



Teaching and Learning Languages under Covid-19

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Abstract

2020 will be remembered as the Covid-19 year. Under these out of the ordinary circumstances, teachers and professors had to quickly adapt to finish the 2019-2020 academic year, and learn new techniques, and technologies to be ready for the 2020-2021 academic year. Different countries, states, or even institutions, had to make a choice about how we would return to the classrooms under this “new normal”; fully online, blended, or face to face (AKA mask to mask) were the main options across the globe. In this presentation, I will show how my institution moved towards a HyFlex approach trying to keep our students in the classroom by dividing them into groups: half of them in class, half of them at home synchronously. Our faculty had to combine different teaching styles to accommodate the necessities of these different groups all together at the same time. Some content areas are easier to accommodate to this new normal, languages were a different beast. How did we provide differentiated instruction while making meaningful connections and aiming for communicative competence? This is my experience and how I survived the pandemic of 2020.

Keywords: Covid-19; Hy-Flex approach; language methods; higher-ed

1. Introduction

2020 will be remembered as the year that shut down the whole world. The economic market, the education system, jobs in services, religious gatherings, and health systems across the globe had to be turned off in order to face one of the most devastating pandemics in recent history.

Covid-19 started spreading out from China where, even with heavy lockdown measures in place, the virus could not be contained. This virus spread fast and soon got to different places in Europe, such as Italy and Spain, where heavy lockdowns were set in place. The education system in all these countries was hit hard, and all levels of education found themselves in unprecedented circumstances. They had to adjust fast and with little to no support to make these changes.

2. Spring Semester 2020

In the US, we were about to go on Spring break, when the news of the virus spreading massively made our state -Utah- send an order to move all education to an online setting. From Kindergarten students (5-year-olds), to College students (graduate and undergraduate programs) found themselves at home to finish their studies for the year. The K-12 system (elementary, middle, and secondary education) move to remote teaching providing the students with a mix of asynchronous online education and synchronous online education.

As Hrastinski explains, asynchronous E-learning uses means as discussion boards and blogs to reflect on complex issues, guaranteeing students have more time to respond because there is not an expectation for an immediate answer. On the other hand, synchronous E-learning works best when discussing less-complex issues, letting students increase their motivation “because a quick response is expected”.

However, in Higher Education, not many instructions were given in terms on what online teaching should look like to finish this semester. My institution received a State mandate to close all face to face teaching and learning as we were going on our Spring break. This break is usually a period of time when faculty does research (I am at a teaching-centered institution where research is not required for tenure and promotion), completes service projects, or just recharges to get enough energy to finish a long semester. This time around, we found ourselves dropping everything we have planned in order to modify our teaching to ensure the learning process for our students.

Some faculty members moved their courses to a synchronous setting, trying to maintain a feeling of normalcy. Students and faculty would connect at the class scheduled time via zoom or google teams. They would conduct their lectures as usual, but including breakout rooms and grouping activities online. During the meeting times, students would engage in interpretive mode of communication, defined by Cutshall as “Focused on the appropriate cultural interpretation of meanings that occur in written and spoken form where there is no recourse to the active negotiation of meaning



with the writer/speaker” (35). The lecture format of the course would be working towards Standard 1.2 “Students understand, interpret and analyse what is heard, read or viewed on a variety of topics” (ACTFL 1). Even though the lecture was happening in a synchronous environment, most of the opportunities for negotiating meaning happened during the breakout rooms, and group work. These types of group work would allow students to interact and engage in interpersonal communication with their peers supporting Standard 1.1, “Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions” (Cutshall 35).

Other faculty members, understanding the stress that was put into our students -who suddenly were jobless if they were not *essential workers*, decided to move their course work to an asynchronous mode of learning since “*synchronous e-learning*, [...], supports work relations among learners and with teachers, even when participants cannot be online at the same time. It is thus a key component of flexible e-learning” (Hrastinski). This approach seemed appropriate when our students had to find a new job, usually as retail store workers, to support themselves during a pandemic.

We finished the semester offering the opportunity to our students to change their grades to a credit vs. non-credit option, so even if the work was not the best and they did enough to pass the course, a low grade would not affect their general GPA (grade point average).

3. Fall Semester 2020

Our state decided to go back to the classroom in a face to face model of sorts. The Utah State Board of Education offered the opportunity for families to decide if they wanted to send their kids to school fully online, fully face to face, or in a hybrid combination. There was a mask mandate so everyone would have to wear a mask indoors when at school, and physical distance would be maintained when possible. Depending on the county, the rate of transmission, and/or size of the student body, some schools adopted a schedule for students’ groups to attend class in person on different days.

At the Higher Education level (colleges and universities), after summer planning meetings and discussions among Faculty Senates representatives, University administration representatives, and Health Department representatives, we were ready to go back to class. My institution, DSU, decided to try a HyFlex approach: “HyFlex (hybrid and flexible) is a blended form of teaching that combines physical spaces, virtual spaces, and face-to-face interaction with online learning”, (Leijon 1). In order to support this approach, the university equipped every classroom with high-end cameras and microphones, so we could be live-streaming our classes to those students who would be attending the class remotely.

Under this approach, we divided our student body to attend half of the time online and half of the time in person based on their identification number. Group A would be in class on Mondays and Tuesdays, when group B would be attending via Zoom. On Wednesdays and Thursdays, group B would be in class, and group A would be on Zoom. This was the theoretical approach we took. However, reality hit fast, and we found that there wasn’t an even division of people on each setting.

Furthermore, as Inglis et al. (2011) showed, when students were given the chance to flip or switch between settings, most of the students stayed on the online environment, even on those days when they could be physically in the classroom. Gannon explains how “The flexibility afforded to students by HyFlex courses has been evident this semester, but the style of teaching required has proven more difficult to maintain than anticipated”, and most of the faculty I interact with, in languages or other content areas, agrees with this statement. Having to maintain appropriate engagement among and with students when managing a chat setting, a live streaming setting, and an in person setting gave a lot of headaches to the faculty. We didn’t want to neglect our online students, but it is easier to see a student rising their hands in the class, than one who is sending a question through the chat.

We were finding ourself looking to kind-of-engaged students in the classroom vs. black squares online, since only a few of them would have their videos on. Trying to manage interpersonal communication between students who are in two different settings was proved to be hard to accomplish. Even though we used breakout rooms for those remote, and pair/group discussion for those in class, we came to different issues. First, those remote had to conduct their discussions in groups without the presence of the faculty. From Zoom, the faculty could jump into a breakout room, but, because of the setting of the technology, everyone in the classroom would hear what was going on. Secondly, those in the classroom had to maintain social distance and wear masks.

Even trying to check for understanding when working on interpretative mode of communication was harder to achieve. Most faculty relies on facial expressions and non-verbal communication for



this. When students are in different settings, faculty attention gets divided, and sometimes, both students and faculty feel frustrated.

4. Preparing for the future

We are almost done with the semester, and we are already planning for Spring 2021. The pandemic is far from over, and, even though we are more knowledgeable about what to expect, a lot of questions are still in the open:

Will students come back under a strict Hy-Flex approach? Because of the stress that our health system is going through, we decided not to require any prove to allow students to stay home and attend remotely; this mainly caused the swift from a more or less 50-50 division to a more extreme 80-20 division of the students, having most of them attend class from their own homes, or work. One of the requests that faculty are already asking to our administration is to develop some kind of process for students to obtain permission to stay remote.

Will faculty decide to apply for exceptions to teach fully synchronously online? Since managing both settings at the same time has been so hard during this semester, many are considering switching to fully remote so they can enable the three modes of communication with a smoother transition.

Will faculty and students accept the possibility of adopting the school district approach of having everyone face to face at the same time? Even though research in our state has proved that most of the transmission of the virus has happened during family meetings and social gatherings were no masks were worn or social distance was not maintained, there is still plenty of evidence that show around the globe how transmission can happen in the classrooms too.

Everybody is trying to do their best, keeping people safe, and relying on science: wear a mask, wash your hands, practice social distance and stay home if you are sick. Hopefully, we will come out of this pandemic being stronger.

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