The theory and practice of blended foreign-language tasks

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Abstract

How can systemic functional theory help shed light on the tasks that are teachers using to teach their blended foreign language (FL) courses as well as how learners perceive of these as learning tools? This paper attempts to answer this question using a functional analysis of participants' texts. Triangulation of data collection methods included online and direct participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual documents. Using two complementary frameworks anchored in SFL, (a) the Knowledge Framework (Mohan, 1986) and (b) social practice theory (Mohan, 2011), this paper examines participants' theories about and practices during online and face-to-face FL learning tasks. Findings include theoretically anchored insight into how blended FL tasks can be understood and explained. This study holds implications for teachers, course developers, and researchers in the fields of SFL, applied linguistics, and computer-assisted language learning.

1   Blended Language Learning

Blended or hybrid language learning is becoming increasingly ubiquitous in many North American universities. Blended courses are commonly defined as those that include a face-to-face (F2F) instructional component as well as a technology-enhanced component (Neumeier, 2005). These courses can be attractive to both students and administrators in part due to their replacement of F2F time with online assignments. Rapid advancements in technology have made blended language courses and the tasks carried out therein intriguing objects for study. An important question when creating or investigating such courses is: What, if any, types of language learning tasks traditionally carried out in F2F modes are feasible and appropriate for synchronous online learning modes? As new options for online modes emerge, questions such as this become very complex.

A large amount of research in computer-assisted language learning CALL has been devoted to comparing traditional and blended language learning courses (Blake, et. al, 2008; Echavez-Solano, 2003; Murday, Ushida, & Chenoweth, 2008; Scida & Saury, 2006). Much of this literature either quantitatively compares blended and traditional academic outcomes or qualitatively focuses on a narrower snapshot of the blended classroom. A review of the research in this area has produced a need for theoretically backed, qualitative inquiry, which would help to understand and explain the goings-on within such academic spaces. Using two frameworks anchored in systemic functional theory, the Knowledge Framework (KF) (Mohan, 1986) coupled with social practice theory (Mohan, 2011), the current paper presents a finer-grained analysis than previous FL studies in CALL have provided. Specifically, it aims to show how the KF can help to interpret the "practice" discourse that students and teachers are using to carry out technology-mediated classroom tasks as well as the "reflection" discourse they use to relate their attitudes and ideas about technology-mediated language learning.

2   The Knowledge Framework and Social Practice Theory

The KF can be used in conjunction with social practice theory to provide the basis for relating social action and social interpretation (Mohan & Lee, 2006). Just as context adds meaning to language, language adds meaning to context (Mohan, 1986). Using the six knowledge structures (KSs) of the KF, as shown in Table 1, the action and reflection discourse produced during online and F2F tasks as well as teachers' and students' perceptions about these tasks can be better understood. By looking at not only what students *do* in the classroom, but also about what they *think* about what they do, we can also come to a greater understanding of the social practices carried out in these spaces.

Classification	Principles	Evaluation
Description	Sequence	Choice

Table 1. The Knowledge Framework.

Each KS has language features that help construct it and key visuals that accompany it. In the first column, description implies classification. In general, *description* is concerned with the who, what, and where. It asks questions about what persons, materials, equipment, items, and settings. *Classification* draws on description to answer questions about what concepts apply and how they are related to one another. In the second column, *sequence* answers questions about what happens and what happens next. It is concerned with the unfolding of the plot, the processes, procedures and routines. Sequence is linked to *principles* because causing (principles) results in a specific sequence. The principles are the cause-effect, means-end, methods and techniques, rules, norms, and strategies. Observing a sequence is more superficial than understanding a sequence or observing cause-and-effect relationships. Finally, in the third column, choice and evaluation are linked because choosing implies evaluating. *Choice* is concerned with the choices, conflicts, alternatives, dilemmas and decisions while *evaluation* pertains to the appropriate values and standards, what counts as good or bad, what the typical reasons are for choosing one object or course of action over another, and what the usual aims and goals are. These six KSs are not the only ones that might exist; however, they are of widespread use in the discourse people use to carry out a myriad of social practices.

According to Mohan (2011), a social practice is about both action and reflection. The KF distinguishes between 'reflection' (the topic) and 'action' (the speech act). While the three top boxes of the KF relate to theoretical background knowledge, the three bottom ones represent specific practical knowledge. These six KSs are "semantic patterns of the discourse knowledge, actions, artifacts, and environment of a social practice" (Mohan, 2011, p. 303). Together, they make up three sets of theory/practice (knowledge/action) pairs. The relationship between the KSs is dynamic, with theory reshaping practice and practice reshaping theory.

Few studies in CALL have used the KF and social practice theory to examine issues of language learning with technology (Mohan & Luo, 2005). Mohan and Luo emphasize the importance of systemic functional approach in CALL in order to interpret and understand the texts that students use and produce. In one of the few CALL studies that harness the KF and social practice theory, Luo (2005) explored native and non-native English-speakers' online discussion in a blended graduate seminar. This study shows how as discourse analysis tool, the KF coupled with social practice theory enable a functional analysis of participants' online

discourse. As the only one of its kind, it points to the need for additional research, especially that which uses triangulation of qualitative methods in order to compare the tasks that can be carried out within different types of blended language learning courses.

3   Methods

Two different variations of blended Spanish language courses were the objects of study for the present study. In the first course, termed *hybrid* for the purposes of this paper, F2F time was replaced by a synchronous online class using Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VOIP) in Adobe Connect™. In the second course, dubbed *blended traditional*, F2F time was supplemented with online homework tasks. Triangulated data collection within these courses included (a) 12 hours of recorded online and F2F observations, (b) approximately seven hours of in-depth interviews and (c) other textual documents, including sixteen classroom PowerPoint Presentations and eight online chat logs. The participants of this study consisted of Sr. Galvez and Sra. Fuente, the teachers of the hybrid and traditional blended courses respectively. It also included observation of 48 students, 20 from the hybrid course and 28 from the traditional blended, 12 of which agreed to participate in in-depth interviews.

For the functional analysis of texts, two tasks were chosen for comparison, both involving instruction and practice with indirect Spanish commands (ISCs). Whereas one task took place F2F in the traditional blended classroom, the other was carried out synchronously in Adobe Connect™. After the tasks, students and teachers were asked to discuss these their "theories" about such tasks during in-depth interviews. The action discourse from the tasks themselves and the reflection discourse from the interviews was the focus of the analysis, using the KF and social practice theory. Coding conventions will be consistent with those adopted in previous studies, such as Mohan and Slater (2006) and Slater and Mohan (2010). *Classification* and *description* will be identified using **bold typeface**, *principles* and *sequence* with SMALL CAPS, and *evaluation* and *choice* by underlined text.

4   Data Presentation and Discussion

Observation of the online and F2F tasks involving indirect Spanish commands (ISCs) allowed for several differences and similarities to emerge, as shown in Table 2.

Blended Traditional	Both	Hybrid
• Teacher asked for volunteers to read their homework answers	• Both tasks had two parts, a lecture followed by a homework check stage	• Teacher nominated students to read their homework answers
• Student asked a question and received explicit grammar instruction	• Students from both tasks had difficulty using correct gender and number	• Teacher used chat box to point out students' incorrect forms

Table 2. Differences and similarities between blended traditional and hybrid ISC tasks.

Both tasks began with a mini-lecture about the ISCs, which included an explanation of at least one of their two functions. Whereas Sra. Fuente explained both functions and gave examples, Sr. Galvez explained one of the functions and told students the specific subjunctive

mood in which the verb would be conjugated. Both instructors' preliminary explanations are juxtaposed in Table 3. Teacher texts are translated from Spanish.

Both Sra. Fuente and Sr. Galvez used *principles* (SMALL CAPS) in their explanations in order to explicitly state what ISCs are used for. While Sra. Fuente's explanation lasted a brief 35 seconds, Sr. Galvez's explanation using VoIP was longer, (1 minute, 23 seconds), and included various pauses. Sra. Fuente used facial expressions and hand movements to emphasize her meanings, while Sr. Galvez used other means, such as the arrow tool in Adobe Connect™ to keep the pace and make reference to different examples in the PowerPoint. Both teachers followed their explanations with a question-and-answer session. In the hybrid course, Sr. Galvez nominated students to give their answers and in the traditional blended course, Sra. Fuente asked for volunteers. Finally, students from both courses struggled to use number and gender correctly in Spanish.

Sra. Fuente (Traditional blended)	Sr. Galvez (Hybrid)
Very good, let's continue guys, indirect commands. WE USE THE INDIRECT COMMANDS WHEN ONE PERSON TELLS ANOTHER PERSON WHAT A THIRD PERSON SHOULD DO. Let Tomás do it [it: masc]. Let Tomás do it [it: fem]. ALSO, WE USE THE INDIRECT COMMANDS TO EXPRESS GOOD WISHES. 'Get well.' 'Have fun.' Okay?	*Now we pass to the indirect commands. THE INDIRECT COMMANDS IS A WAY TO DO THE SUBJUNCTIVE, subjunctive, your favorite topic. The easiest in the world. Subjunctive [typing in the chat box] we will do it every day from tomorrow onward…WHEN ONE PERSON TELLS ANOTHER A THREE SHOULD DO. I TELL SOMEONE WHAT A THIRD HAS TO DO…AND ALSO THEY ARE EXPRESSIONS.*

Table 3. A juxtaposition of Sra. Fuente and Sr. Galvez's Initial Explanation of ISCs.

After the homework had been checked, one student from Sra. Fuente's section, Tom, asked a question, stating that he thought the direct object pronoun should have been used instead of the indirect object pronoun. This gave Sra. Fuente the opportunity to use *evaluation* (underlined) to pronounce his alternative as incorrect. She the used *classification* (**boldface**) in order to better explain the difference between direct and indirect objects, as illustrated below[12]. While the original text is a mixture of Spanish and English, the Spanish has been translated.

Tom (T): Now number five. Wouldn't it be 'let him help TO THEM*', cuz 'TO the clients'?

*Sra. Fuente: THEM**, no, the sales representative helps the clients. In this case, **'the clients' is the direct object**. Okay? Okay? The sales representative helps the clients.*

T: Okay

*Sra. F: **'The clients' is the direct object, it's not indirect**. Let him (the sales rep) help him (the client). Yes, **the action is direct, that's why it's 'him'****. Okay?*

T: I got it.

This interaction between Tom and Sra. Fuente offered an opportunity to explore one of the key differences between the online and F2F tasks, namely the tendency of students in the F2F classes to ask the teacher questions in order to clarify their doubts about the contents covered in the homework. In contrast, during the two weeks of online observations, never once did a student in an online class ask a question. During the interviews, several students commented that this was because they did not feel comfortable asking questions online. Furthermore, these students said that the F2F mode offered more opportunities for understanding the

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[12] *indirect object pronoun / **direct object pronoun / LARGE CAPS indicate heightened intonation.

spoken grammar of the ISC structure. Alex, for example, said that he would prefer the F2F task because "understanding the grammatical structure is not writing it down, it's speaking it and getting the feel for how it's supposed to sound." Other students also stated that they could understand ISCs better when they were in person with the teacher, as the following interaction with Keri illustrates.

> Researcher (R): *would you like to do something like this* [the task] *in class or online? Or which would be more helpful for you to learn the…*[ISCs]

> Keri: *I would say in class, just BECAUSE YOU CAN ACTUALLY SEE THE TEACHER TEACHING IT AND SHE CAN WRITE ON THE BOARD, whereas if you'd get it wrong or something, and she usually explains it to you, like what you have to do, whereas on the online I'd kinda get confused what I would have to do*

Keri uses *choice* and *evaluation* to prefer the F2F classes over the online ones for this type of task and *principles* to offer a rationale for why. Danny reiterated this when he said he felt that although the online lessons offered him a chance to understand when he had done something wrong, he often would not understand why.

> Researcher (R): *How do you feel about this activity, if it's more effective online or F2F*

> Danny (D): *I would say in person, personally, CAUSE YOU'RE GONNA BE ABLE TO ASK QUESTIONS AND… IT MIGHT BE QUICKER ONLINE but I would say it's going to be easier in person BECAUSE IF YOU DO START GETTING THESE WRONG, HOW DO YOU KNOW ONLINE WHAT YOU'RE DOING?*

Danny's interview discourse confirms the observations of online and F2F ISC tasks. Like Keri, he used *choice* to prefer the F2F classes for this type of task and *principles* to offer justification. In the F2F class, Tom was able to ask a question about indirect and direct object pronouns to understand why he had gotten an answer wrong. Sra. Fuente was able to respond to Tom's question using the KS of *classification* to explain why his answer was wrong. In the online classes; however, Danny's and other students' reluctance to ask questions precluded them from understanding why some answers were wrong. Whereas teachers from both delivery formats offered their students positive *evaluation* (e.g., "very good"), only in the F2F task did Sra. Fuente have the opportunity to use other KSs alongside *evaluation* to offer more robust justification for why a certain answer was erroneous.

Students' discourse during ISC tasks and their reflection about these tasks raises questions about if students are learning the ISC structures and if so, what about these tasks in online and F2F classes are helping them to do that? In particular, Alex's point about the speaking and reading aloud of ISCs helping him to understand the grammatical structure is noteworthy because it shows that he was conscious of Spanish speakers' use of ISCs to make meaning with language, as well as his desire to use them to this end. Debbie's interview discourse, below, conveys a similar viewpoint to that of Alex, in which she states that she would like to be able to use ISCs in real life, for conversation.

> Researcher (R): *What do you think about this type of task?*

> Debbie (D): *I don't really like this type of task as much **because they just kind of are 'spit out an answer'**. I mean, for people who don't understand how these* [ISCs] *work, I think they're great to start out with, but I feel that's all we did was this kind of activities, and I really want to actually be able to use this stuff in a conversation and I feel that* [the task] *didn't teach me how. IT JUST TAUGHT ME HOW THOSE ARE PUT TOGETHER and actually use it, and it's activities like that I'm used to, but they feel like I know how to do it but I don't know how to use it in normal, everyday stuff*

> R: *Okay, can you think of an activity that would better help you to learn how to use these?*

> D: *I don't know, some kind of role-playing…BECAUSE IT WOULD GIVE YOU A CHANCE TO USE OTHER STUFF YOU KNOW AND TRY TO MAKE IT WORK IN*

Debbie's use of verbs like *want, feel* and *think* makes apparent her *choice* and *evaluation* of roleplays as superior for FL learning. This brings up the issue of whether or not a roleplay or other types of tasks would better prepare or allow students to use the FL. It would appear, at least on the surface, that engaging students in a roleplay would be a logical follow-up to more form-focused tasks; however, it remains to be seen if such tasks are feasible for online delivery modes.

5 Conclusion

This paper has juxtaposed two tasks that teachers from different types of blended Spanish course used and examined students' reflection discourse about the quality of these tasks as learning tools. Social practice theory and the Knowledge Framework (KF) permitted a fine-grained analysis of the resultant action discourse from such tasks coupled with students' reflection discourse during in-depth interviews. Together, they facilitated a deeper interpretation of what students *know* (i.e. their personal theories) about technology-based tasks and what they *do* during such tasks. This knowing/doing or theory/practice duality helped explain participants' theories about certain blended FL tasks. The findings of this paper in particular point to the setbacks of using certain tasks, such as the ones described for learning ISCs, for use with online delivery modes. One major question that remains pertains to how other types of blended FL tasks are playing a role in students' language development. While this study has focused on participants' theories and the tasks themselves, future research must examine the role of different blended FL tasks in students' Spanish literacy development.

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