan & Lee, 2006).

The basic underlying premise of the KF is that “the ways in which knowledge is structured are similar from situation to situation” (Early, 1990, p. 569). As shown in Figure 1, the KF consists of six KSs, or semantic patterns of text. While the two horizontal rows represent the action/reflection component of the SP, the three vertical columns correspond to the SFL processes outlined by the ideational metafunction. **Classification/description** encompass ‘being’ meanings, **principles/sequence** the ‘doing’ meanings and **evaluation/choice** the ‘sensing/thinking’ meanings. Each KS has thinking skills, key visuals, and language features that help construct it. The linguistic choices enacted by the different KSs can be seen in Figure 2, as based on Mohan (1986) and Early (1990).

**Figure 1**  
The tri-fold meanings and action/reflection duality of KF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflection</th>
<th>‘Being’ Meanings</th>
<th>‘Doing’ Meanings</th>
<th>‘Sensing/Thinking’ Meanings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classification</td>
<td>Principles</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Sequence</td>
<td>Choice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2
Connecting key visuals, language, and thinking skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge structure</th>
<th>Thinking skills</th>
<th>Key visuals and examples</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classification</td>
<td>Classify, group, sort, categorize</td>
<td>Tree</td>
<td>General reference “Being” verbs (e.g., be, have)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Define</td>
<td>Web</td>
<td>Additive conjunctions (e.g., and)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parts/wholes</td>
<td>Table</td>
<td>Taxonomic, part/whole lexis (e.g., nouns: types, classes, kinds, categories, ways; verbs: classify, sort, group, organize, categorize, divide, comprise)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Passives (e.g., are classified, are grouped)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principles</td>
<td>Explain, predict, draw conclusions, apply causes, effects, means, ends, rules</td>
<td>Cycles, Line graphs, Cause-effect chains, Problem/solution branches</td>
<td>General reference, Action verbs, Consequential conjunction and adverbials (e.g., since, due to, in order to, consequently, because, thus, if-clauses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formulate, test, and establish hypotheses</td>
<td>Interpret data</td>
<td>Cause-effect lexis (e.g., nouns: cause, effect, result; verbs: cause, produce, bring about)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpret data</td>
<td></td>
<td>Passives + agency (e.g., is caused by, are produced by)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Evaluate, rank, judge, criticize</td>
<td>Grid, Rating chart, Evaluation chart</td>
<td>General reference “Thinking” verbs (e.g., believe, think, value, consider, rank, judge)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Identify, label, describe, compare, contrast, locate</td>
<td>Picture, map, diagram, drawing, Venn diagram, Pie chart, Same/different chart</td>
<td>General or specific reference, “Being” verbs (e.g., be, have)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Additive conjunction (e.g., and)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Attributive lexis (e.g., adjectives of color and size)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Language of comparison and contrast (e.g., the same as, similar to, like, different from)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequence</td>
<td>Arrange events in order, note changes over time, processes, follow directions</td>
<td>Timeline, Action strip, Flowchart</td>
<td>Specific reference, Action verbs, Temporal conjunction and adverbials (e.g., after, since, as, initially, firstly, finally, when-clauses, or-clauses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sequential lexis (e.g., nouns: beginning, end, verbs: start, conclude, continue, summarize)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Select, make decisions, propose alternatives, solve problems, form opinions</td>
<td>Decision/consequence tree, Generating alternatives/decisions chart</td>
<td>Specific reference, “Sensing” verbs (e.g., like, want), Alternative conjunction (e.g., or), Appositional choice lexis (e.g., nouns: choice, option, which + mean, verbs: choose, opt, select, prefer)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The KF has been most extensively used for pedagogical purposes to shed light on issues of language and language education (see Early, et al., 1986). However, Mohan and Luo (2006) emphasize its importance specifically to CALL, highlighting the dearth of research in this
sub-field of language education. Discourse analysts can use the KF as a research tool to illuminate the features of texts produced in online and f2f modes.


The KF provides a lens through which to view BL classrooms, as exemplified in Luo (2005), who illuminated multimodal discourse from three different angles (social practice, discourse, and clausal levels). Broaching important issues surrounding online discussion, Luo’s study points to the need for additional research using the KF in BL contexts. The present study shows how the KF was used to illuminate student and teacher experiences and knowledge in technology-enhanced environments.

METHODS

The overarching questions were as follows.

1. How do students’ and teachers’ experiences influence their beliefs about online-hybrid and f2f-blended Spanish courses?
2. How do students’ interactions in online versus f2f classrooms impact their thoughts about learning in physical and virtual spaces?

To address these questions this study used triangulation of data involving online and direct participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual documents. The following sections outline the research sites, data collection procedures, and techniques of analysis.

Research Sites

Table 1 shows the observational data for this study, which were collected in two different types of blended Spanish language courses at a medium-sized research university in North America.

Table 1
Two Research Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Class Observations</th>
<th>In-Depth Interviews</th>
<th>Total Hours of Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>f2f-blended</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>online-hybrid</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The f2f-blended course

The f2f course was classified as a technology-enhanced BL course. Students met f2f four days a week for 50 minutes and one of these sessions took place in the language laboratory, a technology-enhanced lab with computers, a Smartboard™, and other technology. On days in the language lab, students would interact using the chat feature in Blackboard™ as well as engage in other synchronous computer-mediated communication tasks. Most of the tasks in the f2f-blended course could be classified as communicative, with students using language in order to accomplish a goal rather than focusing on the language as a system in and of itself. Students in the f2f-blended course were required to spend approximately ten hours per week outside of class working on web-based assignments and evaluations.
The online-hybrid course

Like students in the f2f-blended course, students in the online-hybrid were required to spend approximately ten hours per week outside of class working on web-based assignments and evaluations. Students in the online-hybrid met f2f twice each week for 50 minutes and they met synchronously in smaller groups once a week for 25 minutes in Adobe Connect™, a synchronous web-based platform. During f2f lessons, most of the tasks could be classified as communicative, where language was used to communicate a purpose with a specific outcome in mind. Tasks in the online class usually included a warm-up, which involved describing a picture or practicing vocabulary from the unit, putting items into a sequence, creating sentences using specific grammatical forms, and practicing assigned phraseology from the textbook. When the teacher asked questions, students responded speaking into their microphones. In contrast to the f2f classes, online lessons did not provide opportunities for students to interact with each other. A screenshot of one online class meeting is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Online interface of one online-hybrid class meeting in Adobe Connect™

Participants

The participants in this study included 13 undergraduate students enrolled in an online-hybrid or f2f-blended section of intermediate Spanish (fourth semester) and their two teachers. Students in these courses had a mean age of 19, and had already been studying Spanish for a number of years ($m=5.23$ years; $sd=2.18$). The two teachers of these courses, Mr. Galvez and Ms. Fuente, were both native speakers of Spanish from Colombia. The researcher took on the role of participant observer in the study. The pseudonyms used here do not necessarily reflect participants’ cultural backgrounds.

Six students in the f2f-blended and seven in the online-hybrid agreed to be interviewed. Discourse from eight of these students (Daisy, Giselle, Keri, Danny, Debbie, Ester, Leslie, and Shalista), who had previously taken both online-hybrid and f2f-blended Spanish courses, was used to compare BL learning experiences.
Data Collection Procedures

Data collection instruments consisted of two weeks of online and in-class observations, in-depth interviews, and textual documents (see Table 2).

Table 2
The Database

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Field Notes</th>
<th>Documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>f2f</td>
<td>online</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 f2f-blended</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>PPTs, texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>online-hybrid</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>PPTs, texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>~7 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observations

Mason (1996) outlines several reasons for electing participant observation as a methodological choice. The observations of online and traditional courses served two main purposes: to understand the tasks students carried out in each of the different course delivery formats and to develop a relationship with participants that would facilitate subsequent in-depth interviews. Observations carried out in the f2f-blended course included eight class meetings, two of which occurred in the language laboratory. Observations of the online-hybrid course included four f2f meetings and six synchronous online meetings in Adobe Connect™. As students were organized in smaller groups for the online class meetings, the teacher gave three identical 25-minute online lessons per week.

Interviews

Spradley (1979) defines the ethnographic interview as a “particular type of speech event” (p. 55). In a review of ethnographic studies carried out in the field of applied linguistics, Talmy (2010) argued that greater attention must be paid to the theories of the interview. Adopting the definition of the social practice, interviews were opportunities for speakers to reflect upon what they knew as well as what they did. Using a flexible interview protocol (see Appendix A), the researcher probed participants’ thoughts on and experiences in online-hybrid and f2f-blended courses. Participants were asked questions about specific tasks carried out in class and their general views of BL learning.

Documents

Ethnographic research in applied linguistics has incorporated a variety of textual documents (Harklau, 2005). Those used in this study consisted of researcher field notes, online chat logs, teacher lesson plans, and PowerPoint Presentations (PPTs) from the BL courses. Field notes, teacher lesson plans, and PPTs were used specifically to compare the themes that emerged during interviews to what actually happened during online and f2f classes.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of data from the present study draws upon Mohan’s (1986) KF and SP theory. Although these are treated separately here, they interrelate, representing different levels of analysis. As Halliday (1994) notes,

A discourse analysis that is not based on grammar is not an analysis at all, but simply a running commentary on a text: either an appeal has to be made to some set of non-linguistic conventions, or to some linguistic features that are trivial enough to be accessible without a grammar, like the number of words per sentence (and even the objectivity of these is often illusory); or else the exercise remains a private one in which one explanation is as good or as bad as another (pp. xvi-xvii).
A discourse analysis informed by grammar is necessary in order to avoid simply offering up participants’ words in a running commentary to support one’s claims. The ideational meanings targeted by the KF provided a way of verifying the content of participants’ discourse as manifested through their wordings in the lexicogrammar. This analysis offered insight into participants’ knowledge and beliefs about different types of BL courses.

To analyze discourse, first the action and reflection elements of the SP were identified. Next, pertinent KSs within this discourse were classified according to the vertical columns of the KF (e.g., ‘being’, ‘doing’, and ‘feeling/sensing’ meanings) as shown in Figure 1 above. Coding conventions were consistent with those used in previous studies (Mohan & Slater, 2006; Slater & Mohan, 2010), where classification and description used bold typeface, principles and sequence SMALL CAPITALS, and evaluation and choice underlined text.

**Data Presentation**

To understand participant knowledge and experiences surrounding online-hybrid and f2f-blended Spanish courses as well as the online and f2f classes therein, this section examines interview discourse and compares it to observations of online and f2f lessons. As part of a larger study of BL Spanish classrooms, participants’ knowledge and beliefs about different types of BL learning will be foregrounded. Several contradictory views, or ‘dilemmas’ about BL learning as implemented by these courses will be discussed. These dilemmas were equally balanced and could not be easily identified through observation alone. While the first two dilemmas (time commitments and developing relationships) related to the larger online-hybrid and f2f-blended courses in and of themselves; the latter two (developing speaking skills and understanding the teacher) pertained to the online classes versus f2f classes within the online-hybrid course.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

**Dilemmas Involving the Online-Hybrid and f2f-Blended Courses**

Table 3

Dilemmas surrounding online-hybrid and f2f blended courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Developing Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There’s not enough time in the online-hybrid</td>
<td>The online-hybrid better helps me develop relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There’s too much time in the f2f-blended</td>
<td>The f2f-blended better helps me develop relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Dilemma 1: Too Much or Too Little Time**

The first conflict that emerged from analysis pertained to the amount of time allotted for each course. As the online-hybrid course had only two weekly days f2f, many students who had taken both courses said they felt there was not adequate time to learn the language. Others felt that too much time was spent in the f2f-blended course, resulting in feelings of boredom or de-motivation. Compare the texts below.
Not enough time in the online-hybrid
Giselle: Obviously the traditional class meets more, (1) it feels like I’m constantly in Spanish class, but I also feel like I’m retaining more and I’m learning more, and actually speaking (2) like when she puts us in pairs being able to speak with another person is very helpful... the online stuff I guess is okay, (3) we’d get the homework the night before and then basically it was just write your answers and then speak them back when you were called on, (4) so it wasn’t like we could actually have conversations

Both students used choice and evaluation (underlined) to relate their preferences and evaluate why the time commitment in either the online-hybrid or f2f-blended course was better for them. Shalista used a ‘feeling’ process in (5) to choose the f2f-blended course while Giselle chose the online-hybrid using ‘feeling’ processes in (1). In (3) and (7) Giselle and Shalista describe their rationales. Whereas Giselle’s justification related the f2f-hybrid’s more frequent meetings, which allowed her to retain more information, learn more Spanish, and speak; Shalista’s reason for preferring the online-hybrid was that the technology kept her more engaged. Shalista chose the online-hybrid in (5), linked to principles in (6) with a ‘doing’ process. Using a consequential conjunction (e.g., because) in (8), she provided justification for why the online-hybrid course did not bore her in the same way as the f2f-blended course.

In (2) Giselle gave evidence for how the traditional course provided her with opportunities to get into pairs and in (4) to elucidate why speaking with another person was helpful. In (3), her use of sequence with temporal markers (e.g., the night before, and then) relates a string of events to show how she would complete the work in the online classes of the online-hybrid. In (4), she used a consequential conjunction (e.g., so) to express the inability of the online-hybrid course to promote conversations among students.

This breakdown of students’ discourse using the KF shows how students linguistically constructed their theories about time in online-hybrid and f2f-blended courses. The use of ‘being’, ‘doing’, and ‘thinking/feeling’ processes were classified to show why participants chose a particular course for having better time allocations. The KS-analysis provided the analytical detail to show how participants’ theories were constructed and transmitted through language. Other participants brought up more reasons for preferring the time commitment of one course or another as seen in Table 4.
Table 4
Additional Reasons for Too Much or Too Little Time in Online-hybrid or f2f-blended Course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There’s not enough time in the online-hybrid course</td>
<td>No time for playing games, learning structures, or getting questions answered</td>
<td>There’s too much time in the f2f-blended course</td>
<td>I get bored easily, it doesn’t fit into my schedule</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In favor of increased time commitment

Several participants, including the teachers, said there was not enough time in the online-hybrid to cover the same course content as the f2f-blended. Mr. Galvez said that the two weekly f2f classes precluded them from playing games like charades or Pictionary™. According to Ms. Fuente, these games were her students’ favorite moments of class and presented the most enjoyable and engaging types of tasks. Mr. Galvez, however, had no time for games since he had to take advantage of all f2f time to cover the material in the syllabus.

Danny, among others, voiced the problem of not being able to get his questions answered in the online classes. He said that the classes in Adobe Connect™ allowed opportunities to check his work but not to understand why a particular answer might be wrong. For others, increased f2f time had other benefits, such as increased opportunities for developing relationships with one’s classmates and for honing speaking skills.

In favor of decreased time commitment

Some participants gave reasons why the increased time commitments of the f2f-blended might not be best for everyone. Shalista, as shown in the example, talked about how the four days of class made her bored with her teacher, classmates, and material. Other students said that they would have liked to take the f2f-blended course but that their heavy course loads precluded them from doing so. For these students, the time investment of the f2f-blended was not feasible and, therefore, some Spanish study was better than nothing.

Dilemma 2: Developing Relationships

The second dilemma surrounding the online-hybrid and f2f-blended courses pertained to student ability to form relationships. Whereas some felt that four weekly classes provided the essential space and time for forming friendships, others said the small class sizes afforded by the online-hybrid contributed to bonding. Table 5 summarizes this contradiction.

Students who had taken both types of courses were apt to comment on the ability of either type to forge alliances and establish trust. Trust is an essential ingredient in such courses, where anxiety about looking foolish runs high. This dilemma emerged with many of the students, who expressed different viewpoints, as shown in the examples below.
Table 5
Building Relationships in Online-Hybrid or f2f-Blended Course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developing Relationships</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The online-hybrid helps me develop better relationships</td>
<td>Class sizes are small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The f2f-blended helps me develop better relationships</td>
<td>I see my classmates and teachers almost every day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Relationships in the Online-Hybrid

Keri (K): (1) **I was scared** [in the online-hybrid] because (2) **I’m kinda shy at first** but then I realized that **it was a really small class** and you got to interact with the people in it. (3) **I feel like everyone just became friends**

### Relationships in the F2f-Blended

Giselle: (4) **I enjoy the traditional class** because I get to actually form bonds with the students, (5) Because I’m seeing them four days a week (6) **it’s a lot more welcoming...it’s just a lot better environment, it’s a positive learning environment**

Both Keri and Giselle brought up different positive aspects of each course. Keri used a description of the small number of students in the online-hybrid to lend credibility to her positive evaluation. Keri used evaluation in (1) to relate her nervousness surrounding the idea of the online-hybrid course. In (2), she described herself as shy and then the class as really small to portray how the small classes of the online-hybrid afforded a shy student like her the chance to interact with others. In (3), she again used evaluation to show how everyone in the online-hybrid became friends.

Whereas both students mentioned their ability to make friendships in the online-hybrid and f2f-blended classes, Giselle made a point of emphasizing how much more conducive the f2f-blended classes were for this. Using sequence and principles, Giselle showed how the increased time commitment of the f2f-blended allowed her to establish camaraderie with fellow students. In (4), she used evaluation to express her preference for the time commitment of the traditional classes for their ability to encourage rapport among her classmates. She used principles in (5) to give a rationale for why seeing her classmates four days a week enabled stronger bonds with her classmates. In (6), she describes the f2f-blended courses as providing a more welcoming and positive learning environment.

**Dilemmas Involving Online Versus f2f Classes**

The second two dilemmas were based on online and f2f classes, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6
Dilemmas surrounding online versus f2f classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaking Skills Development</th>
<th>Understanding the Teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online classes help speaking skills</td>
<td>Online classes hinder speaking skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s easier to understand the teacher online</td>
<td>It’s easier to understand the teacher f2f</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dilemma 3: Online Classes and Speaking Development

Several of the participants’ reasons for why these classes either facilitated or interfered with the development of speaking skills are given in Table 7.

Table 7
Why Online Classes Either Help or Hinder Speaking Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaking Skills Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online classes help speaking skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shy students are pushed to speak up because they don’t have to volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online classes hinder speaking skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You just have to read what you wrote, there is no spontaneity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several students, as well as Mr. Galvez, stated that online classes gave them opportunities to speak up when they were otherwise reluctant. The text below juxtaposes the theories of Mr. Galvez (left) alongside that of one of his students, Leslie (right). Both spoke of the advantage of online classes for helping students develop their speaking skills. The original text in Spanish is provided in Appendix B.

Mr. Galvez: (1) **The good part is that there are students who never participate or speak up only seldom in class but in the online class, I can hear them pronouncing well for example.** (2) This might result in them gaining confidence speaking up online, which may carry over to having them speak up in class as well

Leslie: (3) **in class I’m more of a quiet person,** (4) so I have to talk in the online course... (5) **I’m pretty shy, I’m worried people are going to judge me when I speak,** but (6) **in the online course it doesn’t matter, you have to say it anyways** (7) because of participating more in the online classes I’m stepping out of my boundaries to participate in class as well

Mr. Galvez, begins by using description (1) to show how the online classes provided an opportunity for him to hear the pronunciation of students who have limited participation during f2f classes. He then moved to principles in (2) to hypothesize that online classes might encourage shyer students to speak up, both online and f2f.

The interview with Leslie confirmed Mr. Galvez’s theory about online classes facilitating f2f participation. Using description in (3) and (5), Leslie described herself as quiet and somewhat shy. In (4), she used principles to relate that the rules of the online lessons required her to speak whether she liked it or not. In (6), she described how she was pushed to speak in the online classes because rather than having to volunteer, the teacher called on everyone individually. In (7), she confirmed Mr. Galvez’s theory that online classes promote speaking development and participation in other classes, by rationalizing that her increased participation in online classes carried over into the f2f classes, having a positive effect on her tendency to speak up there as well. In other words, not only did Leslie tend to speak up and participate more during online sessions, but this tendency also carried over into the f2f classes by positively impacting her participation in both modes. Teachers as well as students confirmed this theory.

Not all participants, however, felt that online classes promoted their speaking. Others, such as Daisy, felt online classes were just an excuse to read off homework. According to her, she did not have to listen to her classmates or the teacher during the online sessions. Many said that they would feel more reluctant to speak up online because of a fear that if they
said something incorrectly, their classmates would judge them. Daisy said that at least in the f2f classes, she would know right away if people were making fun of her, as shown below.

Researcher: you’d be more willing to speak up in front of all those people [in the f2f lesson] than in the Adobe Connect™. Do you know why?
Daisy: I think it’s just because....(3 sec) I don’t know, I guess (1) it’s that instant feedback, so if you’re on Adobe Connect, you know the people who are online and everyone knows who each other is. (2) So, you mess up and maybe they’re laughing on the other end of the computer or something and you’re gonna see them the next day. And then in class, you’re there so you just know.

From this excerpt, we can see that Daisy clearly preferred f2f to online classes for speaking. Daisy’s rationale can be seen in (1), where she used description to relate how f2f classes offered her instantaneous understanding of her speaking performance, whereas in (2), she used sequence to provide an example scenario in which if she were to make a mistake online in Adobe Connect™, she would not know if her classmates were laughing at her. Juxtaposing Leslie and Daisy’s texts shows that while some students felt more challenged to participate and speak up during online classes, others felt reluctant and somewhat self-conscious about not being able to see their peers’ reactions.

**Dilemma 4: Understanding the teacher**

At this particular university, Spanish teachers were encouraged to speak entirely in the target language. According to Ms. Fuente, f2f classes offered increased opportunities to hear the language and resources to decipher the teacher’s message. Some students disagreed with Ms. Fuente’s theory. For students like Debbie, f2f classes were more distracting. The texts below contrast Ms. Fuente’s theory (right) to that of Debbie (left) and in doing so presents an example of the final dilemma, as shown in Table 8. Ms. Fuente’s original text can be found in Appendix B.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding the Teacher</th>
<th>It’s easier to understand the teacher online</th>
<th>It’s easier to understand the teacher f2f</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>Easier to tune everything else out and focus on the teacher</td>
<td>Hand gestures / body language / facial expressions help understand</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Debbie: (1) **There’s no one staring at me or giving me weird looks if I get it wrong [online] and it’s easier to just tune everything out because I’m not in a weird classroom, I’m in my dorm room,** (2) I can tune everything out, just focus on what I’m saying, (3) **for some reason I feel like the online I can understand Mr. Galvez better...it helps focus me, it makes me focus on the online**

Ms. Fuente: (4) **I believe that the traditional course is able to help students [understand] a little more [than the online classes] because (5) there is a lot of body language [that you use] to make yourself understood.** (6) You use your hands, your face, and all that helps the students [of the f2f classes]
Debbie used description in (1) to give background details in support of her evaluation in (3) that she could understand Mr. Galvez better online. Her use of principles in (2) supplied a potential rationale for why she was more comfortable and able to tune out external distraction and concentrate in online classes. On the other hand, the teacher, Ms. Fuente, used evaluation in (4) to express her belief that the f2f classes better helped her students understand. She used description in (5) and principles in (6) to provide examples of body language, hand gestures, and facial expressions and as evidence to support this view.

Despite the plausibility of Ms. Fuente’s theory, Debbie’s example casts doubt upon the idea that f2f classes are always better for promoting understanding of the teacher. Both Ms. Fuente and Debbie’s theories are justified, hence exists the dilemma about whether it is easier to understand the teacher in online or in f2f modes.

DISCUSSION

With respect to the first dilemma surrounding time commitments, it is clear that course developers and administrators must be cautious in their decision to replace f2f time with online time in BL courses. Although several students in this study reported that they would not have been able to fit the f2f-blended course into their class schedule, many others, including the teachers, described how f2f classes provided important opportunities for students to relax with the language, play vocabulary games, or discuss alternative topics. This has strong implications for proponents of communicative teaching methods, like task-based language teaching (Skhehan, 1998; Willis, 1996), since interactive tasks may prove more difficult to carry out online.

The second implication pertains to the time commitments of online-hybrid and f2f-blended courses. Neumeier’s framework (2005) offers course developers a way to organize the time spent in online/f2f modes. Nevertheless, the results of this study point to the likelihood that time spent in online and f2f modes may not be equally valuable for all students. This builds on Chenoweth et al. (2006) and Murday et al. (2008), who found the reduced schedule of online courses to be a setback. As such, it provides a rationale for why the extra f2f time in f2f-blended courses may have been directly linked to the tendency to form closer-knit relationships. Given that close-knit human relationships inevitably provide an incentive for continued language study, course developers should seek alternative ways for students to develop solidarity and kinship through an online medium. In contrast, if the online components of hybrid courses only include glorified moments for students to parrot back homework; one might inquire about better resource allocation.

A third implication stems from the finding that some shyer students may be encouraged to speak up in online classes rather than amongst larger groups of peers. In this case, the anonymity of the online classes may provide a crutch for more reserved personality types to increase their contribution to online class discussions. The findings of this study point to the possibility that this may also carry over to their f2f classes, boosting students’ confidence to speak up f2f. By offering a potential reason for why some personality types may be more suited to blended or traditional courses, this builds on Echavez-Solano (2003) and US Department of Education (2010), by showing why some students may be able to overcome the hurdle associated with speaking in synchronous online modes.

The final implication pertains to the dilemma of whether students can understand their teachers better in online or f2f classes and builds on the research of Blake et al. (2008), who found that students from blended courses emerged with similar oral proficiency to those who took traditional courses. While f2f teachers have many resources for making themselves understood, online teachers may need to harness additional tools. Mr. Galvez, for example, used the chatbox function in AdobeConnect™ to emphasize pronunciation.
Without the reliance on the visual cues such as hand gestures or facial expressions, online classes must seek alternative means of scaffolding students’ knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This study has inquired about the types of knowledge that students and instructors possess about their online-hybrid and f2f-blended Spanish courses. Using Mohan’s (1986; 2007; 2011) Knowledge Framework, in-depth interviews compared users’ views about two different blended intermediate Spanish courses. Knowledge-structure analysis was used as a discourse analytic tool for helping to detect conflicts, contradictions, and dilemmas surrounding the theories and practices of BL learners.

Discoveries from this study unearthed several “theories” about using technology in blended courses and its role in learning Spanish as a FL at the intermediate level. In particular, four dilemmas surrounding the different types of BL courses (time commitments and developing relationships) and classes in online versus f2f modes (speaking skills development and understanding the teacher) were constructed. Participants had well-articulated theories about the contradictory sides of these dilemmas, building on Stracke (2007), who highlighted several student reasons for dropping out of BL courses.

As all classroom-based research, the present study has limitations. Given the small number of participants and short observation schedule, the findings here are preliminary. Future studies will benefit from a longer observation schedule in order to understand how a greater number of students and their teachers perceive BL learning over time. Indeed, more longitudinal research is needed on BL courses, not only on the perceptions of participants within these courses but also the types of tasks that occur therein. In order to understand just how language is being enacted in and surrounding online and f2f registers, discourse analyses, which pay close attention to links between language, tasks, and technology in the BL classroom offer a promising venue for future inquiry.

REFERENCES


Stracke, E. (2007). A road to understanding: A qualitative study into why learners drop out of a blended language learning (BLL) environment. ReCALL, 19(1), 57-78. doi: 10.1017/S0958344007000511


APPENDIX A
Interview Protocol

For students:
1. What did you think about the language learning task/s that we did in class today/this week?
2. What was the most successful part of the task/s?
3. What was most difficult about the task/s?
4. Why do you think the instructor chose to carry out the task/s in this way?
5. How would you improve the task/s?
6. How do the tasks in face-to-face differ from those online?
7. Which tasks are more effective for helping you to learn Spanish, the ones carried out online or face-to-face?
8. How did technology play a role in the task/s from today’s/this week’s lesson/s?
9. Do you feel technology was used effectively for these task/s?
10. Tell me about your experiences with language learning with technology in this course in general.
11. How does technology help to complete the language learning tasks?
12. How does technology perhaps interfere with your language learning?
13. Do you feel that there is too much/not enough/just about the right amount of technology used in this course?
14. Do you feel the teacher makes effective use of technology?
15. Is there a steep learning curve for the technology used in this course? Please explain.

For instructors:
1. How do you feel the students responded to the language learning task/s we did in class today/this week?
2. What made you decide to carry out the task in this way?
3. What made you choose to do this task?
4. How is this class carried out differently in the hybrid course versus the traditional course?
5. How do you think the objectives of the lesson were achieved via the task/s?
6. What are the expectations of you regarding how you should carry out such language learning tasks?
7. Do you ever run into difficulties carrying out such tasks?
8. What are the expected outcomes of such types of task?
9. How does technology play a role in your lessons?
10. Tell me about your experiences with language learning with technology in this course in general.
11. How does technology help students complete the language learning tasks?
12. How does technology perhaps interfere with students’ language learning?
13. Do you feel that there is too much/not enough/just about the right amount of technology used in this course?
14. Describe some of the differences in the ways that students respond to tasks involving technology versus those that are carried out face-to-face.

APPENDIX B
Original Texts

Mr. Galvez: (1) Lo bueno es que hay estudiantes que nunca hablen o participen muy poco en el salón de clase, y en la clase en línea, se los escucha y se los escucha pronunciando bien por ejemplo, (2) puede que sirva que a veces hablen en línea y entonces, saben que lo hicieron bien y se sienten con más confianza para hablar en clase

Ms. Fuente: (1) yo creo que el tradicional se facilita un poco más porque (2) hay mucho lenguaje corporal, entonces cuando tú te estás haciendo entender. (3) Tú usas las manos, usas la cara, entonces eso ayuda un poco también a los estudiantes

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