

CONCEPTUALIZING A HYBRID MODEL OF TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH - CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract

The paper aims to conceptualize a hybrid model of teaching Business English and investigates whether this model would be suitable for the transition from online teaching to face-to-face teaching or whether the Romanian Education Law should provide it as an option for language instruction to complement traditional models and to ensure a more flexible environment. We predict the challenges to its adoption, considering that students have different language proficiency levels.

Next we identify the principles of designing a hybrid model of language instruction, adapted to learners, who have at least an intermediate language proficiency. Furthermore, we highlight the role of gamification in improving vocabulary and the creation of a content rich practice book for business communication.

Our results show that, a hybrid model could become a rule not only to face unprecedented disruptions but also to generate profit in higher education institutions focused on attracting diverse students through flexible programs of education. However, the hybrid model of teaching Business English takes time and effort to be tailored and implemented for each group of study and for each level of language proficiency. From this perspective, hybrid teaching can be challenging for language teachers who teach beginner or pre-intermediate classes.

Keywords: Business English, hybrid model, conceptualization, challenges, implementation, learning outcomes

JEL Classification: A00, A22

1. Introduction

The teaching activity conducted during the pandemic has taught us that a one-size-fits-all teaching model does not exist. Most professors had not met their students before so it was challenging for them to build rapport on Microsoft Teams or on other educational platforms to anticipate students' needs. Despite disruptions, some students adjusted relatively quickly to the online format whereas other students needed more time to integrate themselves in the new learning space.

The combination of teaching models in the acquisition of a foreign language (online and on campus) can be considered, beyond the framework provided by the State of Alert, if it is

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based on a coherent and flexible approach in the entire educational system, from a structured curriculum on two levels, online and face-to-face, that can be combined to complement one another, to legislative changes and training of teachers who want to embrace the hybrid model. Analyzing the European Commission's Guide to Combined Teaching, we highlight several areas of action that can ensure the success of combined teaching in higher education, such as the management of educational institutions (i.e. supporting teachers in decision making, developing a curriculum with objectives relevant to combined teaching models, the university culture based on collaboration, common vision and so on), the legislative amendments (i.e. accreditation of the combined model, fulfillment of associated legislative requirements, access of teachers to professional development, etc.), the university culture (e.g. fostering collaboration inside the community, sparking dialogue between all parties involved and evaluating students based on the principles of transparency and fairness).

According to the statements in the media, The Ministry of Education intends to issue an Emergency Ordinance to propose that the activities carried out through specific electronic, computer and communications resources be recognized. These activities and their share will be provided in the quality standards that will be developed and approved by the institution accrediting the types of education (ARACIS), by differentiating the types of education, according to each field of study, because each field has specific prerequisites, depending on the undergraduate, master and doctoral study cycles.

The main goal of a hybrid model for teaching Business English is to apply the principles of both face-to-face instruction and online instruction successfully. Thus, we combine the didactic concepts underlying the online method with those underlying the face-to-face method in order to design and implement a hybrid model for third-year students at the School of Computer Science for Business Management. The teaching-learning processes in the hybrid model require an effective strategy that works synchronously and asynchronously, which can be brought into action by teachers experienced in both face-to-face and remote teaching.

The education technology sector can provide universities the right tools to enable hybrid teaching and learning such as interactive displays, web cameras, audio setups, collaborative tools and UC solutions. Some European universities have already adopted a hybrid model for teaching and learning with a focus on remote teaching, which has allowed teachers to offer interactive seminars and innovative activities as an intuitive solution during the pandemic. Moreover, the model has provided the same experience for learners whether they are remote or onsite. Students have been helped to be able to learn and engage from different locations. A collaborative learning environment should be based on a thorough understanding of the concept of hybridity in a specific discipline and its implications for effective implementation. The delivery of Business English classes is ensured by adopting new technologies that provide touch-screen capabilities and integration with popular video conferencing software like Microsoft Teams. Thus teachers and students can connect and share cloud-based annotations engaging both the students present and the students online at the same time. For example, an effective way to generate debates and ensure everyone's participation is by splitting the study group into smaller groups of students then return to the main call to tackle their ideas and findings. The pandemic has had a significant impact on how teachers and students respond to technology and how it can be handled to provide a balance of independence and teamwork. Obviously, the way students see hybrid learning will lead to an increase/decrease in demand for specific university programs. If they want

to embrace a hybrid model of learning then universities will have to shape the future of education, tailoring their programs, investing in new technology and offering more incentives to the teaching staff.

2. Principles of Designing the Hybrid Model of Teaching Business English

The State of Alert and the prolonged period of online teaching required extensive use of technology to ensure the continuity of the learning process. The State of Alert restrictions in Romania were lifted in March 2022 and all schools had to return to face-to-face teaching. Many professors and student organizations expressed their concerns over the immediate shift to class attendance and asked for a transition period in which hybrid models could be designed and implemented to integrate the students in attendance and the online students on an equal footing. The proposal was rejected because the provisions of the Romanian Education Law do not allow educators to adopt hybrid teaching. The education programs of universities are accredited and get funds if the teaching activities are carried out in a face-to-face format. Thus it has been particularly important to us that, thanks to the technical equipment at hand, we identify the principles of a hybrid model of teaching Business English (see the figure below) and how our students can benefit from hybrid methods, which convey a sense of togetherness and promote interaction between teachers and students on the one hand, and between students present in the classroom and remote students, on the other hand.

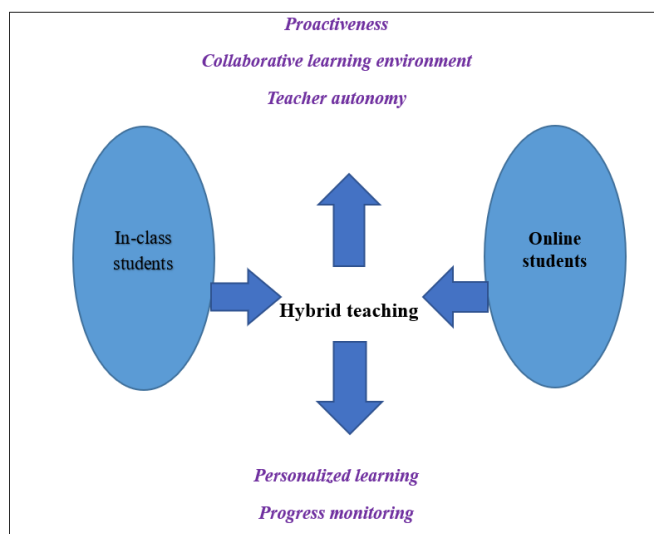


Fig. 1: Principles of a hybrid model of teaching Business English

Conceptualizing or formulating a hybrid model for teaching English business is relevant because it aims to change both the addictive behavior of students after two years of online education, by assessing their motivation and availability for change, and the development of a combined teaching plan on the Microsoft Teams platform and on campus simultaneously, which provides a flexible and proactive learning environment and a regular assessment of language skills during teaching, through online and written tests in-person,

by rotation. Also, to improve the teaching and assessment methods of the hybrid model, the monitoring of learning results includes constant student feedback.

Some researchers consider that blended learning and hybrid learning apply the same principles and methods while others prefer the term hybrid-flexible, which is frequently used in the hyflex instructional approach for course formats, which merge face-to-face and online learning [1]. At this point, we suggest referring to the concept of hybrid teaching of ESP as a form of blended learning in which face-to-face lessons are substituted partially by online learning. From another perspective, blended learning incorporates five models: the replacement model, the supplemental model, the buffet model, the emporium model and the fully online model [2]. These can be implemented in various formats but only the first one, the replacement model, seems to be in congruence with the hybrid model.

A comprehensive study conducted by [3] shows how a hyper-hybrid learning space for students and teachers learning and working across countries works based on five design principles: “a. Rhizomatic places and knowledge forms, b. Dissolving dichotomies in education, c. Creating a niche in the environment, d. Breadth and depth of the collective and e. Value-sensitive spaces.”

Our study relies on the principles of face-to-face teaching and online teaching in tandem which guide the design of the Business English lessons for a hybrid space in which acknowledgement and collaboration are determinants of success in communication. [4] refers to “the *opportunity cost* of course design deciding what cannot be omitted from a course and what can be omitted without serious ill-effect”.

- Proactiveness

In this study, the conceptualization of a hybrid model in education can be supported by the quality of teachers to be proactive. I believe that every teacher has exercised his or her ability to make quick decisions during the teaching process. Some teachers focused on group projects, others initiated personal projects out of a desire to provide students with an interactive framework for acquiring the economic language. During the pandemic, we identified solutions to the problems that arose in online teaching. Thus, we initiated the project of elaborating a practice book suitable for face-to-face, blended and synchronous Business English teaching and learning. Since it focuses on genres of business communication, we included authentic texts and activities designed to improve 3rd year students’ soft skills, specifically to understand the features of business communication in various contexts so that they could achieve various tasks in the workplace.

- Collaborative learning environment

The design of the lessons facilitates communication between students and contributes to the creation of a space for exploring various topics aimed at developing creative thinking and problem-solving skills. The instructional material used in face-to-face classrooms should be adapted to the hybrid format because educational videos, audio clips and gamification can increase student engagement. The hybrid model provides a learning environment in which students are encouraged to speak their mind, to think creatively and to face any challenge with innovative solutions. The activity below, taken from our practice book, exemplifies how teachers can assess the communicative competence of their students.

“Watch Bob Davids speaking about leadership without ego (<https://youtu.be/UQrPVmcgJJk>) and answer the questions below:

Why did Bob exemplify the interplay of money, quality and time?

Which personalities inspired Bob and helped him build his visionary self?

Did he manage to make himself understood in crisis situations?

Did his actions impact the Chinese workers’ perception of a manager?” [5]

In a dynamic hybrid space we can rely on games that arouse students’ interest and increase their concentration. “Wordle” is a free vocabulary game in which players are allowed up to six trials to find the word of the day. All players get the same word each day but it can be played only once per day on the website of the game. Letters can be repeated in words more than once. Every student needs to take the following steps:

- Type a five-letter word
- Check the color of the letters

If one or several letters are green, they are in the word of the day and have the same position. If one or several letters are yellow, they are in the word but their position does not correspond to the position of letters in the word of the day. If one or several letters are gray, they are not in the final word.

- The player needs to type in proper words that will eliminate other letters otherwise he/she might be in this unfortunate situation:
- Show the result of the trial; if you manage to deduce the word, look up its meanings and compose a sentence using the identified word.

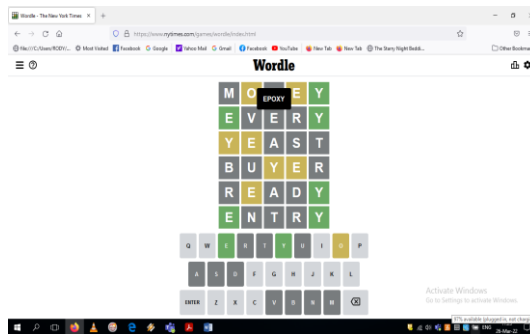


Image 1: Playing Wordle – Failure to Deduce the Word (Source: www.nytimes.com)

We can also test programs that support vocabulary building such as Splat-O-Nym, Read Naturally® Live, Read Naturally® Encore, Read Naturally® GATE, One Minute Reader® Live and One Minute Reader® Books/Audio CDs. The first one is an app for iPad that can teach vocabulary through questions about meaning from context, synonym questions and antonym questions, then it checks the answers and awards points for the correct ones. The activities are fun and engaging as students can

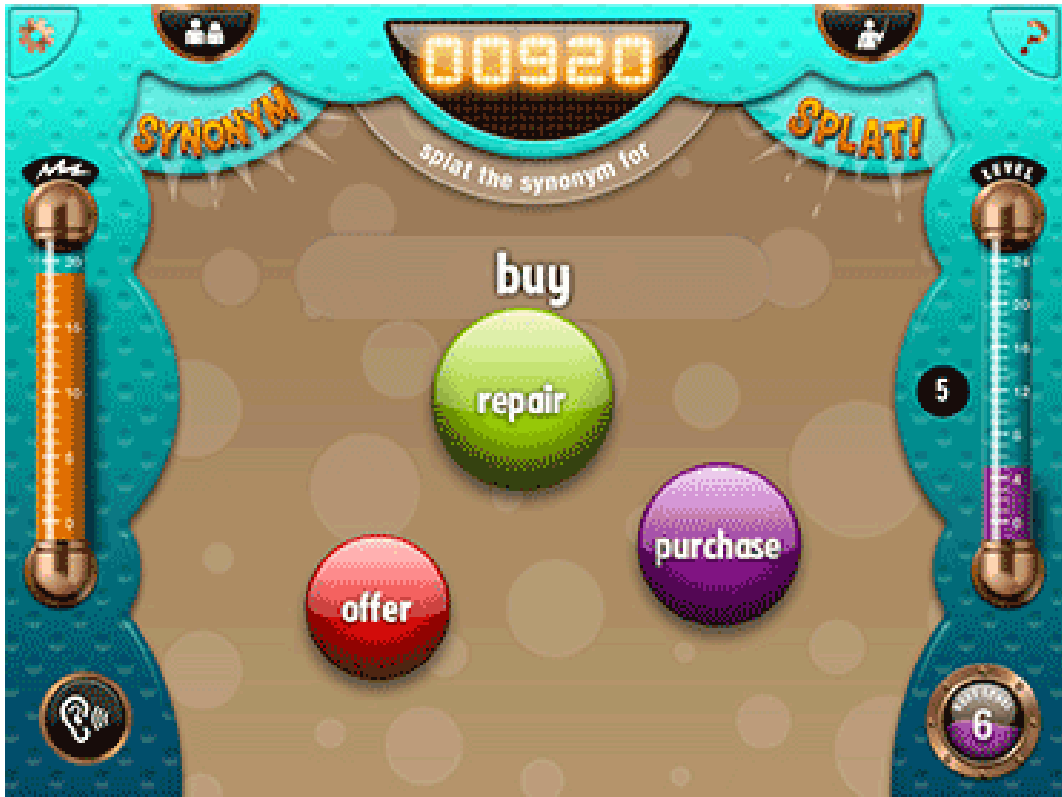


Image 2: Synonym Splat

(Source: www.readnaturally.com)

Read Naturally® Live is a cloud-based software that enhances fluency and helps students to comprehend vocabulary with audio definitions of key words. The next program, Read Naturally® Encore, is a print-based program that improves fluency and phonics and provides glossaries of key words to build vocabulary. Unlike Read Naturally® Live, Read Naturally® Encore, Read Naturally® GATE is a teacher-led program targeted at small groups of beginners who are taught the foundational skills of phonics and fluency. For example, each student starts the game in level one of the Synonym Splat Activity and, based on performance, he/she can move up and down through 24 levels. If the student splats the correct synonym, it stays on the screen with its target word for a while so that the student acknowledges the connection between the words. If the student's answer is incorrect, the target words appear again on the screen after a couple of new target words to offer the student another chance to tap the synonym. The results reports are forwarded to the teacher who will create new activities to improve their vocabulary like creating word families to cultivate the students' awareness and interest in business vocabulary.

- Teacher autonomy

By embracing a hybrid learning model, teachers can reach every student. Moreover, they can choose from a myriad of teaching resources for Business English like text-based material, videos, Ted Talks, gamified lessons, etc. Each teacher has a desired style of teaching, and the variety of resources equips them to help students grasp business concepts

faster. Game-based learning is popular among students due to their addiction to play various video games that enhance their creativity, critical thinking skills and decision-making skills. Some students argued that video games made them understand that stress and pronunciation are very important in conveying meaning.

- Personalized learning

The hybrid model supports personalized learning in the sense that the learning activities can be tailored to suit different learning styles according to the students' linguistic competency. If the teacher proposes relevant lessons for students to identify their role in the workplace, he/she catches their interest by creating a personalized approach, where students can see how the lesson will be applied in real business contexts.

- Progress monitoring

If the methods of teaching in the hybrid model are integrated in a systematic and coherent structure, the learning process unfolds smoothly. They can be categorized as active-participatory methods, methods based on role-play and games, methods for developing creativity and methods for developing critical thinking. These methods can be combined to enhance an educational experience, which can generate immediate feedback and performance monitoring. Formative assessments play a significant role in monitoring students' progress. They can create a teaching and learning environment where language development is not considered a simple linear process, but rather a more complex system that requires scaffolding, explicit and cohesive processes of feedback and permanent adjustment through relevant interchange. Evaluation aims to determine the students' communicative competence, for instance, if they understand the conveyed message, if they use the economic language in oral and written communication correctly, if they know the lexical, grammatical and stylistic nuances of business communication, if they can achieve reading comprehension tasks and if they can comment on a given text or on a specific business case study, using words and phrases from the lesson. Also, regular feedback to track students' progress and direction for subsequent engagement with the materials are provided.

3. Roles and responsibilities

We present the roles in the design of the hybrid model of teaching Business English and the technological service that ensures delivery and participation:

Table 1. Participants in the design of the hybrid model and technological service

Course teacher	<p><i>The Author</i></p> <p>The author delivers the lecture every two weeks. The teacher makes the course content available and explains the course learning objectives.</p>
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	<p>She encourages the sharing of knowledge by and with the learners to facilitate learning.</p> <p>She also conducts online surveys to gather feedback on her delivery.</p>
Teacher-Designers	<p><i>The Author and her colleagues who teach Business English at the School of Computer Science for Business Management</i></p> <p>The teachers conduct seminar activities weekly.</p> <p>They meet to explore their views and experiences on hybrid teaching.</p> <p>They establish the guiding principles to design the hybrid model, following de guidelines of the Department of Foreign Languages.</p> <p>The teachers take responsibility to co-create a repertoire of teaching activities and to identify particular tasks that can help students meet the learning outcomes.</p> <p>They organize workshops to exchange ideas and practices with other professors.</p>
The Director of the Foreign Languages Department	<p>The Director establishes a set of guidelines for hybrid teaching</p> <p>He/she monitors the activity of the teachers-designers, provides constant feedback and advocates for resources for digital tools.</p>
Learners	<p><i>The students in the final year of bachelor's studies</i></p> <p>The hybrid seminars are designed to equip them with the skills that enhance their communicative competence in future job roles.</p>
Platform	<i>Microsoft Teams</i>

	<p>The students developed a strong familiarity with Microsoft Teams due to the pandemic. However, the teachers need to keep abreast of the latest MS features by testing and applying them to offer students memorable learning experiences (e.g. Microsoft Immersive Reader).</p>
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Changing the English language teaching-learning paradigm for a specific purpose through a legislative framework that also allows the adoption of hybrid models will strengthen not only language skills (e.g. understanding and critically evaluating texts, understanding economic concepts and notions), but also soft skills that are in high demand in organizations worldwide (e.g. teamwork, communication and argumentation of ideas and opinions, critical evaluation of ideas and opinions, etc.). The teacher can improve the student learning experience by constantly prioritizing tasks that require more direct interaction between the student and the teacher during face-to-face teaching activities.

The main challenges in the implementation of a hybrid model for our discipline are related to the reluctance of teachers to adopt this model due to the amount of time spent to create content and to select the best instructional material, the remuneration schemes considering that the implementation of a hybrid model requires great effort to serve beginner, intermediate and advanced learners, low attendance in campus because students are employed or because the rotating schedule is perceived as a possibility to skip classes, lack of training programs for hybrid education and insufficient investment in effective tools for language instruction in business contexts.

4. Conclusions

The pandemic has impacted tremendously the educational systems worldwide. Now that we returned to fruitful face-to-face interactions, we need to readjust the pedagogical activities to meet the current needs of this generation of students and to develop opportunities for a more flexible learning environment. [6] point out that “Just as students have to relearn how to learn, professors have to relearn how to teach”, which is a pertinent statement for today’s students and teachers. More opportunities and incentives for professional development are imperative. Organizers of training programs can create a forum for mentoring and exchanging pedagogical practices in ESP, sessions for discussing the lessons learned during the pandemic and strategies to combine face-to-face teaching with online teaching in a hybrid format more effectively to overcome future disruptions.

The conceptualization of hybrid teaching may serve as a model for other ESP classrooms where learners need to enhance specific language competencies. The hybrid model of teaching Business English we conceptualized benefits students who have a good command of English, employed students who are familiar with various genres of business and students who performed well online. I believe that many universities will create new education programs that incorporate self-paced learning as it enables flexibility and does not disrupt

the students' work routines. Although second-language learning in Romania is traditionally conducted in a wholly face-to-face environment, our practice book aims to achieve specified language development using the features offered by Microsoft Teams to the online students to foster collaboration with their colleagues present in classroom. It provides targeted English language input and practice, as well as debates that are subsequently assessed by the teacher.

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