Benefits and challenges of a hybrid flexible EAP program

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Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic caused changes in modes of instructional delivery in Canadian colleges and universities when many moved to fully remote classes in March 2020. Then, in September 2021, as a part of the Return to Campus Plan at the University of Guelph, the English Language Programs (ELP) pivoted to a program that combined in-person students with remote students living outside of Canada. To ensure a smooth transition and to provide a quality learning environment, the academic team needed to figure out how to teach these two groups of students by taking into consideration multiple factors, such as students' learning needs and preferences, as well as the instructional teams' knowledge, skills, and experience. This paper provides the learning context and rationale for the program teaching mode, how the learning hours were planned and assigned, the benefits and challenges, and some practical guidelines for instructors.

Learning context

If there has been one common theme throughout the pandemic, it has been a need to be flexible (and calm) despite an ever-evolving environment. As we approached the Fall 2021 semester, it became increasingly clear that we faced much uncertainty about how the classes would operate. Since March 2020, we had become used to teaching the students fully remotely using an online platform. However, we now had the unprecedented scenario of teaching two distinct groups of students, one in-person and the other remotely, at the same time. Even as the first day of class approached, questions remained about how many students would study in-person vs. remotely (and whether their status would change throughout the semester), classroom capacity, how instructors and students in both groups would interact, vaccine requirements, physical distancing, and so on.

Students' needs and study preferences

The first consideration was the students' learning needs, skills, and study preferences. By the time classes began, we knew that most of the ELP students were able to study in-person. However, a small portion of the students were unable to study in-person for a variety of reasons, such as difficulties associated with traveling

to Canada or coming to campus. Students were informed that they had the flexibility to study either in-person or remotely, and that we would accommodate the remote learning students to the best of our ability so that they would be provided with a quality learning experience. Of the students studying remotely, a few were living in Ontario, but most were living overseas in China, South Korea, and Thailand. All students had previous experience studying remotely, and so were familiar with using many videoconferencing tools. Given the time difference between Guelph, Ontario and these countries, and given that most of the students were studying in-person, we decided that the in-person and synchronous remote learning hours should be in the morning, which was preferable for the in-person students, and should end before noon before it would become quite late in the evening for the remote students.

Instructor experience

In addition, it was important to take into consideration the instructor team's ability to transition to this new teaching mode. We were fortunate to have a highly experienced team of instructors who had already developed many strategies during the previous 18 months teaching remote students online and who could pivot to teaching this combined in-person and remote environment. The instructors had experience using the online learning management system, called CourseLink, which is a Desire2Learn (Brightspace) learning management system used by the University of Guelph for teaching. They would continue to use Virtual Classroom, which is a tool available in CourseLink or Microsoft (MS) Teams to connect students studying in-person with those studying remotely via-webcam and microphone. Students could engage with their classmates and instructors both in-person and synchronously online during class time (e.g., for lessons, group discussions, presentations, etc.), and they were expected to participate in learning activities asynchronously outside of class (for e.g., taking a quiz, doing exercises on a course textbook's online learning management system (LMS)). For assessments, instructors would continue to use the Quiz tool for creating online quizzes and exams or use the textbook LMS quizzes online. To manage academic integrity, instructors used Respondus + Monitor, which is an online exam proctoring tool, and Turnitin to check for plagiarism in submitted written assignments. Other tools at their disposal included MS OneDrive, which could be used for sharing files for peer collaboration, and the Peer Evaluation Assessment and Review (PEAR) tool from the University of Guelph, which is used for providing written peer feedback on assignments. In-person students would buy textbooks and remote students would buy the e-book version of the textbooks.

In short, the instructors were confident using the tools, and they just needed to figure out how to use those tools in this new teaching mode.

Teaching mode and name

The ELP academic team gave much thought to how to name this new teaching mode. When other institutions pivoted in the Fall 2021 to a combination of in-person and remote learning modes, they adopted numerous terms to name their programs, many of which the reader may be familiar with: Blended, BlendSync (see BlendSync.org for more information), Hybrid, HyFlex (see HyFlex.org for more information), and so on. It has been apparent that numerous terms are being used by institutions to describe the same teaching mode, and in some cases, the same terms are being used to describe distinctly different teaching modes.

Of these terms, HyFlex might seem to be the best term to describe this multi-modal way of teaching. The HyFlex teaching mode is defined by the HyFlex Learning Community as "a classroom experience and at least one online learning experience for students to choose among" (HyFlex Learning Community, 2021). However, the HyFlex Learning Community recommends that it should include a fully asynchronous component, allowing students to study the course completely independently without interacting with the in-person or synchronous remote students. While the ELP courses did provide extensive asynchronous learning activities, such as discussion boards, exercises on the course LMS, and online quizzes, they did not include a fully asynchronous component, so we agreed that HyFlex was not quite a suitable name. However, the delivery was a hybrid of in-person and remote delivery, and it did require instructors and students to be flexible. For the purpose of this article, we will refer to the teaching mode we used as Hybrid Flexible.

Planning and assigning of learning hours

Given the context of great uncertainty about the Fall semester, it was critical that we planned for every contingency and remained flexible. We had the benefit of much experience teaching students remotely, a highly experienced instructor team, and we had collected feedback and formal surveys about the students' study needs and preferences. With this information in mind, two of the three authors of this article who were assigned to teach the Level 9 & 10 courses chose to use the curriculum which had been developed for a fully online distance education as a basis for the Fall Level 9 & 10 Hybrid Flexible courses.

The ELP academic team met several times prior to the program start and created a plan. They decided that the synchronous and asynchronous learning hours could be assigned differently according to numerous factors, such as the course and skill (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) being taught, as well as students' time zone differences, expectations, and level of comfort with in-person learning, etc. That said, the instructors did share some common ways of assigning the Hybrid Flexible class hours.

During in-person and synchronous class time, both groups of students would work collaboratively in pairs or groups using Virtual Classroom or MS Teams to practice newly introduced language skills, receive

instructor and peer feedback, and to discuss questions generated from assignments. Synchronous/in-person assessments were interactive, such as, group presentations and debates, which provided further opportunities for both remote and in-person students to interact and build community.

During asynchronous class time, students would post on discussion boards (e.g., sharing their homework answers and reflecting on the course content), complete self-directed learning tasks (e.g., independent grammar study, course learning goal journals), provide written peer feedback, and prepare for group presentations and debates. Asynchronous assessments were typically completed individually, such as online quizzes and exams, individual recorded video presentations, and vocabulary journals. As well, instructors offered office hours for individual student feedback and support.

Benefits

The benefits we observed in the implementation of this Hybrid Flexible mode were students' increased learning flexibility, enhanced autonomy, and increased accessibility to learning resources.

Being able to choose between in-person or remote study provided significant flexibility for both remote and in-person students. Students who were not able to come to Guelph for various reasons benefited from having the option to learn remotely in their home. Even the in-person students benefited from being able to choose to participate remotely from time to time due to unexpected changes in their lives (e.g., family issues, health concerns, etc.). Several students mentioned that they appreciated having the flexibility to access classes regardless of the geographical locations and uncertainties in their lives. Similarly, in their case study, Bower et al. noted the benefits to both groups, which included "having remote students flexibly access lessons" and "being exposed to a broader range of views and ideas" (2015, p. 13).

In addition to flexibility in participation, the Hybrid Flexible mode provided students with flexibility in time management. The instructors provided flexible time ranges for the students to complete individual assessments. For example, they were able to choose a time to complete an online quiz or provide written peer feedback using the online peer review application PEAR. The student survey feedback collected at the end of semester showed that they appreciated the convenience offered in this flexible scheduling. For example, one student commented, "I would always prefer to have in-person lectures, though the thing that I would always wish to be online is quizzes and test mainly because I can have a controlled environment where I am alone, whereas, in-person quizzes and tests would be in a class with other students meaning more chance for noise." Another student commented, "It'll be convenient for students if the exams and quizzes are online."

Finally, two other benefits of this learning mode were the increased level of student interactions, and the greater accessibility of learning resources. Since the remote and in-person students were in different time zones, it was often challenging for them to interact with each other outside of the synchronous class hours. For this reason, the instructors set up a discussion forum on CourseLink and encouraged the students to collaborate with each other asynchronously to reinforce what they had learned in class. In the reading and writing courses, the instructor checked the students' posts and responses every week, recorded their participation, replied to some of the posts, and summarized the interactions during class. This resulted in an enhanced level of interaction between the two groups and helped build community. Videoconferencing, through Virtual Classrooms or MS Teams, allowed the remote students to receive immediate attention from their instructors, and this synchronous online interaction between students "reduce[ed] learner isolation through real-time dialog and co-construction team activities" (Power & Vaughan, 2010, p. 23). When students met online using MS Teams, they could also turn on live captions to gain a better understanding of discussions. Similar to Stewart et al. (2011), we found that the communication and interactions through videoconferencing technologies enhanced a dynamic collaborative effort among group members. In addition to this increased level of interaction, the course learning materials, such as course outlines, weekly learning contents, class PowerPoint presentations, assignments/assessments descriptions, and learning resources were posted on CourseLink, providing enhanced accessibility for all students.

Challenges

While the instructors and students experienced many benefits in this teaching mode, there were several notable challenges in the learning environment.

Technology: Webcam and audio

Technology is undeniably a key component of the Hybrid Flexible teaching mode, and problems with technology can greatly impact the ability to create and maintain an effective language learning environment. Technological problems tend to impact international students whose first language is not English more significantly (Day & Verhaart, 2016).

One of the most significant technological challenges we experienced was how to best use the webcam in class. In our case, the webcam was either connected externally to the instructor's laptop via USB cable or built-in the instructor's laptop. As White et al. (2010) found, ensuring that the instructor could be in the field of view of the webcam in the class was problematic, as was the level of visibility of in-person students for the remote students. Remote students were projected in the classroom on a screen and that they could be easily seen by the in-person students, but the webcam used in the classroom could not show all the in-person students or with sufficient detail when doing whole class activities. During pair or group work, this

was not really an issue since all students could turn on their webcams when working in the breakout rooms. However, this created another barrier for the instructor as it was challenging to monitor all the remote and in-person groups equally. This became even more challenging when remote students did not turn on their webcams, either because of student choice or connectivity difficulties.

Other significant challenges were caused by the use of and interactions between in-person and remote student laptop microphones and speakers. Occasionally, the voices from the classroom speakers were distorted, and maintaining the correct volume levels proved to be a challenge. At other times, voices of remote students were too loud, too soft, or unclear. The quality and placement of the laptop microphones used for the in-person students was also key to ensure the students' and the instructor's voices could be heard by students online. For example, remote students had difficulty hearing in-person students' responses, which often meant the instructor had to move their laptop microphone closer to the student speaking. Moreover, audio feedback could also be a significant problem when a student's laptop or phone microphone in class was on at the same time as the instructor's microphone.

Lastly, remote students' internet connectivity and bandwidth restrictions impacted both the audio and video quality resulting in little to no ability to hear or be heard in class. This concern was also noted by Park and Bonk (2007) in their study of a Hybrid Flexible learning graduate education technology class, and by White et al. (2010). This was particularly a problem when conducting and assessing live presentations done both in-person and remotely. For example, remote students' audio was occasionally cut off when presenting, or their video would freeze. This problem presented less frequently when working in breakout rooms.

Instructor classroom preparation and multi-tasking

Another challenge for the instructors was the need to adequately prepare before class and to multi-task multiple pieces of equipment during class to ensure a collaborative and participatory learning environment. The classrooms assigned were not designed for a Hybrid Flexible class, so instructors needed to quickly develop skills using various technologies such as the laptop, projector, document camera, microphone, webcam, and creating an optimal seating arrangement. Instructors made sure to arrive well ahead of the start of each class to set up all this equipment. Technological glitches happened a few times throughout the semester, so preparing alternative lesson plans, documents for students to access offline, and backup equipment (a backup laptop and headphones) proved to be essential. Despite these efforts, a balance between class activities and technology-based activities was at times difficult to achieve and could even become a distraction. White et al. (2010) also noted that it is important for the instructor not to overly constrain the in-class lesson activities with a focus on technology that are susceptible to many problems. This multitasking created a challenge for the instructors to keep the learning experience engaging and

balanced for all students. At times, the instructors felt a bit overwhelmed as they tried to ensure that they were visible and audible to both the in-person and remote students through the laptop, responding to backchannel chat, email, and any online collaborating tools like Microsoft OneDrive, and so on. Inevitably, there were times when one group felt they were being neglected. Bower et al. (2015) stated that this extra focus of the instructor on remote students was identified as a problem by in-person students in their study as well.

Student collaboration

While instructors provided many options to encourage student collaboration, it was often hindered not only because of the technological problems noted above, but also because students were living in different time zones, and this problem became more pronounced over the semester. When students needed to prepare for group or pair assignments outside of class hours, it was often difficult to find a time when all could meet, as there was only a small window during the day when all were awake, and this proved to be very frustrating for the students. Another issue was encountered when some remote students would not turn on their microphone or webcam (due to a variety of issues), and some in-person students were at times reluctant to work with remote students in breakout rooms. Stewart et al. (2011) also identified the same problem and stressed the difficulty of ensuring effective interactions between in-person and remote students. Instructors spent part of the class time encouraging remote students to turn on their mics when participation was required, but this became tiring. Park and Bonk (2007) also mentioned the increased effort required by the instructor to expend additional class time and energy encouraging remote students to contribute as well as stimulating meaningful communication and collaboration between the two groups.

Student technological skills and platform use

While most students came well-equipped to use various technologies, we found both in-person and remote students needed time to become familiar with the online tools required to participate in the course and to have the self-efficacy to complete the asynchronous and independent learning portions of the course. White et al. (2010) also identified the importance for remote students to develop technological skills and become familiar with the communication platform, as well as the importance of the reliability and functionality of the system used. Furthermore, both White et al. (2010) and Szeto & Cheng (2016) have stated that in-person students, too, need time and help to adjust to the technological demands and become familiar with the online tools. Another issue that arose unexpectedly was that some overseas students were unable to access and use Virtual Classroom, which necessitated a change to MS Teams after the start of the course. Student self-efficacy in this teaching mode was also a very important consideration because, in order for students to succeed, they needed to have or develop the confidence to solve technological problems. Shen

et al. (2013), in their study of online learners and self-efficacy, indicated that "students' self-judgment about their capabilities to complete an online course is critical for their satisfaction with an online course" (p. 17). Initially, both remote and in-class students expressed uncertainty about how to use the digital tools to access the materials and quizzes, but as they progressed through the semester, and as they became more familiar with the digital tools used in class, that uncertainty diminished. A final important factor we noted was that this learning mode did require a willingness and acceptance from the in-class students to work part of the time online with the remote students even though they were physically present in class with other students.

Discussion

After completing a full semester teaching using this Hybrid Flexible mode, we would like to highlight some key points for consideration.

Classroom and technology preparation

Instructor awareness of what technologies are available in the classroom and online and competence using the technologies played an important role in the effective delivery of course content. The program devoted one day of practice before the term started, which provided an opportunity for instructors and administrators to anticipate and resolve and technological issues. Before class starts, it is also important to arrive early to ensure that all the equipment is set up and to prepare to adapt to different situations; for example, the microphone and webcam need to be set up differently for class discussions and for presentations, and the chairs had to be moved so everyone could be viewable on camera.

It is important to consider which platform to use. Some students had fewer connection issues using a specific platform, and instructors and students also had preferences with certain features, for example, having captions, smooth and timely transitions to and from breakout rooms, viewing the main room while in breakout rooms, and being able to see more students on the screen. Individual instructors in the program chose a platform based on these criteria often with student input. In the program, a few instructors moved from Virtual Classroom to MS Teams due to enhanced features and fewer connection issues.

Student engagement

Student willingness to accept this teaching mode impacted the level of their engagement. Initially, a few in-person students were reluctant to work with remote students, but over time as all students became accustomed to this mode, this reluctance diminished. Consequently, both in-class and remote students need to understand the benefits and the flexibility this mode provides, and this requires some explanation from staff pre-arrival and by instructors once the program starts. In the classes, the students appreciated the

option to choose their mode of learning every class based on their needs. Some students chose to study remotely because of illness, family issues, or vaccination status.

Student collaboration

The third key point to consider is how to create flexibility in class for group work to reduce the stress students faced when trying to schedule meetings outside of class with fellow students in different time zones. Even though the course feedback survey showed that most students were very satisfied with their level of collaboration, one student commented in the course feedback form, "I hope teachers can consider the time difference when arranging group learning activities. Because some students affect group activities because of a time difference." When given more time during class hours to meet to work on group assignments, students were appreciative and also benefitted from the immediate instructor feedback.

Conclusion

In the Fall of 2021, the University of Guelph English Language Programs needed to move from a fully remote learning mode to a Hybrid Flexible mode based on student and programming needs. This move required significant planning, preparation, practice, and collaboration by the instructors and students to meet the course learning outcomes. During the implementation of this new teaching mode, both instructors and students experienced benefits and challenges. Because of the challenges of the pandemic, it was necessary to experiment with more flexible and adaptive modes for English language teaching. In the future, the skills the instructors have acquired in this Hybrid Flexible mode of teaching will contribute to future innovation in the program's offerings.

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