



TEACHING SOCIOLINGUISTICS IN A HYBRID CLASSROOM

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to present the differences and similarities between online teaching and teaching sociolinguistics in a hybrid classroom. The theoretical section of the paper comprises basic information about teaching sociolinguistics, the definitions of the traditional classroom, online teaching, and the hybrid teaching model, along with the advantages and disadvantages of each of these teaching models, whereas the research section includes methodology and results from a focus group with students of sociolinguistics at the study program of Anglistics at Singidunum University. The research results have shown that students do not experience significant differences in learning sociolinguistics in a hybrid model when compared to the online model. The results have also confirmed the fact that students are aware of the importance of sociolinguistics for their future careers and that they are willing to study both in a hybrid classroom and an online setting, as their goal is to acquire the necessary knowledge.

Keywords:

Hybrid model, sociolinguistics, online teaching, traditional classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Having in mind that socialization is one of the significant factors in language learning and the teaching process, one cannot help but wonder whether online language classes have had any consequences on the social aspect of education. As Van Herk points out, a change in a social situation will lead to changes in the sociolinguistic situation' [1]. In other words, the link between language and society is so strong that there is almost no possibility that the events in one sphere (society) will not have any influence on the events in the other sphere (education). Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the differences between traditional classrooms, online classrooms, and hybrid teaching models, with special reference to teaching sociolinguistics as a course that is of immense importance for future language teachers. Since there are so many studies about the differences between traditional and online teaching methods in general, what this paper aims at is to highlight these differences in terms of teaching a specific course, with its advantages and disadvantages.

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Moreover, specific attention is given to a higher education institution where this course is offered in the fourth (final) year of Bachelor's studies. These differences are shown both in theory and in practice, from the perspective of sociolinguistics teachers and students, to enhance the teaching process in the future, for the benefit of students and teachers likewise. As the authors of this paper have been teaching sociolinguistics at Singidunum University, their goal is to discover which teaching methods suit their students' needs in order to adapt their teaching model, but also to realize whether there are any disadvantages of the current hybrid teaching model.

2. TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM

Traditional teaching is known as the use of classical teaching tools, which consist of blackboards, chalk, books, notebooks, and pens. According to Ilic, one of the most common theoretical approaches to traditional teaching implies three main educational methods, which were used separately in the classroom, but their intertwining occurred in the 21st century as a consequence of the need for changes in the educational system around the world [2]. The teacher-centered method empowers students to simply receive the knowledge from their teacher without building their commitment level. However, most lecturers used to practice the student-centered approach to encourage interest, analytical research, critical thinking, and feelings of fulfillment among students. However, the most commonly used method in contemporary society is the teacher-student interactive method, in which we can see the characteristics of both teacher-centered and student-centered methods [3]. Although it has already been proclaimed old-fashioned in some societies, the traditional classroom offers certain advantages, such as a wide range of projects and student interaction. Moreover, attending lectures implies following and respecting the university schedule, which provides students with the necessary punctuality and a sense of order. Additionally, studying in a group with their peers, students are more motivated, as they all have similar goals (e.g., to pass the exam, learn new vocabulary, etc.) [4]. Less than twenty percent of the traditional classroom is dedicated to language production and lacks creation, interaction, and critical thinking [5]. According to another study, more than half of the 29 interviewed students stated that they preferred a workbook and a textbook, which is a form of traditional language teaching. Furthermore, the same study has shown that the vast majority of students could

imagine themselves studying in a traditional classroom setting without the use of modern technology. They pointed out that traditional approaches to teachers' lectures are far more effective than the use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) tools for language learning [6].

3. ONLINE CLASSROOM

Hiltz & Turoff [7] claim that 'Online teaching is the latest in a long list of social technologies that have been introduced to improve distance learning by adding various augmentations, substitutions, or blending of new pedagogical approaches and technologies. Face-to-face courses blended with online learning technologies and methodologies are generally rated by students as significant improvements over traditional face-to-face (only) classes. Some of the benefits of the online classroom include the following: the usage of video and other pre-recorded media places online classes under the control of students: they are able to watch, rewind, and fast-forward when needed; they can be watched more than once, which may help someone who has a problem with language acquisition. Moreover, according to many previous studies, flexibility is one of the greatest advantages of an online classroom, as both the teacher and the students can create an atmosphere at home which will make them feel more comfortable. Furthermore, teachers are able to follow all the students' improvements and they can easily discern who carries out the assigned activities by giving them online assignments. It has been observed that online classes are especially supported by introverted students, those who are usually quiet and inactive in a traditional classroom [8]. According to European Center for Modern Languages (A Guide to Teacher Competences for Languages in Education), digital literacy and digital competences of language teachers are considered to be one of the most significant factors in contemporary education [9].

4. HYBRID TEACHING MODEL

In the critical review of the role of technology in providing education of quality, Garson states that "as a supplement to face-to-face education, online technology is useful. As a replacement, it is a threat to liberal education." [10]. One of the sectors which are highly affected by the worldwide pandemic of COVID-19 is most certainly the higher education area. According to



UNESCO, 'On 1 April 2020, schools and higher education institutions were closed in 185 countries, affecting 1 542 412 000 learners, which constitute 89.4% of total enrolled learners [3]. In order to avoid future closures, many schools and universities chose a hybrid teaching model, which is defined as the combination of both traditional and online classrooms. In other words, the hybrid flexible model is delivered using a combination of face-to-face seminars and electronic delivery and communication tools [11]. According to Petrova, 'the hybrid model relies on self-motivation and on the belief that using the Internet is only one of the means of delivering the course, which enhances effective learning [12]. The same author also states that the 'hybrid model incorporates various methods of content delivery and guided and self-centered student learning, but more importantly it is capable of recognizing multiculturalism and diverse student learning needs' [12].

Regardless of whether students opt for attending the course face to face or online, there are certain students who are never willing to participate or, on the other hand, those who are looking forward to participating. According to the authors' experience, depending on whether students are introverts or extroverts, they will choose their level of engagement during the classes. This implies that choosing the appropriate teaching model is often not the factor that influences students' participation. On the contrary, it is more often the question of how much students are interested in the topic, if they like the teacher, or if they like to participate in classes in general. Furthermore, it has been shown that the same students who participate online also participate in person and vice versa. Also, simply being physically present doesn't mean that students are actively listening or participating. What is even more important, participating in order to be heard or noticed does not necessarily entail that you are contributing anything meaningful to the classroom experience, which is why teachers should allow their teaching model to be the only judge of students' participation and motivation.

5. TEACHING SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Sociolinguistics is defined as the branch of linguistics which studies the correlation between language and society. It is also related to the social implications of the use and reception of language. With that in mind, its significance is implied, especially when it comes to foreign language students, as their knowledge about sociolinguistic topics is crucial for their future careers ei-

ther in teaching or translating. Therefore, at Singidunum University, a course in sociolinguistics is held in the final (fourth) year of bachelor studies (Anglistics study program) and it covers all the main topics related to language and society: language variations, language maintenance, loss, shift and death, speech communities, dialects, accents, registers, language and age, language and gender, language and ethnicity, etc. Lectures include theoretical and practical aspects of these topics, whereas practice includes covering various essays related to sociolinguistic issues, approaches, and practices around the world.

This year, the authors of this paper started teaching sociolinguistics in a hybrid model, due to the current situation with the COVID-19 pandemic. Both lectures and practice classes are held both online, via the Microsoft Teams platform, and simultaneously face-to-face, in the classroom. Students can choose either of the two options, and it has been noticed that they prefer online attendance. It has also been observed that some students opt for attending class in person for one week, but then switch over to following online, and vice versa.

During the harshest months of lockdown during COVID-19, classes for all courses were held exclusively online. At the university where the authors teach sociolinguistics, this took place initially over the Google Meet platform. This was ultimately switched out to Microsoft Teams, which proved to be an improvement in terms of administrative tasks which, among other benefits, allowed the professors to track which students entered class, and for how long. In addition, Google Meet did not have as many options like the Microsoft Teams platform in terms of organizing an online classroom. To be more precise, Google Meet had the chatbox and the share screen option, whereas Microsoft Teams now offers a wide range of possibilities, from posting information about the course, adding handouts and study material at any time, chatting, or having a video call with students whenever they feel the need to ask a question, to organizing assignments which can serve as midterms and testing for students. Another benefit of the Microsoft Teams platform is the fact that it is connected with Microsoft Stream, so you can share the video of your class to your students immediately after the class, and they can watch it whenever it is convenient for them.

It must be noted, however, that this was not necessarily an accurate reflection of how much they participated or comprehended the materials covered in class, as the students themselves are the ones who choose to speak up or communicate with their classmates or their teacher.



Though in both cases these class sessions were recorded and promptly uploaded for students to re-watch (or, in the case of employed students, watch for the first time), the process of measuring quantitatively and qualitatively student participation would have implied a painstaking and time-consuming process, and would not necessarily be a direct factor influencing the students' grade at the end of the semester. Ultimately, as in the case of the 'traditional' classroom, there were several instances of students not attending classes while they were 'live,' and choosing to simply read the notes at the end of the year, thusly preparing themselves for their midterms and final on their own time. To sum up, the Microsoft Teams platform might be considered a mixture of all course requirements in one place.

Due to a series of circumstances, the professors found themselves in the unique position of being able to teach sociolinguistics to the same generation of students during both their junior and senior years at university. The first year in question represented a lighter and more accessible approach as an introduction to the intersecting world of language and culture. These classes were held online in their entirety, with the professor covering one chapter per week on a variety of topics, ranging from time, age, gender, sociolect, ethnolect, language policy and planning, and many others. The agreement was for the students to read the chapter ahead of time and for all to discuss the most salient points together though, in these fast-paced and busy times, this was not often the reality of the situation. What tended to happen instead was that the professor would most frequently go through the information via PowerPoint presentations, which had previously been compiled of notes gathered from the contents of the textbook. Oftentimes, these presentations would be supplemented with audiovisual clips from the Internet, which would allow for their stimulation and provide the students with, perhaps, a well-needed respite from the sound of their professor's voice. In cases such as these, the online model would, if the internet connection worked sufficiently well on both ends, end up being the superior medium for transmitting sound, given that the in-person amphitheater setting could sometimes include acoustic echoes, which would sometimes make it difficult for many of the attendees to discern what was being communicated clearly. In addition to content provided from the textbook, the course notes, and audio clips, personal anecdotes to supplement the information often proved most successful when it came to student retention. By appealing to the experiences and sensibilities of the students, it became possible to bring the course material to life, a place in which practice (even through other peoples' lives) trumps theory.

This is especially important for students who are employed, as it is now easier for them to both attend classes and sit for midterms and exams. In the past, when only the traditional teaching methods were used, employed students were given an option to join consultations with teachers after 5 pm, but they did not have an option to replay videos of classes or to attend lectures if their classes were scheduled between 9 am and 5 pm, which was often the case. However, by using an online and/or hybrid teaching model, employed students now have the opportunity to both watch the videos of lectures and practice classes at any time and to sit for their midterms, as their physical presence is no longer obligatory. Also, they can now address their teachers at any time by either using chatbox or using video call, which is an option they gladly use, especially when they have a question related to the course itself.

The following year became an opportunity to expand students' knowledge by delving even further into the world of sociolinguistics. Given that a whole academic and calendar year had passed since the last time the students had studied these particular topics, there was uncertainty as to how much they had been able to retain since then. This was a particular concern, as the past year's courses had taken place online. The following year, however, with a seeming improvement in the global pandemic situation, the students were allowed to attend classes at the university in person once again. This entailed the teacher's physical presence in a classroom setting, though students themselves could also choose to follow the in-person classes remotely, ostensibly from the comfort of their own homes, behind a screen, be that a computer or a mobile device. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the varying experiences reflected a combination of outcomes: the students who had consistently proved themselves to be the most focused and engaged in the past-both in person and online-indeed also demonstrated that they were successfully able to recall the concepts which had most often been discussed and debated in class. On the other hand, many other students found themselves having to re-learn the materials that they had, theoretically, already mastered during the previous year. In terms of both subject matter and approach, this new academic year has been challenging. The textbook is now an anthology, which consists of a collection of essays covering the world of sociolinguistics from a more global perspective. This marks a significant shift from the English-speaking world, in that it goes beyond it, and the more Anglo-centric perspective they had been accustomed to learning from in the past, particularly when compared to the previous year.



It was important for the professors to ensure that their students maintained a broad perspective of the world, and to open their minds to parts of the globe they had no previous knowledge of.

As far as the approach goes, the hybrid model does essentially compel the educator to split or even double their attention between and/or towards both the students in front of them (who tend to be a numerical minority) and those attending online. This approach requires shifting attention to focus on the screen as well, as when they are sharing a screen, be it in the form of a video or a map, they are unable to follow the chatbox conversation. There is a mixed manner of participation from the students online-some simply turn on their microphones and chime in their responses, as they might in an in-person setting, while others patiently 'raise their hand' and wait to be called upon-which, again, is tricky as the platform is set up in a way so that only one window is visible at a time. Others online still participate only by commenting in the chat box-which can be advantageous for the professor, as a chiming sound is turned on and this brings their attention back to that window. Ultimately, however, it is difficult to state with certainty whether either model is superior to the other. Students can show up in person and still lack focus and participate with reticence, only when called out. The same goes for those online-many simply log in to receive participation points, and plan on studying for midterms/their final by going through the textbook. The students who do tend to show up, even if their participation is sparse and insufficient, tend to have had the opportunity to travel and are often quite interested in the world around them, having grown up with more access to the world, if nothing else then through the scope of their mobile phones. This helps ease the course material for them to process as we take a trip around the world and continent-hop.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH RESULTS

With the aim of investigating the reasons behind students' choices between online classes and face-to-face attendance, the authors of this paper have conducted a qualitative analysis by organizing focus groups during regular sociolinguistics classes. The focus group consisted of 5 male and female students who were asked 2 open-ended questions and 6 multiple choice questions related to the hybrid model and teaching sociolinguistics. After they gave the answers to the questions, the

moderators of focus groups (the teachers of sociolinguistics who hold lectures and practice classes) asked students to elaborate on their answers in order to gain more thorough answers.

When asked if, compared with last year, when sociolinguistics classes were exclusively online, they think that they are learning more in a hybrid setting this year, 80 % of students gave a positive answer, whereas 60% of them said that it is important for sociolinguistics to be taught face to face. Also, 80% of them claim that sociolinguistics is important for their professional development, which means that they are completely aware of the significance of this course, especially since 80% of them confirmed that their knowledge has been enriched by learning sociolinguistics. When asked about the biggest benefit of learning sociolinguistics, students gave the following answers:

- ◆ *Because it's incredibly important for our future endeavors*
- ◆ *Learning a lot about other nations and their tradition*
- ◆ *Knowing the language trends and how they change and affect us*
- ◆ *Learning about and understanding other cultures and people*

On the other hand, when asked about the biggest disadvantage of learning sociolinguistics, they said that:

- ◆ *Maybe the proximity(similarity) to other subjects*
- ◆ *There are no disadvantages*
- ◆ *Having to study for the grade*
- ◆ *There is no true disadvantage to sociolinguistics*

Finally, when asked whether they find the videos after the lectures and practice classes helpful, 60% of them gave a positive answer.

Those students who participated in the focus group are those who attend classes regularly face to face, so it should come as no surprise that they find classes in the classroom more suitable than online classes, as face-to-face communication provides them with feedback both from their teachers and their peers. Also, according to these students, learning sociolinguistics is better in the classroom as they feel more comfortable sharing their own thoughts, ideas and asking questions than it would be the case if they attended classes online only.

What we can conclude based on these answers is that students do find this course to be relevant for their overall linguistic knowledge, but they also think it is quite important to have the opportunity to attend these class-



es in the classroom, rather than having online classes. In other words, the hybrid model is considered to be a much better option for learning sociolinguistics than the online model.

7. CONCLUSION

Bearing in mind that education, in general, has suffered enormous changes in the previous period, it is extremely important to be able to define all teaching models and to choose the teaching model that suits the needs of your students. In the case of sociolinguistics, according to students at Singidunum University who regularly attend sociolinguistics courses, the hybrid model has most certainly been demonstrated to be the best option, as it combines online and traditional teaching models, taking the advantages of both models while, at the same time, eliminating their disadvantages. What we as teachers can conclude is that we should carefully analyze our students' needs in order to teach them about some of the main linguistic aspects, which they will later be able to use and put into practice as the basis of their professional careers. Moreover, it must be underscored that the students who participated in the focus group have yet to sit for their first midterms, let alone their final exams. Several weeks of coursework, revision, and knowledge assessment yet await, so it would be premature to reach definite conclusions with a degree of certainty when it comes to determining the advantages of the hybrid model over a traditional classroom setting.

Additionally, it has come to light that not every educator's experience teaching online or in a hybrid model setting has necessarily been universal. To be more precise, there are teachers who, due to their lack of experience or exposure when it comes to digital literacy, find themselves struggling with new technologies. Those hurdles can ultimately be overcome through practice and training but do require a learning curve. Furthermore, even those educators who are well-versed in new technologies in education and beyond have discovered that they prefer the dynamics of an interactive, in-person classroom setting. The goal is for students to be satisfied with the knowledge, but also for them to have the opportunity to grasp all the concepts in the manner which suits them best. For employed students, this usually defaults to online courses.

8. REFERENCES

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