

HyFlex LINC literacy: Challenges and successes

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Literacy instruction in the context of Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada has traditionally been conducted exclusively in physical classrooms, with paper and pencil, worksheets, binders, notebooks, and perhaps the weekly Computer-Assisted Language Learning lesson in an on-site computer lab. The thought of teaching English to students who may have little to no schooling, reading, or writing skills in even their first language in an online setting seemed a remarkably daunting task, and still does to many in the field. “Wait, what, how?” is a common refrain when the topic of virtual Literacy instruction comes up at industry events. As noted in *Evaluation of the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) Program* (IRCC, 2011), for the most part, LINC has been a classroom-based program since its founding in 1992, with approximately 95% of students attending the program either in a standard school classroom or a room in a commercial building. But of course, as with most things employment- and education-related, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada in early 2020 changed everything. Due to the sudden disturbance caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, educators had to rethink traditional teaching methodologies, from public schools in South Korea and Mexico to LINC and English for Academic Purposes schools in Canada. This new reality encouraged the Caledon Community Services (CCS) LINC program to not only adopt new tools for remote learning but also reimagine education delivery to better serve its diverse newcomer student body as teaching transitioned back to in-person instruction. CCS implemented the beginnings of its HyFlex model in 2021, combining in-person, virtual, synchronous, and asynchronous learning. With trial and error, improvement, and expansion, the HyFlex model remains the foundation of the CCS LINC program today. With this hybrid, flexible approach, students can choose how and where they want to participate. We have students located locally in Caledon, who may want to walk to their Monday or Friday class, or benefit from CCS transportation shuttling them to school if living some distance from the location. But also, those learners as far flung as Brantford, Waterloo, North York, and even Ottawa, who are only ever able to participate virtually. Using the camera and microphone technology embedded into the physical classroom, all students in all corners of the province can see and hear each other, and participate physically and digitally together, as they communicate orally and complete worksheets on paper or PDF. The fact that students are receiving the same curriculum and instruction, with the same teacher, whether in-person or



online, also enables them to attend classes during inclement weather, when under the weather, or despite potential physical or mobility challenges, encouraging a high level of attendance and participation.

Another major component of the evolution of the HyFlex module was the introduction of the digital navigator position. This role is most crucial for online/HyFlex classes. The digital navigator is the bridge that connects teachers, students, and the Learning Management System. Learning a language is not an easy task, and if students struggle with the use of technology, their journey may end before it gets a chance to sail. In this case, the digital navigator helps students become comfortable using online platforms like Zoom, Google Classroom, Ellii, and Kahoot!. The role of digital navigator does not end here, as the students are made to feel comfortable so that they may contact the digital navigator at any time the need arises. Meetings with students are scheduled regularly, and digital skills are webinars conducted monthly. WhatsApp homework groups are created for students of the same language so that learners can assist each other with asynchronous tasks. The digital navigator also assesses students' digital capabilities and device availability. If it is found that the students would benefit from more modern computers to take full advantage of Zoom and other educational technology, the digital navigator is able to provide laptop loans through third party organizations and support the students and their families in becoming familiar with attending classes and completing asynchronous tasks.

While teaching Pre-CLB language skills or foundation level reading and writing to online students was once deemed impossible, when there were no other alternatives, teachers found ways to deal with the challenges and came up with numerous strategies and successes. The main challenges encountered with this new approach included how to use paper-based materials in an online setting, review students' work and provide them with feedback, teach mixed levels, and conduct assessments. The remainder of this article will delve into how we, CCS Literacy and Pre-CLB instructors, endeavoured to address these challenges, as well as note some best practices for teaching Literacy learners.

Using paper-based materials in an online setting

As a new literacy instructor with CCS, adapting to HyFlex instruction was a definite learning curve. Previous experience with instruction, during a pre-pandemic teaching practicum, had been almost entirely in a brick-and-mortar school, with physical textbooks and printed materials. Additionally, many of the readily available and well-produced Literacy-level modules, which are aligned with Canadian Language Benchmarks and compatible with Portfolio-based Language Assessment, available on Tutela or through other organizations such as Literacy Centre of Expertise, were designed primarily for use in a physical classroom. How could these very relevant module PDFs on topics such as winter clothing or recycling be useful for synchronous



work on Zoom, or for asynchronous tasks in our Learning Management System Google Classroom? For the in-person students' synchronous time, of course they could be printed on paper and handed out in class. Regarding asynchronous writing, the instructor can print the pages as individual or multi-page PDFs, as required by the task, and import them into individual assignments in the LMS. The instructors have both teacher and student accounts for Google Classroom so that they can see every assignment how a student would see it, which helps to identify and troubleshoot potential issues. This approach also enables the teacher to demonstrate how to complete and submit each assignment synchronously so that learners have continuous exposure to the ways PDFs can be written, drawn, or typed on, and the steps that need to be taken to hand in their work. A very useful PDF editor that can open files directly in Google Classroom is LuminPDF, as when logged in with the same Google account the work syncs the student's edits automatically. As soon as the assignment is handed in, the instructor can see the work with no additional file downloads or uploads required. And what if an assignment involved cutting up paper with scissors to match sentence strips with images? One way to recreate this activity is to use Microsoft's snipping tool to digitally cut out sentence strips and associated pictures and paste them into a Google Slide. In a Google Slide assignment, learners can drag and drop matching words next to pictures like paper on a table. For those listening tasks that required students to listen to audio before answering questions, the instructor can use a free tool such as Audio Editor Online to cut out the relevant audio from large mp3 files that accompany many modules, export as mp3, and upload the audio into the LMS along with the accompanying PDF worksheet. Another option is for the teacher to read appropriate scripts while recording in Microsoft Sound Recorder and upload those files with the connected writing files.

Reviewing student work

Another challenge identified was how to review student work and provide feedback. For students attending in-person, the instructor is easily able to view a pupil's writing at their desk. For virtual review, another option is to screenshare the PDF or show a Zoom Whiteboard and have the learners copy the writing in their notebooks. They can then show their work via their device camera and receive immediate, constructive feedback from the instructor. Formative assessment may be conducted and areas for improvement identified in the moment. If it is noticed that the tail of a lowercase *g* or *q* does not go down below the line as it should, for example, the student is given the opportunity to re-write the letters on the spot until correct, increasing the likelihood that this skill will solidify, with repetition. Clients and teachers also participate in WhatsApp groups for each individual class. They can send pictures of their work in WhatsApp and receive timely guidance, which is especially effective when it comes to reading comprehension.



Mixed-level learners

LINC classes typically include students with diverse levels of literacy and digital proficiency. With some students struggling with technology and others with literacy skills, LINC instructors need to be ready to resolve the continually arising issues while keeping the class engaging and interactive. “In HyFlex learning environments, engagement can be particularly challenging due to the diverse modes of participation, such as in-person, online synchronous, and online asynchronous” (Beatty, 2019). Students with low literacy often struggle with comprehension, making them overly dependent on translation applications. Those with limited technological skills, on the other hand, find it difficult to navigate Zoom and the LMS. If these two core challenges are addressed, the remaining issues become more manageable.

Technological skills can be developed with the support of a digital navigator. An initial step is helping new students practice joining Zoom meetings multiple times, so they feel confident and less overwhelmed when attending their actual LINC classes. Students with limited technological skills are also given a transition period of 15 to 30 days to complete asynchronous work, rather than being rushed.

Students with limited literacy or comprehension challenges benefit greatly from peer support. To reduce anxiety, instructors adopt a flexible approach, allowing occasional use of students’ first language, especially when introducing new vocabulary. More advanced students are encouraged to assist their peers by explaining concepts in their own words. The use of visuals, gestures, and peer collaboration helps students feel safe, welcomed, and less reliant on translation apps.

To further support asynchronous learning, instructors should join platforms such as ELLI or Google Classroom as students. Completing homework tasks together as a class using student accounts helps learners gain confidence and complete assignments independently, without relying on family members.

Conducting assessments

It is also important to make students feel comfortable in the class setting, so they are not scared of making mistakes. It needs to be manifested that mistakes are the way to learning. Errors enable instructors to adapt, modify, and plan lessons to support learners. Students should also be encouraged to complete their homework independently so teachers can accurately assess their progress, especially in HyFlex settings where family members or AI tools may otherwise be used for support. One effective way to address the challenge of work completed with family support is to conduct regular formative assessments.

It is also essential to keep students informed about their progress, as this helps celebrate their achievements, motivate them, and support ongoing improvement. To ensure that students understand the assessment



results and are working on the right track, one-on-one meetings are held every month. Both their progress and assignments are shared with them verbally as well as translated into their first language to ensure they understand. If they have any questions or suggestions, the student is encouraged to share in their first language so the instructor can understand using a translation app. This, as well as keeping a record of students' work on Excel sheets, helps instructors evaluate progress as well as write progress reports.

Additionally, when conducting summative assessments, instructors can recreate paper-based rubrics as Google Classroom rubrics by inputting the same criteria as listed on PDFs, with the same criterion descriptions, values, and target scores. In this way, marks are easily inputted and communicated to students via email. Private comments can also be added for further feedback on which criteria were well met, as well as things to be worked on for further improvement.

Best practices

To conclude, though each instructor may find different ways to navigate and ensure students' success, here we would like to share some of the best practices that worked well for us. The first and foremost is having a consistent class format, so the students know exactly what to expect in the class, and they are not overwhelmed. For example, the class may begin with each student greeting each other, or the instructor playing jeopardy, or guess-the-word games reviewing the vocabulary learnt in previous classes. Another important, highly recommended practice is teaching them clarification strategies, such as *can you repeat* and *I don't know*, otherwise they find it hard to express any issues they may be having in the class. Teaching them real-world, meaningful skills that they can immediately apply in their immediate settings keep them motivated and provides a way to practice the skills. These tasks should be reviewed, repeated, and recycled so the students feel confident. Teaching Literacy students in a HyFlex setting can be successfully carried out by having a positive mind-set, supportive digital navigator and management, and equipping students with basic technological and literacy skills needed. This is the most rewarding and meaningful experience to equip the students with literacy and technological skills which enable them to not just survive but thrive in Canada in the years to come.



References

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Author Bios



Javeria is an experienced English language educator with over a decade of teaching experience in the areas of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for General Purposes, and English as a Second Language (ESL). She joined Caledon Community Services as a LINC instructor in 2025. Javeria has taught a wide range of proficiency levels in both in-person and online settings, with a strong interest in integrating technology to create interactive and engaging learning environments. She holds a Master's degree in applied Linguistics and is a certified Ontario Certified English Language Teacher.



Rowan is a former newspaper writer and experienced English language professional with almost two decades of work in the TESL field, including two years as a LINC Literacy Instructor with Caledon Community Services. With extensive experience in virtual learning and teaching, and a keen interest in employing technology in a HyFlex setting, Rowan strives to make every class accessible and engaging while assisting students in developing digital and literacy skills. Rowan is an Ontario Certified English Language Teacher with an MEd and Bachelor of Journalism degree.