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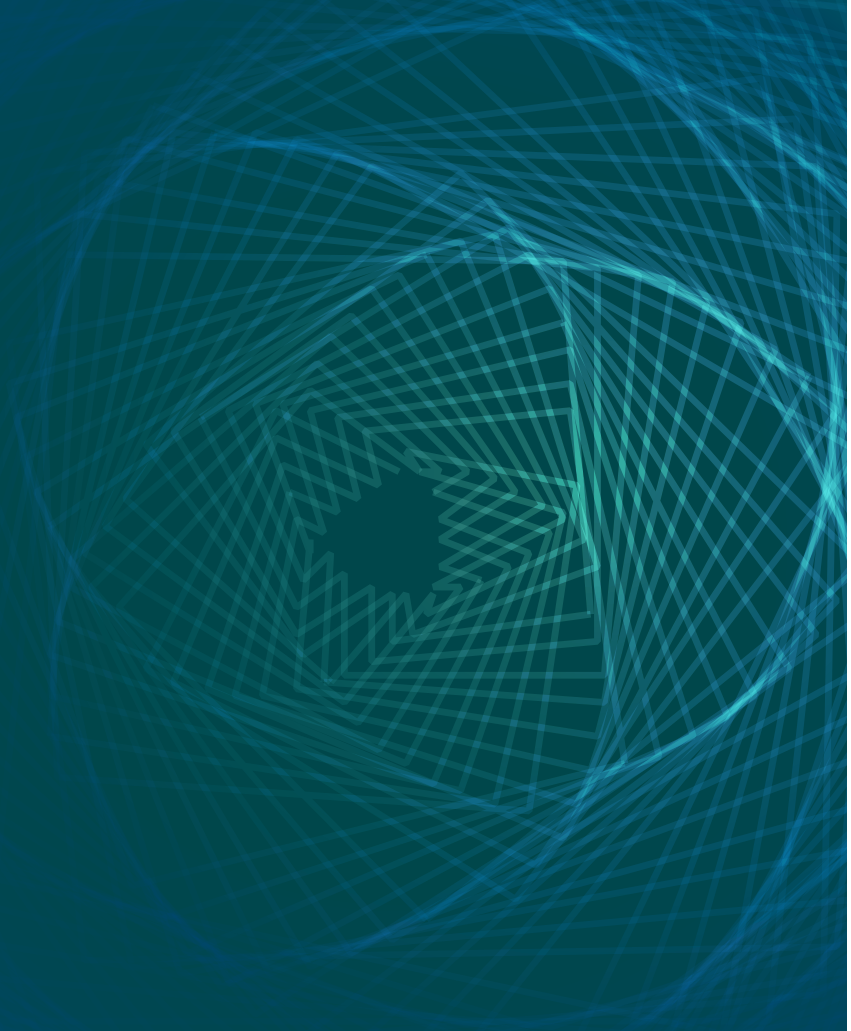

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Synchronous Sessions During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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Abstract

COVID-19, for sure, was the most pervasive test to the use of technology in education. In the last few decades, a barrage of technological tools was crafted and developed in pursuit of ameliorating the learning process for learners across the world. The efforts to find the best technology and the most effective modus operandi to integrate technology into teachers' practice in and out of classrooms was still immature that the pandemic struck and exacerbated the situation. Now, the once-deemed-useful technologies become the refuge for learning. Today, distance education is no luxury, but an urgent need. The students who do not have a reliable internet connection with an advanced device to study would lag behind their peers. Albeit technology is a must here, having access to these technologies does not guarantee learning for a variety of reasons. The widespread use of online learning (re)surfaced the very many constraints of hybrid courses. To not only survive but thrive, many academic institutions decided to adopt hybrid courses. A hybrid course includes a face-to-face session as well as synchronous and asynchronous sessions. Many educators are already familiar with these courses but synchronous sessions inherently impose constraints on teachers and learners alike. In this article, we will detail the nature of nature of hybrid classes. Beginning with how to manage a hybrid course, we will put forth the modus operandi of how to tackle the issues while teaching online in synchronous sessions.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, synchronous sessions, face-to-face sessions

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Introduction

The number of university students continues to climb and university shutdowns have become an indispensable part of our careers. Lately, there has been a mass migration from physical classrooms to cyberspace due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The novel way of education heavily relies on technology and technological tools. Distance education has taken the precedence over other forms of education. Synchronous sessions are a powerful tool in distance education occurring in real-time. The virtual space is the main platform where students and teachers interact. They engage in the virtual equivalent of face-to-face activities such as discussions, group work, and online projects. In synchronous education, students can interact in real-time and receive feedback from either their peers or teacher immediately. Adaptation is key to asynchronous education. The accompanying challenges cannot be ignored here.

One common complaint of language educators in synchronous sessions is the students' lack of participation. Holding a synchronous session is one thing and making it lively and engaging is a totally different thing. Simply transferring what educators do in a physical classroom to cyberspace is unlikely. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) through different platforms was the only solution to the worldwide issue of the pandemic. Platforms such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, or Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, Microsoft teams are a fairly new medium for language educators. Hersh (2020) states that to make online education useful, educators need to tailor curriculum and become familiar with the specifics of the tool adopted. Educators, in general, struggle with synchronous sessions because these sessions deprive educators of body language, face-to-face discussions, and many more. Accordingly, language educators need to find the cyber equivalent to what they already experienced in a physical classroom. As for the ground rules, educators need to set the ground rules for synchronous sessions, too. Students should know that there is a button to raise their hands, for instance. Students need to mute themselves when they do not intend to talk. Students should turn on their cameras when they are ready to have a strong impact when it comes to learning. These rules can be written on the first slide of every new lesson so students can remember and play by the rules. As a reminder, there must be a cyber equivalent in the platform we use to make it engaging.

Managing Synchronous Sessions

Teaching students in an online environment takes a different arsenal of tools beginning with online platforms. It also applies to the material used for synchronous sessions. Generally, language educators utilize a combination of printed and digital materials to manage a classroom. Having struggled with the pandemic and migrating massively to synchronous and asynchronous sessions, language educators were limited to digital materials including online books. There is a myriad of issues with online books, too. Language teachers can alternatively use presentation slides using screenshots from digital textbooks, pictures, and discussion prompts. The prompts can be used for online discussion boards (Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan, 2021) and/or synchronous online discussions. This can be an equivalent for face-to-face discussions in physical classrooms. To lessen the cognitive load, motivate students, and avoid confusion, educators are recommended to use explicit instruction in online tasks. To foster discussions, educators have used breakout rooms so students can discuss different topics in groups. Educators can use Google docs or Google slides so students in breakout rooms can have easy access to the documents. These documents can be used as note catchers so different students can work on the same document and complete it collectively.

Synchronous sessions are a precious time that educators can police the students' work in real time. This is valuable especially during the pandemic that students may not be able to attend physical classrooms. It is then evident that educators would like to make the most of every second of synchronous sessions. One practical way to do so is employing flipped classroom methods. In flipped classrooms, language learners can, for instance, work on a text in asynchronous sessions followed by a synchronous problem-solving session. During the asynchronous sessions, students can use different software such as Perusall (https://perusall.com/) to stay focused on the text by modern communication methods. Perusall stands at the forefront of educational innovation. Perusall enables students to annotate readings and asynchronously respond to other students' comments and questions in context. Perusall has the potential to engage students with automated personalized guidance. This instant feedback increases the motivation level of students while

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reading texts asynchronously. Larger courses can be segmented in Perusall so productive discussions amongst group members are guaranteed.

One important point regarding synchronous sessions is that educators should record the sessions for the students who cannot attend the session for any reason. Some platforms such as Blackboard Collaborate Ultra enables educators to record the session so students can, later on, watch and learn. Additionally, the students who attended the session have a second chance to watch and reinforce their cognitive attainments. It is evident that watching a recorded video is not equivalent to participating in synchronous sessions. One way to reduce the students' confusion and increase their motivation level is to have them add their comments on note catchers (Google docs) and/or write a reflection about the video. In their reflections, students can put forth their take-aways from the videos.

How to Tackle Students' Issues

Students are erroneously deemed to belong to Generation Z and they must know it all about technologies. However, Khoshnevisan (2021a) conducted a study with 104 students at INTO USF to find out technology availability by the students studying English for academic purposes (EAP) courses to get admission to an American university. He explains that students are not masters of using technologies when it comes to learning English in a digital environment. Thus, educators are bound to educate their students about how to use the platform, change their backgrounds, upload their assignments and the like. Educators cannot take it for granted and simply ignore computer literacy.

Teacher talk (TT) time must be always less than student talk (ST) time in traditional classrooms so students have more opportunities to convey their message, put their thoughts into practice, and discuss different aspects of their ideas. Online education is no exception in this regard. In other words, teachers must limit TT time and develop ST time because every second of synchronous sessions are precious. Educators can have their share of talk in the format of lectures (audio & video) presentable in asynchronous sessions. The content of these lectures can be discussed during synchronous sessions (flipped classroom). Another important feature of online platforms that is oft-neglected is chats. Students are encouraged to use chats during synchronous sessions. It is true that the students can virtually raise their hands to talk but if it is not talk time, they have the opportunity to use chat and discuss issues. Educators can also use chats to break the ice and start up conversations. Students can write their ideas and reflections in the chat and educators can simply provide them with their quick feedback. Khoshnevisan (2019) discussed the importance of quick feedback and the role of software such as Grammarly for grammatical feedback in students' writing skills.

Cultivating social connection is inherently hard and in a virtual environment it seems to be unlikely because students are not normally prone to talk in an online environment. Using opening check-in activities in the chat section can help educators break the ice and establish rapport so the students can delve into deeper discussions for later tasks. Chat and Poll features in Zoom are amongst very many tools that can help educators foster more discussion in synchronous sessions without wasting off the precious time of synchronous sessions.

To promote discussions and engage students in synchronous sessions, educators should constantly put them into breakout rooms so they can discuss different topics. These groups can climb up the ladder of higher-order thinking proposed by Bloom (Bloom's taxonomy). Students can summarize, analyze, apply, and evaluate topics in breakout rooms. Later on, students can segue in completing projects to complete the pyramid of higher-order thinking. This can be implemented by creating something new pertinent to the topic of the study. Educators can do a variety of activities such as giving tasks to students, assign different roles to students, use a note catcher to record the take-aways, check-in with different groups in case they need help, keep the time and inform the students if they are running out of time.

Wrap up the Session

Before teachers wrap up the session, it is imperative to ask the students to reflect on what they learned and have them provide you with their feedback. A synchronous session can end with a summary of what was taught and highlighting what comes next in the next synchronous or asynchronous session. Assigning students to be prepared for the next session, working on projects, and reviewing old material can be all parts of the wrapping sessions.

How to Deal With the Camera?

The dilemma of the camera on/off is prevalent and spans across hybrid courses in post-COVID online sessions. To control the camera on/off dilemma, one must strike a balance between the students' privacy and class cohesion. The educators' role, in this regard, becomes prominent so students are encouraged to turn on their cameras while participating in a synchronous session. Switching from in-person to remote teaching is a culture shock for both educators and students. Cornered with the issue of equity in terms of technological tools (Khoshnevisan, 2021), educators need to establish an optional camera on/off policy. The optional nature of camera policy in synchronous does not put students in an embarrassing situation in case they lack access to a private space or the technology required. The pandemic has already filled students with depression, anxiety, and a lack of confidence. Accordingly, educators are recommended to set flexible policies that do not add to the trauma. Currently, educators complain that they are encountered with an ocean of black screen. Black screen deprives educators of reading their students' facial expressions when they are challenged by the material. The non-verbal cues such as facial expressions are used as feedback from students in a synchronous session. However, black screens might put a damper on the learning process as they do not let educators read the students' faces.

Learners can equally benefit from seeing each other during videoconferencing sessions. This onscreen meeting enables the students to foster both trust and rapport that can be later harnessed in group and pair work to complete class projects. Having peers onscreen makes students identify one another and portray a rather comprehensive picture of their peers in synchronous sessions. It is thus evident that both educators and students need to respect each other mutually. However, they need to find a middle ground so they make a win-win situation.

Educators need to be proactive and set the ground rules early on because virtual classes are new to some students and they need some time to acculturate with the new environment. To encourage students to turn on cameras, educators must make accommodations so students effectively and contextually use cameras. Educators can link camera-on mode with specific tasks or presentations

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so students turn on their cameras when the need arises. This will be encultured into the classroom practice when practiced for a while. Additionally, educators can foster the use of games, icebreakers, and the like in camera-on mode so the students become accustomed to participating in class with their cameras on. This also brings a swift shift from the students to different activities while cameras are on.

To encourage students to turn on their cameras, embrace silly moments when pets and family members become onscreen uninvited guests. Also, teach the student to change their backgrounds and make fun so the students feel positive about having their cameras on. Research indicates that students turn off their cameras for non-academic reasons. They are mostly concerned with their appearance and how they look rather than academic reasons.

Community of Inquiry (COI) Model

Community of Inquiry (COI) model was proposed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999). This model introduces and investigates three main pillars for online education: Social presence, Cognitive presence, and teaching presence. To effectively design and tailor the curriculum for online education, these three pillars need to be scrutinized before and after designing a course for synchronous sessions. social presence is the degree to which online participants feel connected to one another (Swan & Shih, 2005). To foster social presence in asynchronous sessions, Educators are recommended to use an online asynchronous discussion board so students can introduce themselves and get to know each other. This establishes rapport that can be later harnessed in group discussions of break rooms. The synchronous break room time nears online discussions to actual discussions in physical classrooms. Teaching presence explains the design and facilitation of the educational experience (Garrison et al., 1999). To implement teaching presence in online education, educators need to make dramatic changes in their material. More specifically, printed books are not the best material for online education. Accordingly, to cater to the needs of students in both synchronous and asynchronous sessions, educators and curriculum designers need to come up with better forms of material that are conducive to online education. Cognitive presence in online education is distinctly different. Online education (regardless of the mode of communication) calls for different methods to implement teaching and learning. “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 89).

Pedagogical Implications

Post-COVID-19 instruction is informed by the results of today’s technological tools use. Utilization of these technologies ushers the future likely paths in education. It is true that technology has served as a catalyst and can help language educators convey the message in absence of face-to-face sessions. Language educators have found equivalents for the elements of face-to-face sessions such as online discussions boards (Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan, 2021a). Rashtchi and Khoshnevisan (2021a) highlighted the main tenets of online discussion boards. They noted how different participants used online discussion boards to gain power and become centralized. They also stated that posting on online discussion board has a pattern that they named it the Grapes Bunch Model. They mentioned that the Community of Inquiry (COI) Model is a working model to develop an effective online course to maintain all three aspects: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. In light of this model, participants have the opportunity to

socialize and learn the material in a motivational ambience. Accordingly, it is highly recommended that material developers and language educators take the pillars of this model into account to craft a more effective course for language learners during the pandemic.

Conclusions

This article was an attempt to primarily detail different nature of classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic. It then made a concerted effort to highlight the constraints of synchronous sessions and how to tackle these limitations. There are many different advantages that asynchronous sessions can bring into the world of education. Nonetheless the disadvantages cannot be ignored. Although the literature that pertains to the use of technology in language and teacher education has exhausted an array of technologies and technological tools: Literacy and augmented reality (Park & Khoshnevisan, 2019); augmented reality and teacher education (Khoshnevisan, 2019b); automatic writing evaluation (AWE) tools to enhance writing skills (Khoshnevisan, 2019f); animated pedagogical agents (Khoshnevisan, 2018a); augmented reality and language learning (Khoshnevisan & Le, 2018); audiovisual input (Rashtchi, Khoshnevisan, & Shirvani, M. (2021); audiotaped dialogue journals (Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan, 2008); AR-infused apps (Hadid, Mannion, Khoshnevisan, 2019); material development (Khoshnevisan, 2020): AR-mediated material for English language Art Classroom (Khoshnevisan, 2021b), to name but a few, there is much more to uncover in post-COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic unraveled the good, the bad, and the ugly of technology in both teacher and language education. The merits of technology and technological tools apart, the next generation of language teachers and curriculum developers must await further empirical research to explore the perceptions and experiences of language educators and language learners to scrutinize the effectiveness and efficacy of the tools.

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