

# Exploring the benefits and disadvantages of introducing synchronous to asynchronous online technologies to facilitate flexibility in learning

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**Abstract.** This article examines the impact of online synchronous tutorials on eight second language (L2) practitioners enrolled in a Master of Arts (MA) in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) L2 Curriculum Development and Evaluation module. The module is delivered asynchronously and synchronously (lecture). To accommodate immediate interaction to the instructor and the students, weekly synchronous online tutorials were also included. These tutorials aimed to give the opportunity to learners to get their questions answered immediately and receive instant feedback, reinforce their understanding of the content covered and the assigned tasks, discuss issues of concern, share ideas and knowledge, and interact with the instructor for questions or problems. A mixed-method data collection approach was used (records of student participation, online interviews in the middle of the course and online interviews at the end of the 13-week module). The data analysis indicated a positive attitude towards tutorials, improvement in clarity in participants' understanding of the material studied and development of a sense of comfort and reassurance.

**Keywords.** e-learning, online synchronous tutorials, CALL teacher-training.

## 1. Introduction

According to literature, synchronous learning gives the opportunity to participate in meaningful face-to-face online interactions (Harris, Mishra, & Koehler, 2009; Hrastinski, 2008; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). It allows students to ask and teachers to answer questions instantly, and students to interact

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with fellow students and instructors, rather than learning in isolation (Hrastinski, 2008). Synchronous e-learning takes place through lectures, discussions, online tutorials, etc. It offers different ways of interaction, sharing and collaboration, flexibility and personalised learning opportunities (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005) in real time online (Higley, 2013). However, it requires setting aside a specific time slot in participants' busy schedule in order to be present (Hrastinski, 2008).

In practice, few instructors incorporate synchronous sessions in their online programmes. There are two reasons for this: (1) the large enrolments in online programmes reduce the chance of effective online interactions, and (2) instructors tend to believe that asynchronous forms of communication such as access to course material by simply clicking on course website links are enough as provision of communication (Wang & Newlin, 2001).

Online courses rely primarily on asynchronous communication for course information delivery; chat rooms are usually the only synchronous communication. This is not organised regularly, because most such courses have large enrolments; also, instructors believe it is enough for students to have access to course material through links on the course website. Moreover, instructors believe they already spend more time preparing web-based than conventional courses.

In earlier modules of our MA in CALL, it was noted that students needed synchronous contact with their instructor, not only during online lectures, but in additional synchronous forms, which would support them in their learning, giving them opportunities to ask questions and clarify issues on a more individual and direct level. Therefore, synchronous tutorials were introduced.

## **2. Method**

This exploratory research focusses on the merits of regular scheduled online synchronous communication between the instructor and students. We hypothesise that such interaction constitutes an important component of the course and enhances and clarifies the information accessed in asynchronous ways.

### **2.1. Participants**

The intervention of online weekly tutorials was implemented for an online MA in CALL 13-week module. Eight students took part with ages ranging from early 20s to 50s. Their teaching experience also varied from 20 years to complete novice.

## 2.2. Instrumentation and data analysis procedures

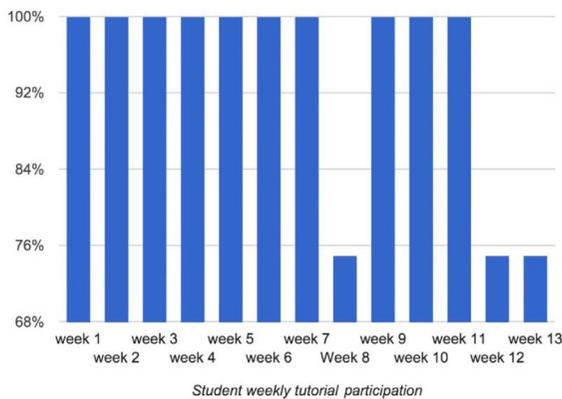
Three techniques were used to collect data: (1) a 13-week record of students' tutorial participations, (2) end of week 5 online interview questions on synchronous learning, and (3) a 23-question (5-point Likert scale) online survey on synchronous learning collected at the end of the module in the form of a Google Form survey.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Student tutorial participation

Student weekly tutorial participation was systematically recorded for all 13 weeks.

Figure 1. Student weekly tutorial participation



According to participation records, most students participated in the tutorials on a regular basis: all during ten weeks and six during three weeks. When students could not attend during scheduled times, arrangements were made to make up for them. This was indication of the value students put to tutorials.

### 3.2. End of week 5 online interview

An online interview was carried out at the end of the week 5 tutorial by the instructor. It aimed at finding out how the eight students valued the tutorials after five weeks. The study revealed the following.

All students found the tutorials beneficial and liked the fact they had the opportunity to meet in real time online to ask questions and have points clarified. Three out of seven felt motivated by the tutorials and found that they made them keep up to date and kept them on their toes.

Students liked the fact that they were not working in isolation. Five of the seven students who had the tutorial with other students liked the fact they had the opportunity to exchange ideas with them. Two students said the tutorials suited their audio/video learning style. Four students liked having the tutorials on a fixed date and time which suited them, particularly halfway through the week; that gave them time before the tutorial to go over the material and be ready during tutorials to ask questions and go over tasks, and have the rest of the week to complete them.

### **3.3. End of module online survey**

Further information regarding student attitudes towards the tutorials was collected at the end of the module with the use of a Google Form. These data revealed the following.

Overall, seven students were satisfied with the tutorials. All students felt very satisfied and four were satisfied with the tutorials' value in helping them improve their professional effectiveness. Seven students found the tutorials a very motivational experience.

Seven students felt the amount of time dedicated to the tutorials met their needs. Regarding the duration of the tutorials, students' opinion varied from 60, 45, 30 to 15 minutes. Two students said "as long as needed". Five students said the tutorials should take place once a week, two students said once a fortnight, and another said they should take place on demand. Six students said they did not find anything they disliked about the tutorials. One said not all tutorials were effective; another said they were sometimes too long. Five students said the addition of the tutorials helped them in their overall performance enhancement, two said very probably and one said probably. All students said they recommend the tutorial to future students.

The conclusions drawn from this survey supported the end of week 5 interview results. All students felt the weekly tutorials helped them in the construction of their weekly knowledge, skills and experiences in the topics covered each week. All the students valued the tutorials. On the whole, students were in favour of regular tutorials and felt a sense of comfort and reassurance.

## 4. Discussion and conclusions

The success of e-learning is associated with effective asynchronous and synchronous communication with the materials and the participants. This study examined the impact of online synchronous tutorials with eight second language practitioners enrolled in an MA in CALL Second Language Curriculum Development and Evaluation module. The results suggest that the incorporation of online synchronous tutorials gave the opportunity to students to participate in meaningful face-to-face real time online learning and interaction, share their understanding of the materials studied, both with the instructor and other fellow students, discuss and clarify issues, and achieve a better awareness of the topics studied. They were also given the opportunity to engage in flexible and personalised learning opportunities, in other words to share their learning and not work in isolation. This developed a sense of comfort and reassurance, since the module was delivered online. The tutorials seemed to give an opportunity to students to reassure themselves in their understanding of the concepts covered and the tasks they were required to work on. In some way, the tutorials allowed many students to revisit the content of each week, to clarify concepts discussed in the lectures or presented in the e-learning area, and to clarify what they had to do in terms of tasks. The results support the arguments presented in the literature about the benefits of synchronous learning (Harris et al., 2009; Higley, 2013; Hrastinski, 2008; Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005; Simonson et al., 2012).

This study has several limitations. The number of participants was only eight students. Students in this study chose to do the MA in CALL, knowing that participation in this course would require synchronous mode. Students in this module may have different abilities and motivation levels than other course populations, which may limit the generalisability of this study.

In conclusion, there are meaningful benefits associated with the inclusion of weekly tutorials in e-learning courses. This module tutorial inclusion allowed the instructor to perceive the level of awareness of new knowledge of students and cater for it during the tutorials and the students to have online face-to-face interaction with their instructor and clarify any misconceptions or difficulties they had with the module.

## 5. Acknowledgements

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