

Change from on-campus teaching to online/hybrid teaching: impact on education quality and students' opportunities to use the language

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Abstract

The transition to online and hybrid education has reshaped language learning, bringing both positive and negative outcomes. While the flexibility in digital learning may have increased enrollment and improved digital competence, it has also introduced significant drawbacks, particularly regarding language practice. The paper discusses how the lack of face-to-face interaction, technical difficulties, and reduced student engagement, among others, hinder students' opportunities to actively use the language they are learning. This is especially crucial in language acquisition, where real-time communication and spontaneous responses are key. Through a discussion of the challenges faced by both teachers and students, the paper argues that these issues undermine the quality of language learning and practicing. Finally, it also proposes some solutions, like targeted faculty training, institutional support for digital resources, and raising student awareness of the need for active participation. While online teaching is a lasting component of education, it must be carefully implemented to support and enhance students' language learning experiences.

Keywords: Online teaching, hybrid teaching, digital education, language practice, language learning

1. Introduction

Online teaching existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, it appears to have become an essential component of higher education nowadays. Universities worldwide offer digitally based studies to varying extents. As an example, several institutions in Norway already offer fully online programs in Spanish language – “Español como Lengua Extranjera”, from now on, *ELE* – (e.g., UiT, NTNU, Høgskolen i Østfold, UiB) or partially online programs (e.g., OsloMet).

This paper presents a discussion about education quality and foreign language teaching and learning in a digital environment, based on my experiences as a teacher of *ELE* at the University of Tromsø. Although online teaching may have certain advantages, I argue that the shift from on-campus to online and the way it has been implemented in recent years reveal clear disadvantages that negatively impact language education quality.

2. Online language learning - upsides

As of 2024, the situation has evolved significantly from the circumstances during the covid-pandemics, marked by urgency and improvisation. The transition from physical to digital/hybrid

learning, along with the increased flexibility of academic programs, can now be approached with careful strategic planning. As we mentioned previously, numerous institutions are now offering digital-based language learning.

The “digital push” experienced in education over recent years has led to some positive outcomes. For instance, the flexibility introduced into teaching has contributed to an increase in enrollment in certain disciplines. This trend is advantageous for both academic institutions and students (Breiby et al., 2022, p. 259). This is particularly beneficial when it comes to language learning within Norwegian higher education, which unfortunately has faced a large decline in enrollment in recent years, potentially leading to a shortage of qualified teachers in a near future.¹

Online education introduces greater flexibility regarding who can study, how many people can participate, as well as where learning takes place. This allows more diverse groups of students to participate in higher education. For instance, older learners with families or those studying part-time while maintaining a job. Individuals seeking a career change can also pursue online studies without needing to relocate to a university city. For many of these students, returning to campus-based education would not have been possible.

Additionally, there could be a reduction in student absences. Some studies suggest a decrease in absenteeism, although this contrasts with the so called “black screen phenomenon” (when students do not turn their cameras on and may be inactive during the whole lecture) and the increasing expectation that lectures should be recorded (Breiby et al., 2022, p. 256).

Furthermore, digital competence has been significantly enhanced, not only among students but also among faculty members and, arguably, all staff within academic institutions. Although teachers have traditionally displayed negative reactions to the transition from on-campus to hybrid/digital education, many have become receptive to its continuation: the experience gained during the pandemics has fostered a greater sense of confidence in their digital competence (Breiby et al., 2022, p. 260). This is a good opportunity for us educators to explore and incorporate new resources and techniques, thereby improving the areas where our students can use the language they are learning, even when not together in the same room. In addition to this, we are also equipping students with tools that may later benefit them in their own teaching careers.

3. Online language learning – downsides

Online language learning has brought certain advantages, as underlined above, but drawing from personal observations, many of my colleagues and I have, at some point, experienced significant challenges. Alongside these issues, there is the detrimental impact on students’ opportunities to practice the language in a digital environment. Let us now discuss the main challenges that both teachers and students may face in this context.

3.1 The teacher perspective

The arrival of the COVID-pandemic forced a rapid transition from in-person to online teaching for us all. As Cervantes Cerra states (2021, p. 193), “Education changed unexpectedly and, in some countries, in a disorganized manner (...) revealing various social, curricular, and even technological inequalities”. Consequently, there was no formal training for educators on how to adapt to this new format. The primary support came from informal exchange of experiences among colleagues. We did our best, but many of us had little to offer in this new setting: the same lecture style we conducted on-campus simply moved online. Cervantes Cerra also asserts that this change “did not catch foreign language instruction by surprise” (2021, p.195); however, I respectfully disagree. While many digital resources for second language acquisition already existed, this does not imply

that all educators were familiar with them. This abrupt change was, in fact, a surprise to all of us, whether we teach foreign languages or not.

This situation, which was far from ideal, unfortunately persists today. While teaching style takes time to change (Breiby et al., 2022, p. 258), many of us have not yet developed a deep knowledge in digital learning. Something that was initially an emergency measure has since evolved into what is now considered “the new norm”, without being driven by pedagogical motivations. Lectures that go from on-campus to a digital platform, without substantial modifications, undermine students’ opportunities to engage. Furthermore, Zoom fatigue can occur (Sandvoll et al., 2022) and can hinder students’ ability to, for example, respond spontaneously to a question posed in a foreign language.

Furthermore, teachers face numerous technological challenges when trying to adapt to digital formats. Due to the teacher’s central role in online/hybrid lectures, their technological competence influences the quality of teaching (Klunder et al., 2022). Issues such as camera and microphone malfunctions, for instance, directly affect the opportunity for students to actively enroll in lectures. Klunder et al. (2022, p. 504) found that teachers often perceive themselves as competent, even with a moderate level of IT skills, since they had good assistance from IT specialists and helpdesk. However, reflecting on my own experiences, this is not always the case. Technical problems and IT assistance may take time away from the lecture itself, and can cause uncomfortable delays and/or stress, since lectures are expected to end within a specific time frame. In extreme cases, the technical issues cannot be solved, so the teacher and the students must move to another virtual classroom where (hopefully) everything works well.

There are also challenges related to student engagement. Teacher-student interaction usually becomes more difficult, particularly in hybrid sessions, where teachers must balance attention between one group of students in the classroom and another group online (van der Rijst et al., 2023, p. 326). This situation places teachers in a demanding position, attempting to be present in two places at once. As a result, the teacher may unintentionally pay less attention to one group and thereby reduce the opportunity for those students to actively participate in the sessions.

Loss of interaction can also be a consequence of online/hybrid teaching formats. In traditional on-campus teaching, students can approach their teachers after each session with questions about any topic, which facilitates better personal connections and helps create a good classroom atmosphere. This is often not possible after the teacher leaves the digital platform in online teaching.

3.2 The student perspective

Let us focus now on the challenges of online/hybrid lectures from the students’ perspective. Specifically, regarding ELE students in the Norwegian context, their motivation to learn the language is often affective-based, and they tend to be more disappointed with their choice of studying Spanish at university level compared to other language learners, since they find it more difficult than expected (Dahl, 2022, p. 4). This is an important point to consider, as a lack of knowledge or experience with online teaching could potentially lead to even greater demotivation.

In relation to a potential loss of interaction online (see above), it is important to highlight that interaction is crucial when learning a foreign language. It is not possible to effectively learn a language in isolation. Limited body language plays a significant role here. Breiby et al. (2022, p. 258) found out that teachers perceived a decline in the quality of their teaching due to the lack of body language interaction. This could “easily” be solved by requiring all participants to turn their

camera on, but this could also create other issues – such as students (and teachers!) paying more attention to their appearance on camera (self-evaluation) which can lead to anxiety, stress and negative emotions (Sandvoll et al., 2022, p. 274). Humor, which is indeed a valuable tool for language learning, might also suffer due to the loss of interaction, making it more difficult to include jokes or similar activities in class. The negative effects of this loss of interaction are further evident when changing to a different teacher – when doing special sessions with our ELE students and guest lecturers, most of them became excessively shy and hesitant to ask and answer questions or request repetitions.

In addition, and related to this loss of interaction, for reasons such as shyness or lack of habit, students tend to be quieter in digital lectures. Based on my own experience, but also on studies conducted by other educators, I can confirm that the student response is generally lower in online lectures, compared to on-campus ones. I fully agree with the unexpected result suggesting that as the number of students increases, the level of response decreases (Breiby et al., 2022, p. 256). This directly impacts the way students practice the language online: not only are they less likely to answer simple questions in a foreign language, but they also hesitate to interact with peers.

This brings me to the concept of the so called “Breakout Rooms”. While these can be beneficial, especially reducing Zoom fatigue and encouraging interaction between classmates (Sandvoll et al., 2022), or as warm-up exercises for new students to get to know each other (Fábregas et al., 2021), there can also be negative consequences in the context of foreign language learning: the teacher has less control over which language students use in these breakout rooms, and students often prefer using their mother tongues when interacting with their classmates (which is entirely understandable).

Another key point is that many educators adopted the hybrid-method to get back the traditional “classroom atmosphere”, where students could gather in person, socialize and experience the feeling of being “normal students” again. Unfortunately, this is not always the case with smaller groups, as has been my experience. Most of our ELE students do not live in Tromsø, so one or two students in the classroom (while the rest of students is on Teams) does not bring back this “traditional lecture” feeling.

Finally, the distinction between spaces (classroom vs. home) is significant in a traditional teaching environment. One might assume that the more comfortable students feel, the better their learning experience will be, as they would be at ease in their home environment. However, the opposite can occur. Students may take advantage of their home setting to engage in other activities while listening to the teacher, turn off their cameras and microphones, adopting a passive role - rather than being actively involved. This issue is complex: on the one hand, we want all our students to engage actively in our lessons. On the other hand, for now, in the Norwegian context, requiring our students to always have their cameras on becomes difficult, because of data protection laws.

4. Some suggestions

To conclude this discussion, I would like to offer some suggestions to mitigate the mainly negative aspects of online language teaching that I have outlined in this text.

It is essential to implement training programs for faculty members involved in programs that are specifically focused on foreign language teaching in digital environments. Not only that, but we also need specific resources for our online/hybrid lessons. While it is certainly possible to improve our online teaching by searching for literature —some colleagues already share their findings with enthusiasm (e.g., Fábregas et al., 2021) —it would be more effective if institutions themselves

provided these resources for all educators, rather than relying on individual efforts to improvise solutions or on a “learning-by-doing” approach. Studies have shown that many teachers were not adequately prepared for the transition to digital teaching (Álvarez-Flores et al., 2022, Cervantes Cerra, 2021) - I would dare to say that many of us are still not fully prepared to continue with it. Only through such institutional support will we be able to offer students more and better opportunities to learn and practice the languages they are learning online.

Lastly, but equally important, we must raise awareness among our students: whether in-person or online, language courses require a commitment to active participation. It is not enough to simply turn off the camera and microphone, passively listen to the instructor, and expect to magically learn the language. This is of course true for language learning in general, in the online classroom as well as in a traditional classroom.

5. Conclusion

The teaching of foreign languages cannot be reduced to delivering a lecture and leaving the classroom. It requires practical engagement, which, in many cases, can become more difficult in an online setting than in a traditional language classroom. As Dahl highlights (2022, p. 19), most students view their target language as a tool for enhancing employability, an aspect that is critical for their future. Therefore, it is essential that we find more effective ways to facilitate language learning and language interaction in this context.

Online teaching, as Sandvoll et al. argue, is here to stay, but digital tools should not be an end in themselves but rather a means to enhance the quality of teaching (Sandvoll et al., 2022, p. 276-277). While this discussion may have appeared somewhat pessimistic, it is important to acknowledge that these challenges present an opportunity to reflect on and improve our approach to language teaching in the digital era.

Endnotes

1) «På fem år er det 25 prosent færre studenter som vil ta tysk og fransk»
<https://www.khrono.no/pa-fem-ar-er-det-25-prosent-faerre-studenter-som-vil-ta-tysk-og-fransk/873412>

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