

## Feature Article

# A Case for Hybrid Learning: Using a Hybrid Model to Teach Advanced Academic Reading

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### Abstract

*The study investigates the use of the hybrid method in the teaching and learning of English reading for speakers of English as a second language. Through an interview, a questionnaire and class observation, the research seeks to investigate the benefits and drawbacks that the hybrid model would possibly bring to the course.*

**Key Words** *Hybrid course, EFL, ESL, reading course, CALL*

### Introduction

With the development and wide use of the computer and Internet, more teachers have turned to technology to help the instruction or assessment of their courses. Due to the increasing desire for multimodal, flexible education models at American universities over the past 30 years, *hybrid* or *blended* classes have arisen as a way of combining face-to-face interaction and online tools (Caulfield, 2011). According to the literature, research on hybrid courses mainly focuses on the following aspects: the students' self-efficacy (Hsu & Sheu, 2008; Yeou, 2016), the comparison between hybrid and traditional classes (Abdullah, 2018; Cubillos, 2007; Scida & Saury, 2005) or the design or challenges of hybrid courses in general (Caulfield 2011; Sanders, 2005). When it comes to using hybrid courses for language instruction, the research centers mainly on courses designed for native speakers or the teaching of foreign languages with the hybrid method (Abdullah, 2018; Gascoigne & Parnell, 2013). Due to the increasing number of online and hybrid classes at American universities in recent years (Lederman, 2018), university-bound students in Intensive English Programs (IEPs) could benefit from early introduction to the online learning model. Unfortunately, very few studies have been conducted on the use of the hybrid model in the teaching of English as a second language. In this preliminary study of a hybrid ESL reading course at an American university, we aim to better understand the effectiveness of the hybrid method for this population of students. We

hope our findings will not only fill a gap in the study of hybrid teaching for ESL classes, but will also benefit those who teach similar courses at other institutions.

### **Research Questions**

1. In what ways does this hybrid reading course meet the needs of multilingual graduate students?
2. How did the students perceive the effectiveness of the hybrid reading course?

### **Methods**

In order to answer the above questions, we conducted a qualitative case study of this class, using interviews, surveys, and class observation as sources of data. In the sections that follow, we first describe the course and then provide an overview of the participants and our data collection methods.

### **Course Description**

The course that we are presenting in this paper is designed as a hybrid reading class for international graduate-intent students at an Intensive English Program (IEP). This course is the final level in a 7-level program where the students are expected to be able to speak, read, and write at what the Common European Framework for Languages calls B2+, or *independent user* level (Council of Europe, 2020). In this academic reading course, the students practice reading and vocabulary acquisition strategies, learn to identify different text types, find and save academic source texts, and analyze the structure of IMRD (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion) journal articles.

As a hybrid course, the students met face-to-face in a traditional classroom setting for two classes each week; they participated in an out-of-class online learning environment for the third weekly class meeting by utilizing a course management system. The students' assignments for this class were made up of four parts: a textbook analysis, a vocabulary notebook, reading and analysis, and an annotated bibliography (see Figure 1).

| Assignment             | Requirements  | Modality          |
|------------------------|---|-------------------|
| Textbook Analysis      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• find a textbook in the library and order it</li> <li>• read the textbook</li> <li>• write weekly reports</li> <li>• make a plan at the beginning of the term</li> <li>• reflect on the process at the end of the term</li> </ul> | online submission |
| Vocabulary Notebook    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• write down words and phrases from the texts that the students were reading every week</li> </ul>   | offline           |
| Reading and Analysis   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• read the texts the students had collected</li> <li>• respond to a prompt</li> <li>• read and respond to their classmates</li> </ul>  | online            |
| Annotated Bibliography | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• find sources, identifying current and seminal sources</li> <li>• summarize and analyze these sources, writing a final reflection</li> </ul>  | online submission |

*Figure 1: Student Assignment Requirements and Modality*

As a hybrid reading course, the students were required to write their reflections on the assigned reading task and comment on several reflections from their peer classmates in the online system. The online discussion was expected to prepare the students for the next face-to-face meeting. For example, in one week, the students were required to read three articles on how to read academic texts and on the importance of taking notes. After reading about these new reading strategies, the students then discussed their way of reading in the online forum before bringing their thoughts to the class. In another online discussion, the students reflected on three academic journal articles on vocabulary notebooks. The students shared their experiences of reading these articles and their personal experiences in studying vocabulary and using vocabulary notebooks. Other students responded by commenting on their reading methods and providing suggestions. The instructor commented at the end of the discussions.

Unless otherwise stated, posts were expected to be 150 to 200 words in length and were usually due by midnight of the online class meeting day (Fridays). The students were required to read other posts and respond to at least two in 100 to 150 words within two

days after the initial assignments. They could comment on what other students wrote, ask them a question, recommend a resource or respond in any other way they think was appropriate. The instructor graded the posts and responses based on four criteria: content, language, format and participation. The criteria were further subdivided and made clear to all students in the rubric.

### **Data Collection**

The data from this class were collected primarily from three sources: interviews, a follow-up questionnaire, and class observations. Prior to the data collection, we completed human subjects training and obtained approval from the university Institutional Review Board. In order to collect information from the students, we first conducted in-person interviews with three students from the class. We recorded these interviews and coded their responses. The second source of student data was a questionnaire. Six months later, at the end of the first term of graduate study for these students, the same group was given a follow-up questionnaire consisting of multiple choice, a Likert scale, and open-ended questions designed to elicit students' perceptions of the applicability of the class for their graduate school preparation. The third source of data was a class observation. The first author of this article (Zhenyu) observed the weekly in-person classes throughout the duration of the entire 10-week term and took notes on the activities and patterns of student interactions. He was also added as a guest to the online learning management system (LMS) where he made note of how often and to what degree a student participated in the class discussions, as well as how frequently a student accessed different pages on the LMS.

To ensure that the students participating in the study would feel comfortable expressing their authentic opinions regarding the content and structure of the class, the teacher of the course (Linnea: the second author of this article) did not participate in the interviews or data analysis procedures. Instead, Zhenyu conducted the interviews, observations, and analysis independently. In analyzing the data and writing the article, Zhenyu checked his interpretations of the interviews and questionnaires with Linnea for further context and background information. This separation of these tasks was clearly explicated in the consent letter that the students signed in order to participate in this study.

### **Participants**

The students who participated in this study were all female graduate-intent students whose ages ranged from their early 20s to mid 30s. Since this class is the final level in the IEP, the students were all at advanced levels of English proficiency. One of these students came from a Spanish-speaking country in South America, majoring in literature;

one came from the Middle East majoring in engineering and the third was from East Asia majoring in social sciences. Table 1 shows a description of each participant:

| <b>Participant names</b><br>(all names are pseudonyms) | <b>Region</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Comfort level with online learning</b>  |
|--|---------------|------------|--|
| Aisha  | Middle East   | Early 20s  | No previous experience with online learning, but open to the experience.   |
| Maria  | South America | Early 20s  | No previous experience with online learning, not so comfortable, doesn't like technology.                          |
| Sunaki   | Asia          | Mid 30s    | No previous experience with online learning. Feels comfortable using technology and safe in an online environment. |

*Figure 2: Participant Demographics*

### **Data Analysis**

In order to analyze the data for this study, Zhenyu first transcribed and coded the interviews, moving from open codes to analytical codes (Meriam & Tisdell, 2016). He then checked these analytical codes against the notes he had made from his classroom and online observations as well as the questionnaire. In order to move these analytical codes into categories that answered our research questions, he wrote memos, diagrammed, and conferenced with Linnea, who was able to serve as both a member and peer check (Saldaña, 2016). As a member, Linnea was able to provide insider details into the interactions that Zhenyu observed in the class. She also reviewed Zhenyu's analysis and commented on whether it matched with her own understanding of the students' engagement with the in person and online material, thereby providing further context for Zhenyu's emerging codes. As a peer and the second author of this study, Linnea also served as a sounding board as Zhenyu processed the information from his data by listening to his emerging analysis, asking questions, and suggesting possible refinements. Based on the analytical codes from the interviews, the observation notes, the questionnaire, and our conferencing, Zhenyu began to construct categories in answer to our two research questions. Because of the small number of participants in our study, we expected our analysis to reveal conflicting perspectives on the usefulness and appropriacy

of this hybrid course, and we therefore paid close attention to areas of disagreement between our participants. Indeed, one of the benefits of qualitative research is the possibility of reaching into these conflicting perspectives, examining them, and commenting on how they might arise out of our participants' lived experiences.

## **Discussion**

Each of the students we interviewed for this study had different experiences with the class. Some were more comfortable, and some were less, but in general, all students found some benefit to having both the online and in-person component for this class. Below, we first summarize each student and her experience in the class. We then describe general findings that might be helpful for future teachers who are considering designing a hybrid course for their IEPs.

### **Aisha**

Aisha had had no experience with any hybrid course before, but she was glad to have some change. She thought the online component of the hybrid reading course prepared her well for the face-to-face instruction. From class observation, Aisha was a strong participant, regularly volunteering her opinion in full class and small-group discussions. On one hand, she reported that she liked reading her classmates' feedback, but on the other hand, she found the comments not so credible, since they came from different majors and were not supposed to read the same materials most of the time. That was why she thought online reading was necessary: they need time to read other people's threads with the online dictionary. Aisha was the most neutral one of the three to the hybrid format. She admitted the hybrid model was effective and flexible, but she thought it reduced the interaction with both the instructor and her classmates.

### **Maria**

This was also the first hybrid course for Maria, who liked the flexible schedule of the model. In class, we observed her to be an active participant, engaging with her classmates in small group and whole class discussions. Although she expressed her dislike of technology in the interviews, her comments regarding the online component of the course were generally positive. She felt that the online activity prepared her well for the face-to-face session and she enjoyed reading the feedback from her classmates, which increased her interest in the course and provided more opportunities for interaction with both the instructor and her classmates.

## Sunaki

In our eyes, Sunaki demonstrated many qualities typically seen in students from East Asia. In class, we observed that she was quieter than many of the other students and more self-disciplined, meaning that she came to class well-prepared and approached her work outside of class with thoroughness and care. She had had no experience of the hybrid format, but after taking this course, she expressed her strong preference to it. Even though, the online part increased her work, she enjoyed doing it, as it brought her security and plenty of time in posting her answers and comments. She even suggested the students should be required to respond to every thread of their classmates instead of just choosing two of them. To Sunaki, the online activity made her more confident in expressing herself and better-prepared for the classroom instruction.

### General Findings:

#### 1. **Students were initially unfamiliar with the hybrid model.**

The students we interviewed had little idea about what a hybrid course was like before taking the course, and none of them had taken a hybrid course before. Class observations showed that in the first two weeks, the students asked more questions on the set-up of the course and the requirements of the online activities. Since the IEP at this university offers no hybrid-model courses other than this one, it is unlikely that these students would have encountered a similar class, unless they had taken one in their previous degree programs.

#### 2. **The students agreed that the hybrid method has some advantages over the traditional model.**

Just as other studies have shown (Caulfield, 2011; Hensley 2005; Yeou, 2016), the students liked the flexibility that the hybrid course provided for their schedules. They were able to complete their assignments at their own pace. In addition, they had plenty of time to read a text before coming up with an idea. As Sunaki said, “Thanks to the online activity, we could have time to think a [*sic*] topic deeply, taking enough time...”

All the interviewed students agreed that the online part of the class prepared them well for the next face-to-face class. To quote two students,

I have to read my classmates’ point of view before going to class, so when I arrive to class, I already have something in mind to discuss about. So I think that I was prepared even more than the traditional

class...but in the traditional class, something more spontaneous [*sic*]... (Maria)

The discussion in the traditional classroom seemed more like the prompt idea. (Sunaki)

When asked in both the interview and the follow-up questionnaire what they would choose for a reading course among a traditional, a hybrid and a completely online course, they unanimously chose the hybrid. This is one of the few answers on which the students reached a complete agreement. The class observation also showed that students could join in the class discussion actively without spending much time on introduction or reading of the topic.

**3. Technology did not add an extra burden on the students.**

Students had conflicting opinions about the use of technology in the course. In our interviews, we found that the use of an online platform in itself was not attractive to the students. Maria even expressed her dislike of technology. However, they seemed comfortable enough with the online platform to the point where their online activities did not require extra work or an unnecessary learning curve. Almost all the interviewed students said they spent similar hours on the assignments for the class, whether they were online or offline. According to the interviews, each week, the students averaged five hours on the assigned tasks and reflections – about half for the posts and half for the reflections. The major obstacles that cost students extra time in completing course assignments came from the language and familiarity with the subject, obstacles that are likely to be encountered for any advanced-level reading class in an IEP.

**4. “Communication” is what the students considered important for the learning model.**

Although some other assignments were also submitted online, the part that most of the students liked best was reading the comments of their peer classmates on their reflections. Maria even suggested adding instant communication occasionally for further discussion. Aisha advised that “doing some written analysis of the discussions in class would help to take this assignment more seriously.”

We also noticed that students with different character traits benefited differently from this hybrid model. Maria, who we observed as rather outgoing and talkative in class, expressed her preference for the classroom discussions over the online interactions, while a Sunaki, who was a quieter student, said she was able to have more chances to express her opinions and felt “more comfortable” with the online form of

communication. The combination of these options provides a wider range of opportunities for interaction for students in hybrid classes. For students who come from more reserved cultures or who are more naturally introverted, having the opportunity to interact online could provide them with more time to process and create meaningful responses, instead of being driven by the requirements of spontaneous interaction. On the other hand, more outgoing students may need the face-to-face interaction in order to feel engaged in the class with their fellow students. Having both options in a hybrid model allows both learning styles to participate in ways that suit their communication preferences.

**5. Students' comfort with the hybrid format for other courses depended on the language skill being taught.**

When asked if they would choose the hybrid format for the other courses in language learning, the students expressed their reservation, especially for the courses that need more guidance from the instructor. For example, Aisha and Maria said they preferred the traditional face-to-face class for grammar. On the one hand, this response may be because they feel as though the online content would not provide them with the interaction they need or the opportunity to ask questions when presented with difficult grammar points. On the other hand, it is possible that these students would feel more comfortable than they realize in a hybrid grammar class; their reticence may be more due to their lack of experience with the hybrid model, rather than the unsuitability of this model for other language skills besides reading.

### **Conclusion**

From the student feedback and class observations, this hybrid reading course proved to be popular and effective for the ESL students interviewed for this project and was successful in familiarizing them with the hybrid model in preparation for their graduate studies. Despite our students' lack of familiarity with the format of a hybrid class, their positive feedback shows that they were able to adapt and benefit from the flexibility and different options for communication that the course offered. The online part of the course provided the students not only with time to think deeply but also with flexibility for their schedules. However, because our students did not feel that the technology itself was an attractive element of the course, teachers of hybrid classes should prioritize creating spaces for communication rather than simply relying on technology when it comes to designing hybrid language courses.

This preliminary study is rather limited due to the small number of interviewees and our inability to compare this class with other similar, face-to-face classes. Because this reading course is one-of-a-kind in our program, several of the students interviewed had

not had similar experiences in other classes in this IEP. Because of these limitations, it is challenging to generalize these findings for a wider audience. Still, our findings suggest that hybrid courses for international students in IEPs offer many of the same benefits that they do for mainstream domestic students. For one, the flexibility of scheduling may be a welcome reprieve from the intensity of IEP study. With one online day, students have the flexibility of working from home or completing their tasks during non-working hours. Additionally, the ability of students to communicate in a non-spontaneous manner may give more reserved students a wider variety of ways to participate in class and engage with the material. In contrast to fully online classes, hybrid language courses also offer the opportunity to engage with classmates in live environments, and to practice verbal as well as written fluency.

While we are not arguing for the full transition of IEPs to the hybrid model, the inclusion of hybrid courses could provide a wider variety of learning experiences for international students studying English. Particularly in the current environment of social distancing, hybrid courses may provide an attractive option for IEPs looking to provide in-person content while limiting the contact hours between teachers and students.

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