

HYBRID LEARNING FROM A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE: CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the International Balkan University (IBU) adopted a hybrid educational mode during the academic year of 2021-2022, which combined face-to-face classes for local students with online classes for the foreign students. The aim of the study is to gain insight into teachers' experience with English hybrid learning with large groups and provide recommendations for more effective hybrid classes. A qualitative study with 5 English course instructors at IBU, Skopje, North Macedonia, was conducted to answer the two research questions: 1) What are the main challenges teachers face when teaching English to large groups during hybrid classes? and 2) What are some possible ways of making English hybrid classes more effective? The interview results indicate that the main challenges include technical problems, lack of interaction and difficulties with effective class and time management. Teachers suggest having assistants for better time and class management, shorter classes and parallel activities for online and face-to-face students.

Key words: *hybrid learning, teachers' perspective, large classes, pandemic.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The International Balkan University (IBU) in Skopje, North, Macedonia, adopted a hybrid educational mode for the academic year of 2021-2022. The model was a combination of face-to-face (F2F) classes for local students with online classes for the foreign students. There were two reasons for choosing the hybrid model: 1) overcoming the health challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic; and 2) only a third of IBU students are domestic, while the rest are foreign students, coming from Turkey, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Austria and Germany, as well as Erasmus students from around the world.

The term 'hybrid learning' refers to the combination of "face-to-face instruction with computer mediated instruction" (Graham, 2006:5). Different terms are used in literature: 'hybrid learning', 'blended learning', 'technology-mediated instruction', 'mixed-mode instruction', 'web-enhanced instruction', and 'online-merge-offline' (OMO) (Martyn, 2003, Tsai et al., 2015).

The research was conducted in a university setting, where classes are held synchronously for both online and face-to-face students. The domestic students were obliged to attend classes with physical presence, whereas the foreign students were given a choice between online and F2F presence. Most of the foreign students decided to stay in their native country and join the lessons online. The university used the Zoom platform for video conferencing, including other digital tools such as the EVOLI tool and exam.net.

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the entire education process was conducted online worldwide. Substantial research has been done on effective ways of enhancing online teaching principles and techniques. However, during the second year of the pandemic, many schools and universities used the hybrid educational model, combining on-site with online lessons in a synchronous mode. There is an insufficient number of articles on teachers' perspectives on hybrid learning in the pandemic and post-pandemic world. The purpose of the study is to fill that research gap by providing insight into the challenges educators face when teaching on-site and remote students simultaneously.

The article aims to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the main challenges teachers face when teaching hybrid classes? and
2. What are some possible ways of making English hybrid classes more effective?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Educators should focus on three key factors when designing hybrid courses to increase the effectiveness of hybrid classes: time, space and interaction. Classes are typically shorter than traditional classroom instruction as course instructors often replace the instructional time with online learning activities (Kurthen & Smith, 2005/2006). Space is divided into cyberspace and physical classrooms, which coexist in hybrid learning. The two types of space have a significant impact on interaction in the classroom, which is now manifold (teacher - all students; teacher -students in the classroom; teacher - online students; F2F students - F2F students; F2F - online students; and online students with other online students).

The benefits of hybrid learning

Flexibility is one of the frequently noted advantages of hybrid learning (Wang et al., 2018; Amoroso, 2014; Stewart, 2008; Hijazi et al. 2006) and “the need for connecting remote individual students is increasing as the population in higher and adult education is getting more diverse” (Raes et al, 2020, p. 2). It is convenient for students who work and have families as it is time-saving and cost-effective (Zhou & Li, 2019; Li,2020). Teachers also have the freedom to tailor-make the course syllabus in order to cater for the various needs and abilities of their students. In addition, course instructors are encouraged to find new ways of using digital tools in creative ways.

The challenges of hybrid learning

The hybrid educational model entails challenges for both teachers and students. Teachers have to devise new ways of creating an engaging learning setting, which is more flexible than fully online or fully on-site classes (Raes et al, 2020). This involves spending a significant amount of time developing their computer skills by utilizing rather sophisticated digital tools. The lack of adequate training and written policies does not alleviate the new types of hardships teachers face in the post-pandemic world of education. Students, on the other hand, need to become more autonomous and change their roles from passive recipients of “didactical presented knowledge to self responsible initiators and organisers of learning” (Graf & Motamedi 2002, p. 154).

Technical and pedagogical aspects need to be considered when planning hybrid classes. The former plays a crucial role in maintaining the quality of hybrid classes. Several studies indicate that the lack of visibility or interaction with teachers has a negative impact on student engagement (Irvine et al, 2013; Joy et al, 2013). The latter mainly refers to interaction in the classroom. Pre-pandemic research indicates that online students feel a certain ‘sense of distance towards their teacher and their face-to-face classmates’ and lack

of group membership because of the physical separation (Raes, 2022; Olt, 2018; Huang et al. 2017; Ramsey et al, 2016).

3. METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study is to gain insight into teachers' experience with English hybrid learning with large groups and provide practical tips for more effective hybrid classes. A qualitative and quantitative method was used to gather data in order to answer the two research questions.

Participants

Five female English teachers from the International Balkan University participated in the study. Three teachers have twenty years of teaching experience, and the other two have taught EFL between three and six years. They teach the compulsory courses in English language 1 and 2 to first-year students from all the faculties and departments at IBU (Faculty of Education, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Faculty of Communications, Faculty of Humanities and Administrative Sciences, Faculty of Dental Medicine, Vocational Medical School).

The courses are a combination of ESP and Academic English. The teachers had previously taught in the classroom and online, but they had little training in hybrid teaching. This was their first experience with hybrid classes, so they were able to make comparisons between all three educational models. The groups they taught ranged between 30 and 150 students. Students' level of English proficiency ranged between A2 and B2.

Research procedure

At the end of the course, the teachers participated in a semi-structured interview. Their students were also given a questionnaire to complete once the lectures finished.

Instruments

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the teachers in order to collect the necessary qualitative data. The interview consisted of both yes/no and open-ended questions. The data were supplemented with quantitative data gained from the student survey.

Limitations

Due to the relatively low number of participants, the results of the study are limited to the experience of the five English teachers at International Balkan University. This is the total number of course instructors engaged to teach EFL classes at the university; therefore, it was the maximum number of participants that could be included in the study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interviews with the course instructors provided information about the challenges teachers face when teaching English, as well as some insight into possible ways of increasing the effectiveness of hybrid classes with large groups.

The interviewed teachers encountered the following difficulties:

- technical problems
- lack of interaction (teacher –online students and online students – F2F students)
- class and time management with large classes

Regarding technical issues, all teachers reported occasional problems with malfunctioning computer equipment (camera, microphone, central computer units, disconnected LCD projects or smart boards) and unstable internet connection. They sometimes received complaints from students that they were unable to hear or see the teacher clearly. This was very frustrating for the teachers, and it made them feel anxious before every lesson, as they were not sure whether they would encounter any technical problems. The student survey showed that the major technical problems for the remote students were: a) the fact that they were often unable to hear the teacher because of the mask she was wearing or due to other technical problems she faced in the classroom, and b) online students not being able to see the teacher or the students who were physically present, as the mounted camera only showed the front section of the classroom, i.e. the whiteboard and the smart board next to the teacher's desk.

All five teachers emphasized that it was difficult to maintain the sense of class community with the online students, which was not the case with those physically present in the classroom. As previously mentioned in the Literature review section, several authors indicate the problem of lack of sense of group ownership for remote learners (Olt, 2018; Huang et al. 2017; Ramsey et al, 2016). According to the results of the student survey, the greatest disadvantage of hybrid learning in large groups is the lack of communication between the online students and both the teacher and the students in the classroom. Previous studies also suggest that in-person learning provides motivation, helps in building a sense of community, and provides much needed encouragement to students (Kemp & Grieve, 2014; Paul & Jefferson, 2019).

Teachers experienced difficulties with class and time management of the large classes they had. Teacher 1 complained: *"I feel like I have to be in two places at the same time. I can neither focus completely on the remote students nor on those in the classroom. When a student answers a question, those who are online cannot hear him/ her and I must repeat what he/she said, which discontinues the natural flow of the lesson."* Teacher 3 added that *"When the online students speak, I sometimes have to repeat their words to the on-site students, which is a bit distracting and time-consuming"*. Engaging all students equally during hybrid classes is a great challenge for all teachers. It is interesting to note that the student survey results indicated that nearly 70% said they communicate with their fellow students outside the online classes, and there is sufficient interaction with the teacher during classes. The same number of students think the classes are the right length. The difference in the views may be due to the teachers' stress and lack of feedback from the online students, which causes course instructors to believe that their hybrid classes lack interaction and to perceive them as longer than necessary.

The interviewed teachers recommend several measures to be taken in order to increase the effectiveness of hybrid classes with large groups of university students. To address the issue of low interaction, teachers suggest brief online meetings with remote students at regular intervals, and at least one joint meeting with both online and F2F students, preferably before the mid-term and final exams. Another recommendation is the obligatory use of a camera for online students. This would improve visual contact and help teachers receive feedback based on the facial expressions of their students. Consequently, teachers may make appropriate changes in the content and teaching methodology (Paul & Jefferson, 2019). Finally, a 360-degree camera could enable the online students to have more visual contact with both the teacher and the on-site students.

Concerning class and time management, teachers propose having a teaching assistant in the classroom. This would help the teacher to a) be actively engaged both in the classroom and online at the same time; and b) increase interaction with all students, particularly with those online. Additionally, all teachers agreed that hybrid classes should not last as much as traditional F2F classes for two reasons: 1) those who are present in the classroom are obliged to wear a mask at all times, and b) short asynchronous and synchronous interactive online activities are very engaging for all students. Different tasks could be given to the online and F2F students so that they can all be actively engaged during the lesson. Previous studies have found that student live engagement increases through quizzes and polls (Raes et al, 2020). Cooperation and collaboration between F2F and online students could be enhanced by assigning pair/group online activities that could be done asynchronously.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study revealed teacher stress and anxiety as a result of hybrid classes with large groups. Further research could focus on the psychological aspect of multitasking during hybrid classes and ways of alleviating teacher stress.

6. CONCLUSION

In the post-pandemic world, dichotomies such as synchronous-asynchronous, physical-digital, onsite-online are to be left as they have become hybrid partners in the new learning environment (Nørgård, 2021). The digital is as 'natural', 'real', 'authentic' and inherently entangled in our everyday learning interactions and experiences as non-digital forms of learning (Feenberg, 2009). The study aimed to investigate teachers' firsthand experience of hybrid classes with large groups during the Covid-19 pandemic in order to provide possible solutions that would minimize the weakness and capitalize on the strengths of the hybrid model of instruction in higher education. Qualitative data was gathered from 5 EFL course instructors at IBU. The interview results indicate that the most common challenges teachers face include technical issues, lack of interaction and class/time management problems, which lead to teacher stress and anxiety. The interviewed teachers recommend assistants for more effective time and class management of hybrid classes, shorter lessons, and parallel activities for online and face-to-face students to increase their engagement in the class.

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