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# Critical Issues and Practices for Hybrid and Online Teaching and Learning: Building Improved Models for 21<sup>st</sup> Century English Language Learning

**Abstract.** This article discusses key topics related to hybrid and online teaching. An overview is provided followed by a discussion of programs and online opportunities for success. The relationship of online and hybrid course delivery in the content and STEM fields is presented, followed by implications and recommendations for future research. Critical issues for English Language Learners and educators is explored, including strategies for aligning course content and online platforms.

**Keywords:** online, hybrid, English Language Learning, technology, STEM.

## Introduction

How do we effectively communicate and revitalize the teaching and learning experience in the technology enhanced educational environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? In many complex multicultural, multilingual environments, the learning of the English language is essential to success personally and professionally. Comparative examination of the wide variety

of methods employed in achieving this learning objective to improve teaching of English in online and hybrid settings reveals a multiplicity of strategies successful in engaging learners with positive outcomes. The demand for online and hybrid coursework continues to be at the forefront of trends in education and dominates academic discussions (Boothe & Caspary, 2016). A myriad of programs and online opportunities support this mode of teaching and reinforce self-directed learning strategies and online platforms.

Critical issues and practices for English Language Learners (ELLs) and educators of ELL students is discussed. Content area instruction will also be emphasized as it relates to English teaching and learning. A demonstration of methods and lesson components along with current approaches in course design will be presented. Examples from hybrid content area coursework in science are shared as well as online course design for multicultural teaching. This paper utilizes examples and student samples from actual university online and hybrid coursework. It provides an overview of the value and implications of technology in language learning and explores essential tools and their benefits utilized in the content and outcomes of this study.

## **Developing Online Best Practices**

All levels of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are undergoing rapid transformations. Numerous complexities exist within communities and nations composed of multicultural environments and multilingual citizens. The comparative examination of the specific education systems designed for principal language learners in such complex cultural and linguistic settings is and continues to be crucial in determining best practices as educators strive to build an educational culture that fosters innovation in, and enhancements of learning experiences.

The close critical comparative examination of the various methods, particularly online learning, employed in the teaching of the principal national languages in developed complex multicultural nations with multilingual populations, such as France, Great Britain, Poland, Israel and the United States provides opportunities to make significant improvements in the teaching of English as a New Language (ENL) within environments across nations and continents. Designing online courses for

English Language Learners ELLs and educators is a challenging endeavor that requires unique and varied strategies for success.

For example, designing curriculum for language teaching that incorporates Problem-based Learning (PBL) has been shown to actively engage learners from diverse backgrounds. PBL and collaboration in online coursework have been shown to develop a community of inquiry encouraging learners to use critical thinking in order to build knowledge and engage in discourse (Stover, 1998). Employing the PBL pedagogy for linguistically diverse students encourages them to interact and engage in real world problem solving. Through the use of collaboration, community involvement and active communication, essential language skills can be mastered and reinforced, regardless of the language involved.

The complex and diverse needs of English Language Learners require educators to engage students and develop online best practices that provide high levels of student achievement. Educators must develop multi-dimensional technologies to address the specific needs of these students. The pedagogical potential to enhance teaching and learning for linguistically diverse students is central to goals and objectives of online course design. At the university level, students are requesting online and blended learning. University educators are working to develop new online, asynchronous, courses as well as convert face-to-face traditional courses to online and hybrid platforms.

Key aspects of online best practices include digital design that provides specificity and is targeted toward the course content and expectations for the learner. The digital content must be clear and comprehensive including appropriate lessons, scaffolding and the building blocks necessary to ensure student learning. Rubrics and assessment that will provide feedback for the student and the instructor are essential for success. The implementation techniques that accompany the coursework must be tailored to fit the skill sets of the students and relate to their needs and the components of the course materials. These implementation techniques are best received and most effective when they are appropriate for online course development and delivery.

It is crucial to leverage exemplary strategies, capturing and sharing cutting-edge experiences that lead to quality courses and student success. A key component of these endeavors is developing and utilizing state of the art technology and coursework, while incorporating outstanding

resources and methods to reach educators and students. High-quality technology infrastructure and timely support for online learning platforms is necessary to ensure a level of confidence for educators. Continued dialogue with colleagues regarding international lessons learned is important for maintaining and cultivating this network and accompanying opportunities. By engaging in information gathering regarding language learning methods and processes employed in varied locations and situations, educators across the globe become well versed in the latest strategies and advances in online education. In order to teach an additional language, it is necessary to value and welcome the home language of the student. As we explicitly honor languages other than English, we are also able to create curriculum and build spaces that give students the tools to do so as well, bridging cultures and languages (Barbian et.al., 2017).

The economic impact of online education is significant and dramatically contributes to changes at institutions of higher education as they reassess their goals and philosophies. Incorporation of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in education at all levels is tantamount to success as education is transformed for 21<sup>st</sup> century learners with high expectations for interactive instructional technologies.

### **Online Teaching Presence for Language Learning: Strengthening a Community of Inquiry**

The fully online learning environment is potentially challenging when it comes to teaching presence and promoting a community of learners. It is crucial to investigate the three components of cognitive, social and teaching presence for online language learning. Each serves an essential role and is defined and its impact addressed as an active learning strategy with multilayered effects. Connecting language learners in an online teaching environment is essential and integration of cognitive, social and instructor presence will support language learning. In the online classroom, critical thinking skills and actively engaged learners are keys to student success. The development of essential questions to enhance learning and critical thinking is valuable including interactive discussion along with reflection.

Social presence and collaboration provide avenues for student language learning in a virtual environment. Student interaction including pedagogy on culturally relevant teaching encourages students on their academic journey and plays a critical role connecting students and the curriculum. Collaboration also supports the creation of a strong learning community (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Finally, instructor presence is an integral part of online language learning and has strong implications for creating linkages and allowing students to navigate the facets of communication and learning.

### **Teamwork in the Virtual Classroom**

Teamwork leading to increased English language acquisition across the curriculum by actively engaging students in meaningful learning in this innovative model of instruction is essential. There has been a significant proliferation of ICT that has yielded profound changes. Innovative ICT curricula takes on numerous dimensions including the ability to revolutionize the learning experience, captivate and empower learners and challenge them to success. Incorporation of technology in various forms is at the forefront of best practices for 21<sup>st</sup> century English language learning coupled with accurate assessment that carefully measures student growth and achievement. These cohesive strategies in combination hold a number of opportunities for specific and practical English language learning academic pursuits.

ICT serves a significant role in developing online cognitive, social and teaching presence (Stavredes, 2011). Through online learning, the incorporation of appropriate communication skills and components can readily take place across nations and continents. Utilization of inquiry and the interaction of cognitive, social and teaching presence focusing on a spectrum of significant themes results in learning (Garrison, et. al., 2001).

Key strategies contribute to creative English language learning across the curriculum, incorporating technology, and building momentum to support students and educators. The pedagogical potential including meaningful research opportunities and analytics, as well as strategies for educators to frame best practices in online language learning focused on the diverse learning needs of students strengthens success.

At the forefront of best practices in English language acquisition, PBL has been found to be successful in engaging learners in relevant settings that reinforce and sustain learning across the curriculum. PBL is a flourishing approach to learning that is extremely useful in promoting critical and analytical thinking, and in addressing the rapid technological changes and dynamic workplace of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. PBL is founded on an unconventional pedagogical model when viewed alongside the conventional didactic one and it offers greater benefits to the quality of student learning (Nicolaidis, 2012). A key objective focuses on designing online curriculum for English language teaching that incorporates PBL and actively engages learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. If we are to assume a multicultural environment, then we must acknowledge that there will be a multilingual component to the circumstance. ENL for a portion of the learning group introduces an added level of complexity to the instructional design. The instructional designer is confronted with an ENL within a PBL dynamic, which becomes one of the impacting variables in the learning environment.

## **Opportunities in Hybrid Learning**

The strength of the hybrid or blended learning model is that the instructor can create a balance between the total online learning platform and face-to-face activities that have the momentum to positively impact the dynamics of instruction in ways that can not be accomplished in a totally virtual environment. Students have the opportunity to interact and fuse online and traditional learning to reinforce the learning experience and outcomes. The opportunity to engage in face-to-face informal conversation will impact the group interrelationships and strengthen learning through collaboration and immediate feedback and discussion. There are positive aspects to learning a task within a group at the same time as colleagues and fellow students learn. There are a variety of valuable hybrid activities that can be reinforced through supportive online activities and lessons. Problem-based learning activities, flipping the classroom, completing reading and exercises online and addressing higher order thinking skills in a face-to-face setting, as well as completing assessments online are all essential components of the hybrid or blended classroom. The incorporation of this method-

ology must include strategies for aligning course content and online platforms.

Positive interaction with community, national and international educators provides rich and high quality language learning experiences adding value to learning and setting the stage for future accomplishments and success. Building relationships, fostering collaboration and partnering with educators through sustained community engagement is rewarded by positive communication creating new avenues to inspire creativity and empowering critical thinking. This will be further supported through online learning activities while engaging in face-to-face community interaction and collaboration with educational partners focused on cooperative endeavors, outreach and school and community engagement. This type of hybrid learning can be expanded to myriad contexts and disciplines. By focusing on building partnerships and reinforcing workplace skills across the spectrum of responsibilities, robust opportunities are created to challenge and inspire students and educators. When providing multiple modes of instruction, instructors are able to combine key aspects of their course in ways that will be of the most benefit to students and apply to a self-directed learning environment coupled with multiple modes of learning.

### **Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and Other Fields**

Content area instruction, particularly relating to STEM fields, is crucial to emphasize the importance of cross disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning that is essential for ELL students. “Conceptual knowledge developed in one language helps to make input in the other language comprehensible” (Cummins, 2000). Between problem based, and subject specificity, it should be possible to build and sustain interest in English language learning even for the STEM post-baccalaureate student population.

This endeavor is approached utilizing multiple pedagogies and developing curricula focusing on essential elements appropriate for a variety of cultures and PBL content areas including STEM disciplines. PBL can be used to actively engage learners and bridge the gap between English

language learners and their subject matter. Methodology rooted in inquiry is particularly effective for teaching science and mathematics (Stoddart, et.al., 2002). ENL students are frequently taught and evaluated on the basis of their reading and writing proficiencies and not on their abilities to apply ENL in nonlinguistically learning situations which has major implications for ENL students in STEM disciplines. This area requires substantially greater research than is often anticipated. It is not just a teaching issue but is a linguistically diagnostic issue as relates to STEM disciplines. A simple example will illustrate how many different words in the English language can be used to imply multiplication addition-plus, combine, added to. All of these simple terms and others imply the arithmetic function of addition, and so it becomes a far more complex matter to define for ENL students what the words that they are reading imply (Boothe & Wickstrom, 2017). There are multiple other terms depending on the STEM disciplinary situation. STEM requires students to learn more English than they do in their reading or language arts class. They have to learn a whole separate vocabulary and how to interpret it in order to be able to succeed in a STEM disciplinary situation. This is a new discovery and is one that is worthy of substantial investigation at multiple levels.

## **Implications and Recommendations for Future Study**

This overview of the critical issues and practices of online and hybrid course delivery followed by the discussion of programs and online opportunities for success has been provided to stimulate creativity and innovative teaching and learning. Online and hybrid course delivery in the STEM fields and the implications and recommendations for future research is being explored and advanced globally on a daily basis. English language teaching and learning is undergoing a rapid transformation into innovative learning environments that are connected, flexible and collaborative. Determination and pursuit of all of these above actions has and will continue to bring significant positive recognition and benefits to online English language acquisition as we build improved models for 21<sup>st</sup> century English language learning. The accomplishment of these endeavors will require a substantial amount of time and dedication and the outcomes of this work will benefit the broader educational community and expand to international and global programs.

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