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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.

KEYWORDS

Blended Course Design, Blended Learning, Chinese Instruction, Course Design, Foreign Language Instruction, Online Education

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).

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 order and how the characters are written, (b) what each character means, and (c) how each character sounds with correct pronunciation and tone.

Another special feature of Chinese is the importance of word order. Chinese does not have conjugations. Characters do not change with tenses or aspects. Expression of different meanings depends heavily on the word order. For example, the four characters, “好”, which is pronounced as /xǎo/ and means “good”, “车” which is pronounced as /tʃʰǎ/ and means “car”, “也”, which is pronounced as /jè/ and means “too”, “多”, which is pronounced as /tuó/ and means “many”, express different meanings if they are put in different orders: 好车也多 (There are also a lot of good cars.); 车多也好 (It is also good to have many cars.); 也好多车! (There are also many cars!)

Due to its logographic writing system and heavy reliance on tones and word order to differentiate meaning, Chinese is categorized as one of the most challenging languages for English-speaking students to learn by the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the U.S. State Department. In designing blended Chinese courses, considerable effort should be made to help learners master this language efficiently.

Blended Learning and Special Language Features

Blended learning has been widely adopted in language learning in the past ten years. Language learning is usually viewed as learning the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), and

the target culture. Researchers and practitioners have conceptualized and used blended learning in many ways, based on the features of language learning. For example, Hughes & Rolls (2012) proposed to use blended learning to address the issue of disciplinary disconnection in the modern university. They pointed out that the online components should focus on teaching students “aspects of the target culture such as its art, literature, architecture, print and visual media”, and on “connect[ing] language learners with native speakers...” (p. 301). Research has also shown that grammar and vocabulary learning can be strengthened through online activities (Al-Jarf, 2007; Pérez Basanta, 2004; Pérez Cañado, 2010; Scida & Saury, 2006). Research further shows that much FTF time can be freed up for “communicative activities and language skill mastery” after grammar and vocabulary activities are moved to online (Scida & Saury, 2006, p. 519). Some researchers even proposed that only oral skills required dedicated FTF meeting time, and that all other skills, such as reading, writing, listening, grammar and vocabulary, could all be transferred to online mode (Texas Tech University, 2006). No empirical research, however, has examined how to design blended learning based on the specific features of one specific foreign language, especially the less commonly taught languages such as Chinese.

Flipped classroom, a form of blended learning, is becoming more and more popular in education (Basal, 2015; Educause, 2012). The basic idea of a flipped classroom stresses the importance of spending class time on activities that support meaning construction rather than information transmission (King, 1993). In a flipped classroom, students are exposed to new materials outside of class through an online presentation, and apply what they learn outside of class through problem-solving and discussion in the FTF class (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Lage, Platt, & Treglia, 2000).

Few empirical studies have been done to investigate whether or not the flipped classroom approach works for introductory Chinese courses. Due to the features of Chinese language mentioned in the above section, the flipped classroom approach does not seem to work well for beginning Chinese-as-a-Foreign-Language (CFL) learners of Chinese language. It takes very little time for the learners to become aware of the unique features of Chinese language, but significantly more time to practice pronunciation, tones, and character writing. Therefore, after FTF practice, supplementary online practicing exercises may help more than would a flipped classroom. As suggested by Egbert, Herman, & Chang (2014), “it is not about whether the classroom is flipped or not, but whether the flip meets the needs of the target students” (p.9).

Research is Needed to Examine How to Integrate Two Components in Blended Courses for Beginning Level CFL Learners

Very few studies have examined beginning CFL learners’ perceived effectiveness of a blended course, the design of which, especially the design of the integration of two components (FTF and online), is based on the consideration of the learners’ background, their prior knowledge of the language, and their learning purpose. There are studies that have examined the effectiveness of integrating one online component in Chinese learning. Hwa, Weei, & Len (2012) investigated the possibilities of introducing a blended learning approach in teaching Chinese as a second language in a Malaysian college and its impact on students’ achievement in Chinese language proficiency. Their study emphasized the available online resources for first year students’ extended learning. It did not explain how the two components (FTF and online) were integrated. In another study, Lin & Huang (2011) explored lower intermediate CFL learners’ perception of Web 2.0-supported blended learning curriculum design and evaluation. In their study, they examined the effectiveness of the addition of some web 2.0 tools such as blog, wiki, voice thread, and online forum to a regular Chinese 202 classroom, on the students’ learning. It did not focus on the integration of the two different modes (FTF and online), and its participants were lower-intermediate level students, rather than beginning level learners.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND NEUMEIER’S DESIGNING PARAMETERS

This study is built upon the constructivist learning theory which views learning as an active and constructive process. According to the constructivist learning theory, knowledge and perspective of the world are constructed through individual experiences and schema (Schuman, 1996). Meaningful learning happens if students are actively involved and engaged in the learning process. Based on constructivism, effective online strategies tend to be rooted in student-centered and active learning (Morphew, 2000). The design of any learning environments should support the construction of knowledge and practice of skills by the learners.

Neumeier’s designing parameters are a selection of key criteria derived from a research project. These parameters can be used to guide the process of designing blended learning environments for language teaching and learning. See Table 1.

According to Neumeier (2005), the key factors to be considered in designing a blended course are: (a) which should be the lead mode, the FTF mode or the online mode, (b) how to distribute learners’ learning time spent in each mode, (c) how to integrate and sequence the two modes, (d) whether the level of integration should be high or low, and (e) how to distribute learning contents to the two modes.

First of all, a lead mode, whether FTF or online, should be decided. Deciding on a lead mode is “essential in securing a clear layout and a transparent structure of the course design” (p. 166). Then, the distribution of modes helps quantify the use of the modes “in relation to the whole process of instructed learning” and specifies how much time is spent in different modes. Furthermore, mode integration, i.e. how to sequence FTF and online modes, should be considered. The concept of transactional distance, first developed by Moore and Kearsley (1996), plays a role in targeting a specific line of sequencing. Transactional distance refers to “[...] physical distance that leads to a communication gap, a psychological space of potential misunderstandings between the behavior of instructors and those of the learners...” (Moore and Kearsley, 1996, p.200). The level of integration is another factor to be considered in designing blended courses. The level of integration denotes which part(s) of the modes is obligatory and which is optional for the learners. Towards the end of the designing process, how to incorporate learning content into the two modes should be considered. As the last step in the designing process, teaching strategies should be planned. Deciding on these factors should be based on who the learners are, what the learners’ learning purposes are, and what special features the target language has (Zhang, 2014).

Table 1. Parameters describing and conceptualizing a BL environment for language learning and teaching purposes (Neumeier, 2005, p. 167)

Parameter	Individual Descriptors
1. Mode	Focus on mode Distribution of modes Choice of modes
2. Model of integration	Sequencing of individual modes Level of integration
3. Distribution of learning content and objectives and assignment of purpose	Parallel or isolated
4. Language teaching methods	Use of teaching methods in each of the modes employed
5. Involvement of learning subjects (students, tutors and teachers)	Interactional patterns: individual vs. collaborative language learning activity Variety of teacher and learner roles Level of autonomy
6. Location	Classroom, home, outdoors, computer room, institutional settings

Bloom's taxonomy (1956) of learning objectives in the cognitive domain was used as guidance in deciding how to distribute learners' learning time spent in each mode, and how to integrate and sequence the two modes. Bloom classifies the cognitive process of learning into six major categories starting from the simplest to the most complex. The six categories are: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Knowledge refers to remembering and recalling learned information. Comprehension means understanding the meaning of informational materials. Application refers to applying the learned knowledge to new situations. Analysis refers to examining the interrelationships and organizational structure of the information. Synthesis refers to combining elements to find patterns. Evaluation refers to judging and deciding based on some set of criteria. The key factor that helps determine the amount of time spent in each mode and the mode sequence is that learners should use online activities to enhance their knowledge, comprehension, and analysis of what is learned while they spend FTF time with teacher and peers applying and synthesizing what is learned.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A blended course was designed based on Neumeier's (2005) framework of parameters with consideration of the learners' characteristics, their learning purposes, and the target language features. The research questions were:

1. What is beginning Chinese learners' self-perceived effectiveness of the blended course on their learning?
2. What problems exist in the design and implementation of the blended course? How can the pedagogical design be refined based on the learners' perceptions and feedback?

METHOD

Context and Participants

This study was conducted in a comprehensive mid-western university. Engineering students in this university are well known for their compact course schedule and intensive learning in their major field. For many of the engineering students, it is hard to find time in their daily schedule to learn a foreign language, especially the five-credit Chinese course offered in the university. In order for these students to be exposed to foreign languages and cultures and encourage them to study abroad, the school of engineering offered Chinese, French, and German non-credit short courses. Nine students from the Engineering School enrolled in the short Chinese course and participated in the study.

This Chinese short course was a 12-week non-credit bearing course, the purpose of which was to provide engineering students who were planning to study abroad or travel in China with an opportunity to learn basic Chinese. These students took a full load of courses in their major while taking this non-credit course. As engineering students in general, they were busier than most of the other majors. A surprisingly high number, nine students, were willing to enroll in the course and devote their spare time to learning Chinese. Out of the nine students, one stopped attending class and working online at mid-semester.

Among the nine students, three were female and six were male. There were two juniors, five seniors and two graduate students. Two students came from Aerospace Engineering, two from Material Engineering, three from Electronic Engineering, and two from Industrial Engineering. None of the nine students had any prior knowledge of Chinese.

Data Sources and Analysis

A survey and an informal interview were used to collect data. The survey addressed the student's reason for taking the course, and their perception of the design and teaching of the course. The survey consisted of a multiple-choice format, and an open-ended question format. An informal interview was conducted with three participants. The three participants were selected using the convenience sampling method. The interview focused on how they felt about the course, about the teaching, and how they thought the course could be improved. Quantitative data were analyzed using excel. Data collected via open-ended questions were analyzed using ground theory.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Faced with many possibilities of combining different learning elements in a blended environment, teachers sometimes have a hard time deciding: which activity goes FTF and which goes online, how to distribute the quantity of contents between FTF and online, and how to sequence the FTF and online modes. "BL courses foster successful language learning only if they are carefully designed on the basis of an analysis of the participants' needs and abilities" (Neumeier, 2005, p. 176). In addition, the amount of time the learners devote to learning should also be accounted. In designing this short course, the choice of activities and where they should go were based on Neumeier's framework of parameters (2005) and Bloom's taxonomy of learning objectives.

Deciding on the Lead Mode

According to Neumeier, the core question when designing a BL environment is "which combination of modes provides the optimal basis for language learning and teaching" (p. 163) for the individual learners, learning contexts, and learning objectives. Determining the lead mode is crucial at the beginning of the course design. The choice of the lead mode can be made only after a careful assessment of the learners' goals and the resources at hand. Kerres (2001) (cited in Neumeier, 2005) specifies the criteria for determining the lead mode of a learning environment: (a) the learners are guided through the learning process by the lead mode; (b) the sequencing and organization of content or negotiation of content is done and presented in the lead mode; and (c) how often the learners spend most of the time in the lead mode (p. 277).

Considering that it was a short course, and that the learners had no prior knowledge of Chinese, FTF was chosen to be the lead mode and the online component to serve as the complementary mode. Generally speaking, beginning CFL learners need FTF guidance when they start to learn an unfamiliar language, which is very different from their native language English or the other alphabetic languages they might have been exposed to before. It is also easier to build up a learning community with FTF than with an online component. During FTF meetings, students could start to feel a community of learners within a short period of time. Furthermore, FTF meetings can guide the learners through the learning process more efficiently than would have been possible through the use of an online component. Sequencing and organization of content could be presented and completed in FTF meetings. In addition, due to the heavy load in their major course work, the learners may spend most of their time in the FTF mode. This satisfies Kerres (2001)'s criteria for making FTF meeting as the lead mode.

Distribution of Modes

After the lead mode has been determined, it is important to determine the distribution of modes. Neumeier encourages blended course designers to consider the amount of time learners are most likely to spend working in a particular mode. The enrolled learners in this non-credit short course most likely had a full load of courses in their major area, and so were, likely, more motivated and engaged via FTF interaction than via online mode. In addition to using this criterion, another three

factors affected the decision on mode distribution. First, learners were new in learning the language and they needed person-to-person contact to build a solid foundation in tones, pronunciation and prosody. Second, Chinese is a very challenging language, which is easier to learn and to teach in FTF mode, especially at the beginning stage of learning. Third, the simple learning process, according to Bloom's taxonomy, could be achieved online without needing to work with peers and teacher, such as knowledge, comprehension, and analysis. The more complicated learning processes, such as application, synthesis, and evaluation should be conducted face to face because assistance and interaction with peers are mostly likely needed. Based on these considerations, it was decided that FTF mode should comprise about 65-70% of the course, and that online mode should comprise about 30-35% of the course. Table 2 shows the distribution of modes in the short course.

Sequencing and Level of Integration

Based on Bloom's taxonomy, the online component focuses on remembering, comprehending, reviewing, and digesting what the learners learned during the FTF meetings, while the FTF component focuses on the student's ability to synthesize the knowledge, and to apply and use the language creatively. Every week there was a 2-hour FTF class meeting. During the 2-hour meeting learners gained knowledge of pronunciation, grammar, and culture, practiced speaking skills, and asked the instructor questions. The transactional distance, i.e. the distance leading to communication misunderstanding, was close. After each meeting, online activities were available to enhance what the learners had learned and practiced during the FTF meeting. It is always helpful for learners to do exercises to consolidate what they have learned in the FTF meeting, and be exposed to spoken Chinese and print. Therefore, meaningful exercises in pronunciation, vocabulary learning, word order, and character writing were put online. In addition, culture explanation and authentic videos on Chinese society and culture were made available online. Since most online activities were used to supplement and practice what learners learned in FTF meetings, the design of this short course had a low level of integration. Thus, if learners were pressed for time and failed to complete the online activities, their learning progress would not be negatively affected.

Distribution of Learning Content and Objectives and Assignment of Purpose

The design of this short Chinese course used the parallel method of incorporating learning content and objectives into the BL environment, that is, both modes were used for teaching and learning the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). However, the different modes were used with different foci. The FTF mode was mostly for listening and speaking practice, even though it was also used to introduce pronunciation, character writing, word order and some cultural knowledge. The online mode was mostly used to help learners practice character writing, word order, vocabulary learning, revision work, and learn cultural knowledge. This method of distribution was selected on the basis of the following consideration: First, for beginning learners, it is critical that

Table 2. Distribution of modes in short Chinese course

Face-to-face modes	Online modes
Twelve 120 minute meetings	[Class video recordings and instructor PowerPoint slides (for review)] 12 weeks of Listening to, and repeating, dialogues: 10 minutes Character recognition and word order exercise: 20 minutes Character writing/typing exercise: 10 minutes Flashcards exercise: 5 minutes Reading exercise: 10 minute Video clips on the language and culture: 3 x about 4 minutes
68% of total 36 hours	32% of total 36 hours

they have interaction in the language with native or near-native speakers. The only chance most of them could practice what they just learned in a meaningful context would be with the instructor. The course design took full advantage of the time when they were with the instructor. The FTF meetings focused on listening and speaking and gave the learners opportunities to use the language creatively. Second, some language skills could be practiced on their own, such as character writing and word order. Memorizing vocabulary and expressions and analyzing word order could also be achieved on their own. With technology, these exercises could be made fun or game-like to engage students. Third, some knowledge could be acquired by watching movies. During each FTF meeting, one cultural topic closely related to the theme of that meeting was introduced and the authentic videos online gave further explanation and expanded meaning to the short FTF introduction.

Language Teaching Method

The design of this short Chinese course was based on Communicative Language Learning (Hymes, 1971; Richards & Theodore, 2001), and Task-Based Instruction (Breen 1987; Klippel, 2002; Long 1985; Nunan 1989; Prabhu 1987). Communicative Language Learning emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of study (Richards & Theodore, 2001). Language use is the driving force for language learning (Long 1989; Prabhu, 1987). Tasks were used to organize the communicative activities.

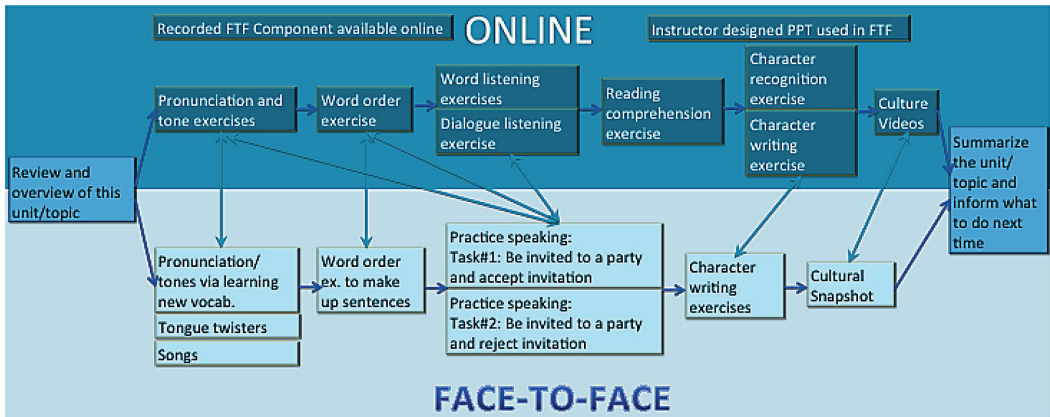
Ten topics were chosen to prepare students with their future traveling or study in China. Within each topic, different scenarios were used to prepare students with applied knowledge in real life situations. For example, when one is invited, there are two ways to respond. One is to accept the invitation, and the other is to reject it. Both scenarios were learned and practiced.

The flow chart below (Figure 1) indicates how the two modes were integrated for each unit/topic. The unit/topic of inviting people and response to invitation was used as an example.

While it is relatively easy to understand how the FTF meetings was conducted, it is sometimes quite difficult to understand how the online components were applied. To make the latter easier to understand, each of the online components is introduced briefly in this section, some with images for the illustration purpose.

For pronunciation and tone exercises, the students were directed to a website which was especially designed for beginning learners of Mandarin Chinese to learn and practice their pronunciation and tones. This website was created by Dr. Der-lin Chao, and sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (http://www.chineseliteracy.net/summer/cssystem_062908.swf). In addition, a series of audio recordings of what the learners learned in the first FTF meetings were put online. These audio

Figure 1. Flow chart of the blended short course



files included: the four tones plus neutral tones using some words as examples, numbers 0 to 10, three easy tongue twisters which are mainly composed of numbers and words they just learned, and the greetings dialogue.

Word order exercises took many different formats. Basically, the order of a phrase or a sentence was purposefully broken, and the learners had to re-arrange it in order to make the phrase or sentence meaningful. The example in Figure 2 was used to make the students aware of the word order of “what is your name,” which is very different from English. By thus doing, the learners could purposefully learn the importance of word order in Chinese and become aware of the relationship between word order and word meaning. Note: The first example below was taken from the first two weeks of their learning, when both *pinyin* and characters were used in the word order exercises. The *pinyin* was gradually removed from the exercises as the students progressed in their learning. When only characters were used in the word order exercises, learners were, then, practicing character recognition.

Character recognition and writing exercises were designed to help learners recognize and write characters. Besides the exercises which combined both character recognition and word order, as illustrated in Figure 3, there were exercises that were designed to help learners use certain words correctly. The exercise in Figure 4 required the learners to choose from different questions to fill in the blanks.

Another type of character exercise is the character-writing exercise. This exercise was in a video format, which showed the learners the correct stroke order for each character being learned. Figure 5 is an example of how 喜(happiness) should be written.

In addition, two different sets of flashcards made available via Quizlet were provided online. The first set of flash cards displayed different characters on the screen, the pronunciation and tone of which would appear if the play button was pressed (See Figure 6 below). Learners could download a printable version of these flash cards, print them, and use them as they had time, without the need for an electronic device. The second set of flashcards was more like a game. *Pinyin* and meanings were displayed, and learners were required to click on the right character(s) among many incorrect choices. The learner’s score was recorded to allow the user to compete with him/herself. Figure 7 shows what a flashcard from the second set looks like, and Figure 8 shows what the flash card looks like if the learner wants to have the character shown before they type in the *pinyin* with tones.

Listening exercises provided audio files with a word, a phrase, or a sentence in Chinese. After listening to the word, the phrase, or the sentence, the students were asked to either choose the correct

Figure 2. One example of a word order exercise

Word Order 3 of 5

3) 1. shénme 什么 2. jiào 叫 3. míngzi 名字 4. nǐ 你

☐ A. 1234
☐ B. 4312
☐ C. 2341
☐ D. 4213

Previous Next

Figure 3. One example of a word order and character recognition exercise

10 points Save Answer

QUESTION 1

When you are in a cab, you want the driver to pull over because there is an emergency.

停

请

车

你

Drop-down menu for selecting the order the character should take.

Figure 4. An example of a character recognition exercise combined with grammar learning

Choose the correct question words to fill in the blanks.

什么 谁 哪里 呢

1. 我喜欢看书，你____？
2. 你的女朋友叫____名字？
3. 他明天去____哪里打球？
4. ____喜欢吃饺子？

[Click here to see the answer.](#)

English translation of what they heard, or choose a word to complete a given sentence. Figure 9 gives two examples.

Reading exercises were the same as print text. A short passage was given and it was followed with a few questions. The questions were either in Chinese or in English. Culture videos complemented what was covered in FTF meetings. During the FTF meetings many aspects of Chinese culture was explained briefly in the last few minutes of class, and titled as Culture Snapshots at the PowerPoint Slides. Examples of Chinese cultural aspects that were explained included giving gifts, forms of addressing people, what seniority means in China, hospitality, table manners, bargaining in the market, color preferences and so on. In addition, one or two video clips on Chinese society were also provided online. These videos were usually in Chinese with English subtitles. The online culture videos were selected from the Internet. For each unit/topic/week, two to three 3-6 minute video clips were put online. These videos were related to what was covered in class at Culture Snapshot.

Figure 5. Character writing: Stroke order of 喜 (The pinyin is xǐ, which means happiness)

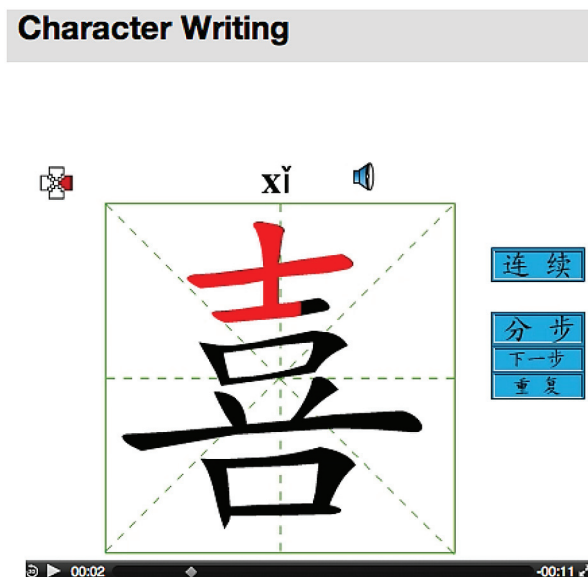


Figure 6. Sounded out flashcards (The pinyin is suān which means sour.)

[Click here to download a printable version of Flashcard in PDF format for self-study.](#)

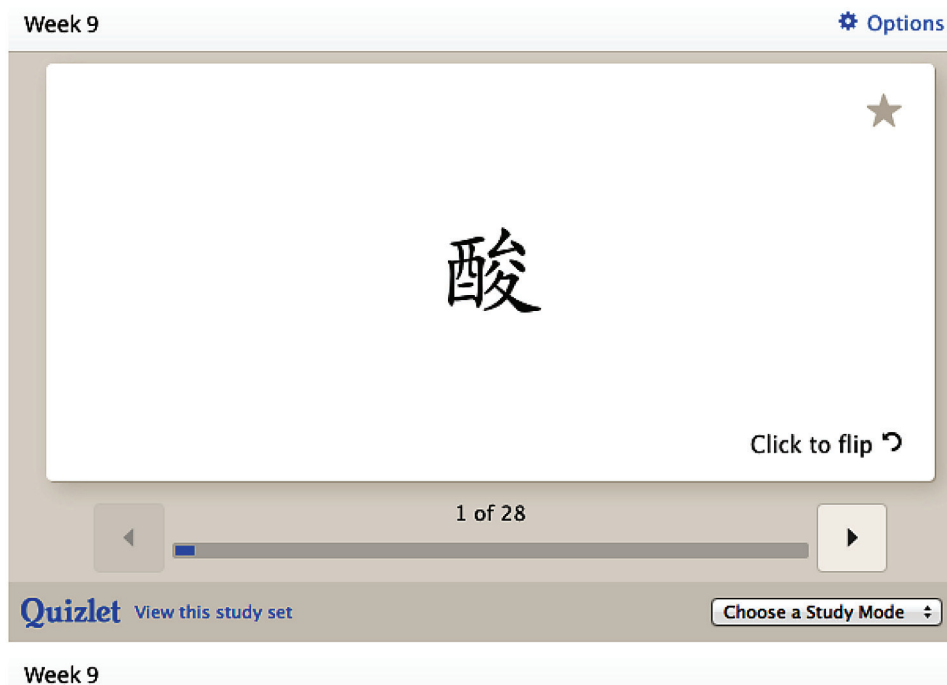


Figure 7. Game-like flashcards with pinyin and meaning shown first

Remaining

28

Incorrect

0

Correct

0

jiǎo zi

dumpling

Answer

一

两

买

共

冰

别

务

单

吃

页

味

咸

喝

块

多

子

家

少

常

想

放

服

杯

水

点

甜

盘

碗

精

素

肉

腐

苦

菜

要

豆

辣

酸

钱

饺

Start Over

☐ See Chinese (Simplified) first

☐ Speak text

Quizlet

View this study set

Choose a Study Mode

Week 9

Figure 8. Game-like flashcards with characters shown first (The pinyin is xiǎng, which means “would like to” or “to miss”.)

Remaining

28

Incorrect

0

Correct

0

想

Answer

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Start Over

☒ See Chinese (Simplified) first

☐ Speak text

Quizlet

View this study set

Choose a Study Mode

Figure 9. Two examples of a listening exercise

Question 1
Listening comprehension. Choose the correct answer based on what you hear.

[Audio](#)

00:00 00:24

- ☐ A. Here we are. We arrived.
- ☐ B. Where are you going?
- ☐ C. How are you?

Question 6
Listening comprehension. Listen to the dialogue and circle the correct answer.

[Audio](#)

00:00 00:26

- A. 你今天下午做什么?
- B. 我今天下午____ (去唱歌 / 去跳舞)。
- C. 你今天去____ (哪儿 / 什么)跳舞?
- D. 去学校。

[Click here to see the answer.](#)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Participants' Use of FTF and Online Components

As predicted during the designing process, the students spent more time on the lead FTF mode much more than using the online component. Eight out of nine students attended almost every FTF weekly meetings. Generally, all students were aware of the online component of the course provided in Blackboard Learn, and most students utilized this component to assist their learning. Taking into account the fact that the online components demand a higher degree of learner self-regulation and motivation (Barnard-Brak Lan, & Paton, 2010; Cho & Shen, 2013; Lynch & Dembo, 2004), and the fact that this course is a non-credit bearing course, the learners' use of the online components exceeded the researcher's expectation.

The online components were categorized into two groups. One group included those online materials and resources that learners could watch to review what they had learned, such as the recorded FTF meetings, researcher/instructor designed PPTs used in FTF meetings, culture videos, and character writing videos. When using this group of resources, the learners did not need to answer any questions. The other group included those online exercises that were designed to enhance learners' memorization of vocabulary and expressions, or comprehension and analysis of word order rules. For this group of exercises, learners usually needed to work out an answer to the exercise questions on character recognition, word order, listening, reading, or character writing. These two groups of online components were used at roughly the same frequencies. See Figure 10.

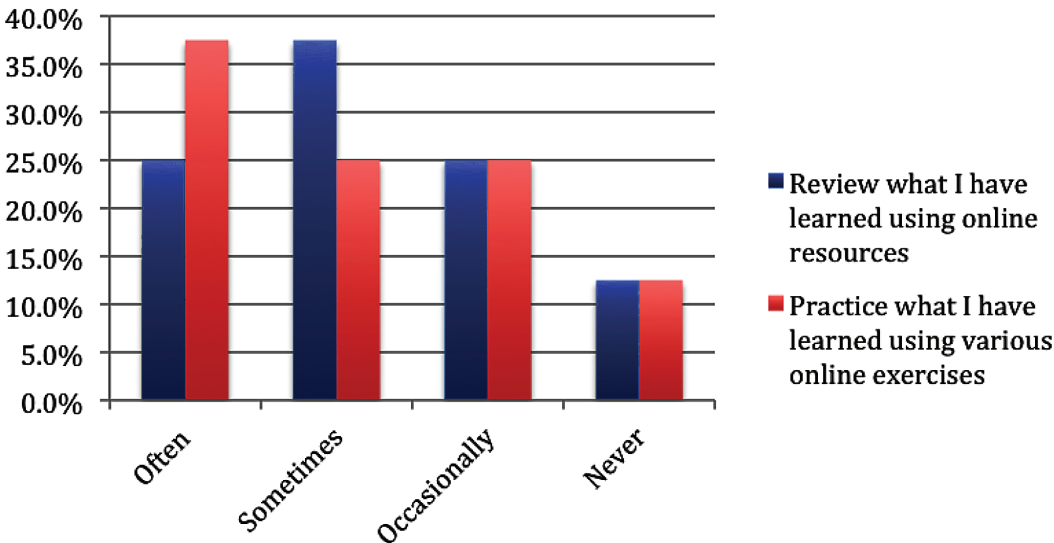
Participants' Perception of the Course and Its Components

Overall, the participants thought highly of the blended Chinese Short Course. They agreed that the quality of the course was high, and that their learning outcomes were optimal. Students especially liked the small and interactive FTF component. They highly praised the professor because they believed that the professor was effective in engaging them in the language learning and providing them with a secure and comfortable learning environment. They commented, particularly, that they liked the course contents, which were useful and helpful in preparing them for visiting or studying abroad in China. One student wrote,

I thought it was a really excellent course. It was very slow-paced at the start in order to allow us to properly learn the pronunciation, and then it really sped up at the end and allowed us to learn a lot of new vocabulary. In addition, the teacher was very nice and patient with us, and encouraged a lot of discussion and practice, which definitely helped me learn a lot more than I normally would have!

Another student wrote,

Figure 10. Frequency of students' using online components



My favorite activities were definitely the conversations and explanations [in the FTF meetings], because I felt like we really thoroughly learned the concept, then we had the chance to practice it, which is a completely different skill set. However, I also really enjoyed the cultural snapshots to learn more about China. And, the tongue twisters and songs were fun as a break where we were still able to practice our Chinese.

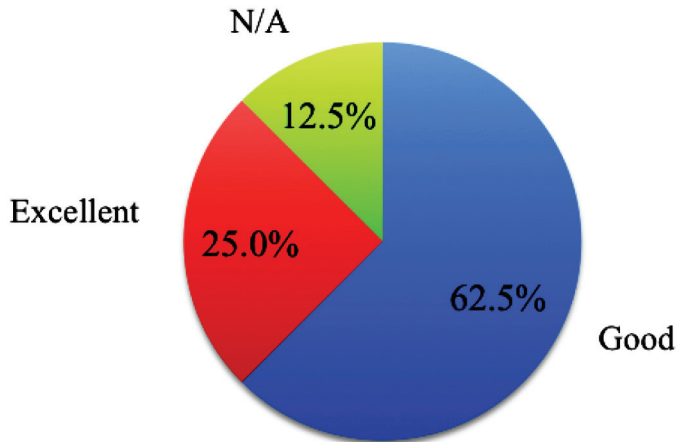
The students agreed that the online resources used in this course were effective in helping them meet the course objectives (see Figure 11). The most popular online sub-components were the recorded FTF class meetings, the researcher/instructor designed PPT used in FTF class meetings, and the character writing video showing students how to write each character they learned. All participants who used these online resources agreed that they enjoyed using them because they were very useful in helping them review what they had learned in class.

Another popular online sub-component was the different types of exercises including word order, character writing, listening comprehension and reading comprehension. Eighty-eight percent of the participants did these online exercises. Out of those who did the exercises, 86% felt that they were valuable in enhancing their learning. Since the survey did not ask students for their opinions on the individual exercises, there was no data on how students perceived each type of these exercises.

Finally, the character flashcards were a very popular sub-component. The online character flashcards were electronic downloadable flashcards. The learners could also use these flashcards to play games online. More than half of the students utilized this tool for their character/vocabulary learning. Seventy-five percent of those who had used the flashcard tool reported that it was very useful and effective. Students especially liked the option to print out the flashcards and have a hard copy with them to study at any time or in any place.

The least popular online sub-component was the culture video. Out of the 88% percent of learners who watched these culture videos, only 57% felt that they were helpful in increasing their knowledge about China. One of the reasons for the less positive response to this sub-component might have been that the videos were procured free on the Internet rather than having been professionally produced to offer a uniformly high quality of imagery and sound, and a close relationship to the culture snapshots explained in the FTF meetings. It is also possible that videos on culture and society, simply, might not

Figure 11. Students' overall rating of the online component



be motivational to students who wished to continue their exploration of the culture points learned in FTF, or that, practically speaking, learners who volunteer to learn Chinese in their spare time, under the pressure of a demanding class load, in order to travel or study abroad, simply, must confine their interests to learning the language which will be essential to their basic survival needs during their stay in China.

In summary, the online components of the course were used by most participants, and they were perceived to have been useful in helping the participants review and practice what they had learned during the FTF meetings. Most participants perceived the blended short course to have been effective and fun in helping them learn Chinese. In addition, the participants also reported that taking this course had increased their interest in learning and their motivation to learn Chinese language and culture. This course was offered in the spring. One student planned to “have a Chinese learning software to work with this summer” to expand her knowledge, and hone her speaking and writing skills. Another student wrote,

It definitely made me more interested in continuing my Chinese education and visiting China! I hope to visit China sometime in the near future with my boyfriend, and I definitely want to keep learning words and practicing with him! My new company has some Chinese courses available, so I'd like to take some of those to stay sharp.

How Should the Course Design Be Improved?

The design of the course, such as making FTF as the primary mode and online as the secondary mode, the level of integration of the two modes, the sequencing and distribution of the modes, the teaching method and content, generally worked very well. However, based on the participant survey, some changes were suggested. The first two suggestions were related to the course design in general, and the last two involved designing the online sub-components. The first suggestion addressed the FTF meeting frequencies and duration, the second suggestion addressed learning of character writing, the third suggestion addressed giving more (paper and pencil) structured assignments, and the fourth suggestions addressed the PPT used for review. The first two suggested areas for improvement are controversial, and required elaboration.

FTF Meeting Duration and Frequency

Five out of nine participants suggested that two-hour FTF meetings once a week be changed to one-hour FTF meetings twice a week. In language learning, having more chances to practice what they learn greatly benefits the learners, especially beginning level learners. Meeting twice a week for a shorter period of time is a reasonable suggestion. However, for learners who are very busy with their major course work, and are not taking the course for credits, meeting more than once in a week might not work better than the single meeting arrangement, because participants might not be able to schedule FTF class twice in a week. Once left behind because of absences, students may eventually give up. Whether, and under what condition, the suggested change will or will not work, need to be examined.

Character Writing

Character writing is one of the most controversial issues raised in the blended short course. As mentioned in the above section, character-writing videos, along with other materials for review, were one of the most frequently used online sub-components, and they were perceived to be useful for learning how to write Chinese characters. However, character writing was also one of the online sub-components that received inconsistent use by the participating students. Most of the students who used character-writing videos watched them very frequently, but three students watched no character-writing videos at all. This behavior corresponds positively with the written feedback given by some participants in the study. Two out of nine participants stated that they loved learning characters; however, two other participants suggested that they should learn the basic listening and speaking skills first before learning how to write characters. Without watching any video might indicate that these learners gave up writing because learning Chinese characters had been very challenging to them.

In the field of Chinese language learning, there are two different views on the timing of character introduction. One view, represented by Koda (1992) and Liu (1983) among others, supports the premise that character learning should be introduced right at the beginning of Chinese learning. The other view, represented by Everson (1988), Packard (1990), and Swihart (2004) among others, suggests that character learning should be postponed for a few months. Another group of researchers propose, timing aside, that being able to recognize characters is more important than being able to write them (Allen, 2008; Jiang, 2007). A recent survey study (Ye, 2013) shows that the majority of CFL programs do not delay teaching characters. In the case of a blended short course, which approaches are most beneficial to the learners, delayed character learning or character learning begun at the onset of learning; required recognition, only, of characters or requirement of both recognition and writing of characters? These are questions that require further investigation.

For the time being, the problems posed by the questions above, may be substantially remediated through the use of flashcards to learn both radicals and characters online. Radicals, also referred to as submorphemes, are the smallest meaningful orthographic units in compound characters. Learning radicals plays an important role in learning Chinese characters” (Shen, 2010; Shen & Anderson, 1997). Research shows radicals are processed before character-level representations are processed in reading (Taft & Zhu, 1997), and that the recognition of radicals positively affects recognition of the character as a whole (Huang, 1984). Even though radicals were introduced in the FTF meetings, radical learning was not offered online because no related online programs were found. If radical learning could be provided online, it might help those who are struggling to learn characters. Further examination of the benefits of online radical learning exercises in blended learning environments is needed.

More Structured Assignments

Some online sub-components also need to be revised. The participants suggested that additional learning materials, such as worksheets, or a workbook, filled with practice problems, the answers to which can be directly written on the pages of the materials, be provided. This suggestion indicates: that the low level of integration of online and FTF needs to be revised, and that the students, while

enjoying using the online exercises, seem to prefer having something that they could hold on, i.e. paper-pencil materials. When the level of integration was decided in the course designing phase, given that the students in this course would be busy with the course work in their major area, studying the online components were not made obligatory. Even though the FTF meetings were not required either (due to the non-credit bearing feature of this course), absences in attending them would result in learners' disorientation in learning because, after all, FTF was designed as the lead mode, making it crucial in leading the learners through the learning process. The students' feedback indicates that the handing in of some worksheets, or a workbook, should be "required". Exercises can be provided online, but a set of organizing worksheets or a workbook in printed form, could provide the learners with an increased sense of structure. A set of worksheets may also provide a bridge between the FTF learning and the online learning. During the FTF meeting, the instructor could use the worksheets to go over some of the important and challenging items in the online activities. By thus doing, learners might be able to take better advantage of the online components.

Edited PowerPoint Files Online

Most students used the PPTs posted online, after being presented during the FTF meetings. Some of the students indicated that these PPTs could be improved to make them more useful while reviewing they had learned during the FTF meetings. During the FTF meetings, the instructor often wrote notes on the PPTs. The annotated PPTs were then put on line. The participants suggested that the PPTs be edited before being posted online as follows: First, the background color of the PowerPoint Slides should be changed to a lighter color. The students often printed out the PPT slides to review. The dark background made the annotations on the slides illegible. The students suggested that a lighter background color could solve this problem. Second, the students suggested that the PPTs should be edited before putting online. They suggested, more particularly, that more English translations and more explanations be added to some of the Chinese sentences, and that the proposed PPT editing would eliminate the need to watch the FTF meeting videos as a method of review -- a practice imposing a significant time burden on their already busy schedules.

CONCLUSION

In general, the course design, based on Neumeier (2005)'s framework of parameters, worked very well in helping beginning CFL learners learn Chinese language and culture. The decision to choose FTF as the lead mode, and online mode as complementary, proved to be a correct one. Learners found the FTF meeting time more useful than the online components. The way the two modes were sequenced and distributed, based on Bloom's taxonomy, also functioned well. The transactional distance was close, and the participants did not express much more anxiety than normal beginning foreign language learners would have. On the contrary, most of them enjoyed this learning experience. Their suggestion on splitting the once-a-week two-hour FTF meeting into two one-hour FTF meeting at two different times in a week is a good one, from the perspective of learning theory (see Ebbinghaus, 1913; Bahrick, et al., 1993 for Spaced Practice). A credit-bearing short course that adopts this suggestion may facilitate more efficient learning of the target language and culture. However, in the case of non-credit short courses, a possible consequence of meeting twice a week might be that some of the students could not be present during one of the two meetings due to their heavy course load in their major area. Absences in attending FTF meetings might lead to dropouts. Nevertheless, it is worth a try, in the future, to find out whether meeting one hour twice a week, or two hours once a week, is best in the non-credit course application.

Distribution of learning contents in the two different modes worked very well. The students were satisfied with the teaching style and methods in the FTF meetings. The choice and sequencing of the topics were also well received. The foci on pronunciation, speaking, word-order knowledge, character writing, and some of the short explanations of key culture points were also well received.

The online components, which focused on reading, vocabulary learning, and character writing, seemed to have worked really well. Providing video recordings of the FTF meetings and posting the annotated PPTs used in FTF meetings online turned out to be very helpful in assisting learners in reviewing what they had learned. Despite the fact that the two modes in the course design worked very well, the learners still wanted to have something that they could hold in their hands. This seems to suggest that, in future blended learning courses, in addition to the online exercises, certain learning exercises should be provided in a paper-pencil format. An alternative would be to offer a printable version for some online exercises.

Culture is a big part in language learning. However, it is not surprising to see that learners spent more of their time and energy learning the language itself. The reason why the videos posted online were rarely watched might be due to the students' limited time and energy to focus on the language learning only, and to the failure of the videos to interest them. Given that the culture snapshots introduced during the FTF meetings were very well received, it is conceivable that high-quality video clips that are closely related to the culture snapshots introduced at FTF might improve student reception of culture videos posted online.

This study was the first in the literature to examine students' perception of a blended course designed based on the language features, learning purposes and the special learning group. It has a number of strengths such as the adoption of Neumeier's framework and Bloom's taxonomy of learning objectives in designing the course. That said, the study also has several limitations. First, The number of participants is small. Even though nine is a good number for a language course in teaching, and is sufficient for the data collection purpose for a descriptive study, it would be more informative if more participants had participated in the study. Second, the survey designed for the study asked only for participants' perception of the group of online exercises, and not for their perception of each individual online exercise. Even though the findings can sufficiently answer the research questions, a more detailed response to each individual online exercise could help inform the question of whether or not the design of each exercise works, and how to improve those that did not work as expected. Third, even though the participants' report of their online components' usage yielded sufficient data to verify the amount of time was spent on the online activities, it would be better if statistics tracking had been used to calculate the exact time spent online. Despite these limitations, this study offers insight into the design of language courses in a BL environment. It can be useful to language teachers who are teaching FTF but are considering of adding online components or vice versa.

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