Blended learning: meeting the needs of diversified Chinese language learners  
2005 SITE Proposal (Full paper)

In this paper, I aim to demonstrate the power of technology and blended learning in an intermediate Chinese language class in meeting the needs of diversified learners and providing them with effective instruction in a Mid-west university.

The students in this Chinese class are very diversified in the following major aspects:

- Age---ranged from 13 to 24;
- Education level---ranged from freshman in high school to college senior;
- Family background—Chinese heritage and none heritage families;
- Previous Chinese learning experiences --- vary a lot;
- Native languages—at least five different languages

To educate the diversified learners in this class has been a big challenge. A blended course combined with online learning and conventional face-to-face instruction has been developed for these learners. WebCT in Chinese is used to support the online learning environment, and the face-to-face instruction takes place in a digitally-enhanced classroom well-equipped with computers, Smart Board and Internet access. A technology-rich learning environment is provided for the students.

This action-oriented research project is still in process. This semester-long research project is part of a larger one which ambitiously aims to address some major limits of the existing research literature on the effectiveness of technology uses in language education identified in Zhao’s comprehensive review (2003): (a) the number of systemic, well-designed empirical evaluative studies of the effects of technology uses in language teaching is very small, (b) the settings of instruction where the studies were conducted were limited to higher education and adult learners, (c) the languages studied were limited to common foreign languages and EFL/ESL, and d) experiments were often short-terms about one or two aspects of language learning (e.g. vocabulary or grammar).

Further, due to the fact that Chinese language is uniquely different from English and other commonly taught foreign languages such as Spanish, German and French in the U.S. in man ways, Chinese teachers are believed to have been confronting a challenge more complex than those facing teachers of any other foreign language in the American educational system. The research literature on the use of technology in Chinese language instruction is very sparse. Another specific urgent issue occurring in the field of Chinese a foreign language is the education of heritage learners who are from families in which different Chinese languages/regional dialects are spoken. Most heritage learners usually demonstrate relatively higher proficiency level in listening and speaking, but very limited or even zero level in reading and writing abilities.

Not many universities have the luxury of instructors and staff to offer enough Chinese courses for heritage learners and non-heritage learners separately. Heritage and non-heritage learners usually are mixed in the classes. In this context, the high school students, because of Chinese language courses are not offered in the local school
students, come to take this course with the college students. Their learning styles and personalities present another dimension of challenge.

For this specific, major research question is how blended learning works in a Chinese language class of diversified learners. I have been working as the course designer, course instructor and participant researcher. The research data will include students’ reflective journals, quiz and test scores, chat logs, discussions, online login records, and interviews.

Major parts of the paper will include the design rationale of the course, review of the learning theory and second language acquisition theories, research methodology, research findings and discussions.

Although most of the attention will be given to research findings and discussions, pedagogical innovations, if any, implications on further research and instruction will be provided as well. Because WebCT did not release the Chinese language plug-in until the beginning of April, 2004, as the first users of WebCT in Chinese, I will share our experiences, both highlights and lowlights, with the use of WebCT in Chinese.

Reference