DISRUPTION IN COMMUNICATION IN HYBRID FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING MODEL

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Abstract:

In the new digital era, within the hybrid teaching model used for foreign languages at Singidunum University, both teachers and students face various challenges: lack of communication between students in the classroom and those attending via Teams, scattered attention of lecturers who teach both in the classroom and to students online, reduced eye contact among interlocutors, etc. Therefore, the main goal of this paper is to analyze disruption in communication in the hybrid foreign language teaching model. For the purpose of this study, the authors have conducted quantitative analysis, using two online questionnaires: one for students, and one for foreign language teachers. The sample includes 125 students and 25 foreign language teachers. According to the research results, along with the number of benefits, the hybrid teaching model also introduces several drawbacks, such as the lack of eye contact, hindered interaction, and reduced nonverbal communication.

Keywords:

Disruption, Communication, Hybrid, Language, Interaction, Classroom, Students.

INTRODUCTION

According to Pauković and Krstinić [1], the hybrid teaching model is a combination of teaching in person and teaching by using digital technology simultaneously. We have already covered this topic in our previous studies, especially by mentioning its advantages. First, it allows those who are accustomed to the traditional way of learning (in person) to follow the course flow. On the other hand, it offers working students the possibility to simultaneously attend lectures from another location, saving them both time and money. This teaching model can use the most contemporary materials from the Internet, which are visible via a projector to those in the classroom, as well as to those attending classes through the Microsoft Teams platform. At Singidunum University, from which we took the sample for our study, the Microsoft Teams platform is used in the hybrid teaching model for all courses. It is fascinating how quickly students adapted to this type of teaching and the use of digital tools. The use of digital tools in a hybrid foreign language teaching model will be further explained in this paper.

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A part of the research results is taken from one study [2], with particular focus on the question: *Do you find it easier to learn a language with ICT tools?* According to those results, 112 respondents agreed with this, while only 10 did not. Another study [3] shows that all respondents still prioritize a teacher-led teaching process and that digital tools cannot replace the teacher.

According to Stanković and Stoimenov [4], information and communication technologies are crucial in contemporary society in educating new generations who live in the Internet era. Informatics and computer science have been introduced as a separate course in schools starting from the first grade since, without computer literacy, newer generations would not be strong competitors in the future job market. It is somehow implied that everyone needs to be digitally literate. In this regard, they should be capable of navigating a hybrid environment.

1.1. COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNICATION ISSUES

If we still believe that language learning is accelerated through teachers or mentors, then we need to highlight the importance of communication, which has significantly changed compared to traditional teaching methods. According to the Referral Center for the Methodology and Communication of E-learning [5], communication in education consists of the following components:

- Informational-cognitive,
- Socio-emotional.

The messages that are exchanged in written or spoken form via Teams — with or without the use of a camera —can be verbal and non-verbal (eye contact, voice — tone, intonation, pace, body language — gestures, movements, clothing, the distance between speakers, etc.). Moreover, the communication climate or atmosphere in the classroom where a foreign language is studied is also significant. We call this climate the 'energy' of the classroom. Participants should always feel safe, accepted, and relaxed, without fear of making mistakes or speaking in front of a group, and the teacher can always influence this.

When it comes to the socio-emotional components of communication, they are more important than mere knowledge of a foreign language. Speaking is ineffective if the participant cannot navigate social environments or society. Furthermore, emotional intelligence is closely related to social intelligence, which includes the ability to react appropriately in an emotional sense,

to endure unpleasant emotional experiences, to recognize emotions in others, resolve conflicts, and generally adapt within social settings. This competence is much more demanding to develop via Teams than in real-life communication. From a certain perspective, society is indeed in crisis, largely since these competencies are being increasingly neglected because of the influence of digitalization. This leads to alienation, withdrawal, lethargy, and other issues. The educational process should not only focus on sharing knowledge, but it should also include the upbringing and moral development of students and children. According to Klimova [6], a teacher needs to adopt an individualized approach to each student, both through Teams and in the classroom. Being a teacher in modern times is highly challenging. A teacher becomes a tutor who manages teaching processes, who is a mentor, or a guide. This role is far more extensive than it once was, as mentoring now occurs both digitally and in person. In the post pandemic landscape [7], [8] current challenges are confirmed in hybrid learning in the higher education context, especially when it comes to teacher-student interaction, due to the previously mentioned limitations.

If we were to analyze the hybrid teaching model conducted at Singidunum University in the previous few years, with a particular focus on foreign language teaching (the languages included are English, German, Russian, Spanish, Italian, French, Greek, and Chinese), we could highlight the main communication issues. First, eye contact is reduced—both with those on Teams via the camera and with those sitting in the classroom. The teacher simultaneously monitors both methods and divides attention between the two. When we don't look the interlocutor directly in the eyes, our attention tends to scatter more quickly. The second major issue is the teacher's immobility, the inability to move around the classroom, as they often adjust materials on the computer and ensure that those attending via Teams can see them continuously online. This immobility can lead to monotony and makes it challenging for students to watch and listen to the lecturer in the same setting for an extended time. The third problem is sound. Participants attending via Teams cannot always hear those in the classroom who read texts or ask questions clearly. On the other hand, the students who are in the classroom can hear participants on Teams well. The fourth issue is the exchange of non-verbal communication between the teacher and participants, as well as non-verbal communication, socializing, and interaction among participants themselves. In large groups, even if all participants turn on their cameras, the teacher cannot simultaneously

see the facial expressions of all participants. Frequently, participants do not turn on their cameras (because they are calling from work or are unable to), and the teacher sometimes has the impression that they are teaching a computer rather than people. Non-verbal communication, which often conveys much more than verbal communication alone, provides the teacher with feedback on whether they are doing something well or not. For instance, imagine a foreign language teacher dictating a text to their participants. If all cameras are turned off, the teacher will not know if they are dictating too quickly or too slowly, if the dictation is too difficult or too easy, or if they are expressive enough. Communication via the Internet is a new form of communication in which it is even more challenging to meet all participants' needs. This brings us to the fifth and perhaps the main issue: participants' focus and concentration. Feelings of lethargy, boredom, and monotony arise. Digitalization and the use of mobile phones and computers have led to reduced concentration—not only in developing children but also in adults. Constant interruptions and jumping from one content to another have altered our focus and attention. While attending several classes via the Microsoft Teams platform, a significant number of participants struggle to follow the course flow. Their thoughts wander, especially when disruption occurs, as this causes them to lose the thread. Those in the classroom have an advantage, at least in terms of attention. However, even here, problems arise. Most participants follow via the platform, leaving those in the classroom feeling lonely or too much at the center of the teacher's attention. Eventually, the teacher dominates the teaching process, and participants contribute to a lesser extent than ever. In foreign language learning theory, it has always been said that a successful foreign language class is one in which participants speak, reproduce the language, and the teacher remains silent. Nowadays, the teacher dominates the class. Participants find it easier to speak a foreign language with an interlocutor in person because this provides them with greater confidence. As a result, many eventually choose not to attend in person. The sixth issue is the lack of socialization and teamwork. These are factors that satisfy the need for belonging, which, according to Maslow, is a very important need that is being lost in this method.

Regarding technical issues that occasionally occur in the hybrid model (Internet traffic quality, computer problems, power outages, etc.), even though they are rare, when they do happen, the teaching process—and consequently the communication process—completely halts or becomes disrupted. This is most certainly another drawback of the hybrid model.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH RESULTS

The main goal of this study was to examine the types and extent of disruption in communication that occur during foreign language teaching in a hybrid model at various faculties and study programs at Singidunum University in Belgrade. Additionally, we aimed to compare the attitudes of foreign language teachers and students by distributing two separate questionnaires with similar questions.

The sample consisted of 125 students (91 female and 33 male students, with one respondent not declaring their gender) from undergraduate and master's programs, and 25 foreign language professors. Students from the following faculties and study programs were included in the study: Business Economics—39 students (31.2%), Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management—30 students (24%), Faculty of Informatics and Computing—17 students (13.6%), Faculty of Physical Education and Sports Management—1 student (0.8%), Anglistics—29 students (23.2%), and Pharmacy—9 students (7.2%). The surveyed students were from various years of undergraduate studies and master's programs. The sample included first-year, second-year, third-year and fourth-year undergraduate students, as well as 3 (2.4%) master's students. All respondents studied two foreign languages. All students at Singidunum University learn English, while a second foreign language was chosen as an option (Spanish, French, Russian, German, Italian, Greek, or Chinese).

The teaching staff who participated in the study consisted of foreign language teachers with diverse academic qualifications and work experience. Among the 25 surveyed teachers, 21 (84%) were female and 4 (16%) were male. Most teachers taught English at the university—14 (56%), while teachers of other foreign languages (Spanish, French, Russian, German, Italian, Greek, and Chinese) comprised 11 (44%) respondents. The teachers had varying academic titles and lengths of teaching experience. The work experience of the respondents varied: up to 5 years—2 (8%) respondents, 5 to 10 years—2 respondents (8%), 10 to 20 years—13 respondents (52%), and over 20 years—8 (32%).

If we think about communication difficulties in hybrid or online teaching models, the first thing that usually comes to our mind are technical problems, ranging from power outages and internet disruptions to issues with devices used to participate in classes. We examined the opinions of both teachers and students and posed

the following questions. The results are presented in Table 1. The question for both students and teachers was: *During foreign language classes in a hybrid model, do technical problems disrupt learning (quality of internet traffic, computer issues, power outages)?*

By analyzing the results, we can conclude that, for many teachers, technical problems affect the flow of the teaching process, while only about twenty percent of students believe that technical problems disrupt the learning process. We believe this outcome is due to the high level of digital competence among students, as they quickly resolve technical issues (e.g., using a mobile phone to connect to the class during a home internet outage). On the other hand, teachers lose significantly more time restoring an uninterrupted work process after an internet network failure in the classroom, as they rely on institutional devices and internet connections.

Table 2 presents the forms of class attendance, showing that only a quarter of the surveyed students always attend classes in the classroom. Based on this, we can see that most students often or occasionally attend online classes, and their responses are based on their personal experiences of participating in online foreign language classes.

2.1. CLASS INTERACTION IN A HYBRID TEACHING MODEL

2.1.1. Differences in teacher-student interaction in the classroom and online

We assume that the teacher pays more attention to students in the classroom than to those online. We wanted to check this assumption by asking two similar questions, one for students, and one for teachers. The question for students was: 'The teacher pays more attention to students attending classes in person and less to those who are online, which affects my motivation to participate in class.' The question for teachers was: 'One of the biggest challenges during the implementation of a hybrid class model is equally perceiving the feedback of students present in the classroom and those on the online platform.' The obtained results are presented in Table 3.

Table 1. The influence of technical problems on disrupting the process of foreign language learning and teaching in the hybrid teaching model

Perspective	Students	Teachers
Strongly Disagree	31,2%	4%
Mostly Disagree	28,8%	12%
No Opinion/Neither Agree nor Disagree	18,4%	8%
Mostly Agree	13,6%	14%
Strongly Agree	8%	52%

Table 2. Form of attendance in foreign language classes

	Students
Always in the classroom	25,6%
Always online	18,4%
Equally in the classroom and online	16%
More often in the classroom	14,4%
More often online	25,6%

Table 3. The teacher's focus on students in the classroom and online

Perspective	Students	Teachers
Strongly Disagree	44,8%	4%
Mostly Disagree	20,8%	8%
No Opinion/Neither Agree nor Disagree	12,8%	8%
Mostly Agree	15,2%	40%
Strongly Agree	6,4%	40%

What can be concluded based on the given results is that the majority of students believe that the teacher has more intensive interaction with students who are physically present in the classroom, which confirms our hypothesis. Of course, it should be emphasized that the surveyed students attend classes with several foreign language teachers, depending on their year of study and the study program. Therefore, we can conclude that their impressions are the result of comparing classes conducted by different teachers, making their conclusion relevant since it is not based on observing the lessons of just one foreign language teacher.

It is evident from the results from the teachers' questionnaire that the interaction between teachers and students in the classroom and students present online is uneven. More precisely, 80% of the surveyed teachers completely or mostly agree that they do not perceive feedback equally from students in the classroom and those online. Therefore, the interaction is more intensive with the group that the teacher focuses on at a given moment.

2.2. DIFFERENCES IN INTERACTION BETWEEN STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM AND THOSE PARTICIPATING ONLINE

There is almost no interaction between students in the classroom and online; it is sporadic and rare. This may have some influence on the quality of language teaching as there is no communication among all participants in the teaching process. Students attending classes online cannot see the students participating in the classroom.

To check the attitude of language teachers, we asked the following question: 'During hybrid foreign language classes, interaction between students who are present in the classroom and those online is very difficult or impossible to achieve.' The obtained results are presented in Table 4. The attitudes of students were analyzed through questions regarding disruption in non-verbal communication, which we will discuss further below.

2.3. DISRUPTION DUE TO THE LACK OF NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Our hypothesis is that disruption and hindered communication develop during hybrid teaching for several reasons. The teachers' attention is scattered as they are simultaneously focused on both groups of students. Due to this fact, they are unable to assess the engagement and participation of each student. This is further exacerbated by the fact that most students participating online do not turn on their cameras or microphones, which results in a complete absence of non-verbal communication.

We analyzed the extent to which it is important for students to see one another during class, to observe facial expressions and gestures, and we obtained the following results. The statement we made in the survey was: 'When I attend foreign language classes, I miss seeing my colleagues participating in class from the classroom because observing the facial expressions and gestures of the speaker is very important to me in oral communication.' The statement teachers were asked to respond to was: 'Students attending online foreign language classes without turning on their cameras reduce the level of interaction because their facial expressions and gestures are missing.' The obtained results are presented in Table 5.

Table 4. Interaction between students in the classroom and those participating online from the teachers' perspective

Perspective	Teachers
Strongly Disagree	12%
Mostly Disagree	12%
No Opinion/Neither Agree nor Disagree	0%
Mostly Agree	64%
Strongly Agree	12%

Table 5. The importance of using cameras during foreign language classes in the hybrid model

Perspective	Students	Teachers
Strongly Disagree	25,6%	4%
Mostly Disagree	20,8%	8%
No Opinion/Neither Agree nor Disagree	32%	0%
Mostly Agree	15,2%	44%
Strongly Agree	6,4%	44%

Table 6. The influence of using a camera on students' concentration and comfort during class

	Students
Strongly Disagree	11,2%
Mostly Disagree	11,2%
No Opinion/Neither Agree nor Disagree	20%
Mostly Agree	26,4%
Strongly Agree	31,2%

What can be concluded from these results is that the absolute majority of teachers believe that the use of cameras by online students is essential for a high level of interaction, whereas only 20.6% of students consider the use of cameras significant for the level of interaction. It is interesting to note that the majority of students do not want to turn on their cameras during foreign language classes, and some even refuse to use a microphone. We assumed that the reason for this is the feeling of discomfort when the camera is on. Logically, when a student feels uncomfortable, focusing on the lecture becomes more demanding. From the survey results, that are presented in Table 6, we can see that more than half of the students confirmed that they feel uncomfortable when their camera is on during class.

3. CONCLUSION

Based on the study on disruption in the hybrid model of foreign language teaching at Singidunum University, several key conclusions can be drawn. First, it has been confirmed that the hybrid model brings numerous advantages, but also significant challenges in communication between teachers and students. The lack of eye contact, hindered interaction, and reduced non-verbal communication are some of the issues affecting the quality of teaching. Students attending classes online often feel excluded compared to their peers in the classroom, while teachers encounter difficulties in focusing their attention and maintaining the dynamics of the lecture. From a technical standpoint, problems were identified as a significant factor that can disrupt the teaching process. Although students demonstrate high digital literacy and overcome these issues more easily, teachers perceive them as a serious challenge, particularly due to the use of institutional equipment and internet connectivity. The analysis of interaction revealed that teachers are more focused on students attending classes in the classroom, which can potentially negatively impact those joining online. This situation may lead to decreased engagement of students who follow classes online.

Finally, the research results indicate the need to improve the hybrid teaching model through enhanced technical infrastructure, better quality interaction, and greater integration of digital tools. Teachers should develop techniques that ensure equal teaching quality for all students, regardless of their mode of attendance. It is necessary to work on the development of this teaching model to ensure effective and high-quality communication among all participants in the educational process.

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