

From Classroom To Cloud: The Impact Of Hybrid Distance Instruction On Learner Engagement And Speaking Confidence In A University English Course In Taiwan

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Abstract—This action research explores the effects of hybrid distance instruction on learner engagement and speaking confidence in a university English course in Taiwan. The course combined face-to-face sessions, synchronous online classes via Microsoft Teams, and asynchronous activities on TronClass, enhanced by interactive tools such as ORID reflections, Padlet discussions, and group presentations. Data from student surveys (N = 30) and classroom observations reveal high satisfaction levels, with mean scores between 4.2 and 4.5 out of 5 across course design, video clarity, flexibility, and participation. Asynchronous components notably benefited introverted or anxious learners by providing a low-pressure environment for speaking practice. While students praised the course's flexibility and clear materials, technical issues and time management challenges were reported. Findings suggest that carefully designed hybrid instruction can effectively promote engagement and oral confidence in higher education EFL contexts. Recommendations include scaffolding asynchronous speaking tasks, delivering timely feedback, and balancing synchronous and asynchronous elements to sustain learner motivation.

Keywords— Distance Education, Hybrid Learning, Learner Engagement, Speaking Confidence, University English)

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally transformed educational landscapes worldwide, particularly in higher education, where most institutions have developed robust digital environments. During this period, nearly all universities and colleges shifted rapidly from physical classrooms to distance learning modes, revealing unexpected dynamics in learner participation. Notably, certain introverted or lower-level students, who might have remained silent in traditional classrooms, appeared to gain the confidence to express their ideas in English when participating from behind a computer screen. This phenomenon is well documented in the literature. Online learning environments often reduce learners' anxiety, providing a safer and less judgmental space for expression (Zhang et al., 2004; Compton, 2009). The perceived anonymity and psychological safety of online platforms, characterized by privacy and perceived distance, can empower typically hesitant students to engage more actively (Sun et al., 2008). In particular, asynchronous discussions give students more time to process and formulate responses, fostering participation among introverted or less confident learners (Hrastinski, 2008), while synchronous online sessions allow students to engage from a comfortable environment, reducing the fear of public mistakes and promoting communication skills in language learning contexts (Lee, 2002). Recognizing these advantages, the present study seeks to leverage the benefits of "hidden participation" to cultivate students' confidence in English speaking by adopting a hybrid learning model in the English classroom. This model, which combines face-to-face classroom instruction with synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (self-paced) distance learning components, offers promising solutions for accessibility and flexibility. Beyond logistical convenience, hybrid learning carries a crucial pedagogical mission: to foster active oral participation and build speaking confidence among all learners, especially those who may be less inclined to participate in traditional settings.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Hybrid learning, which strategically integrates face-to-face classroom instruction with both synchronous and asynchronous online components, has become a central instructional approach in higher education, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic [2], [4]. This model offers flexibility, accessibility, and the ability to accommodate diverse learning preferences, making it particularly relevant in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts [5], [8]. Research demonstrates that hybrid environments can enhance

learner autonomy, provide flexible access to materials, and support engagement with authentic language tasks essential for language acquisition [3], [6]. A growing body of literature highlights the benefits of hybrid and online learning for introverted or less confident students. Online environments, particularly asynchronous modes, reduce learners' anxiety and provide psychologically safe spaces for participation, allowing students to process information and formulate responses at their own pace [1], [9]. The perceived anonymity and privacy afforded by digital platforms can empower students who are typically hesitant to speak up in traditional classrooms, leading to increased participation and willingness to communicate [16]. In language learning contexts, both synchronous and asynchronous online discussions have been found to enhance communication skills and speaking confidence among students who are usually reluctant to participate in face-to-face settings [12], [6]. Learner engagement remains a critical factor in the success of hybrid and online instruction. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris conceptualize engagement as comprising behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, all of which can be nurtured through thoughtfully designed interactions and collaborative tasks [7]. Synchronous sessions, including live discussions and group activities, foster a sense of connection and accountability, while asynchronous components allow learners to participate from a comfortable environment, reducing the fear of public mistakes and promoting deeper reflection and practice [9], [12]. Speaking confidence, a persistent challenge for many EFL learners, is often undermined by fear of errors and anxiety about public speaking [13], [18]. Hybrid learning environments address this challenge by offering varied participation formats, including low-pressure asynchronous speaking tasks and structured synchronous discussions [17], [18]. Recent studies further indicate that video-based assignments and reflective speaking activities within hybrid formats can significantly build learners' confidence and willingness to communicate [17]. Despite these advantages, challenges such as technical issues, lack of immediate feedback in asynchronous settings, and difficulties with time management have been reported [15]. These findings underscore the importance of careful instructional design, timely feedback, and explicit scaffolding of speaking tasks to maximize the benefits of hybrid learning for EFL learners [14].

Building on these insights, the present study examines how a hybrid distance learning model, implemented in a Taiwanese university English course, influences learner engagement and speaking confidence. The aim is to contribute to best practices in hybrid EFL instruction by identifying strategies that support active oral participation and foster speaking confidence, particularly among students who may be less inclined to participate in traditional classroom settings.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

Thirty undergraduate students from various departments at Chang Jung Christian University participated in the English course. Their prior experiences with online and hybrid learning varied, providing a diverse sample for examining the hybrid model's effectiveness.

B. Course Design

The hybrid English course integrated three instructional components:

- **In-person sessions:** Traditional classroom meetings emphasizing interactive speaking activities to foster oral communication skills.
- **Synchronous online instruction:** Real-time discussions and collaborative group tasks conducted via Microsoft Teams, facilitating immediate interaction and feedback.
- **Asynchronous learning:** Self-paced activities hosted on TronClass, including pre-recorded video lectures, grammar and article analyses, and reflective writing tasks.

To promote learner engagement and speaking confidence, interactive tools such as ORID-based reflective exercises, Padlet discussion boards, and group presentations were incorporated throughout the course.

C. Data Collection

Multiple data sources were employed to capture learner experiences and outcomes:

- **Anonymous student surveys (N = 30):** Featuring Likert-scale items measuring satisfaction, engagement, perceived learning, and speaking confidence, alongside open-ended questions exploring perceived strengths and challenges of the hybrid model.
- **Instructor classroom observations:** Qualitative notes recorded during both in-person and synchronous online sessions to document student participation and engagement behaviors.

D. Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, to identify overall trends in learner perceptions and participation. Qualitative data from open-ended survey responses and instructor observations were thematically coded to extract recurring themes related to learner engagement, speaking confidence, and challenges encountered..

IV. RESULT

A. Student Satisfaction and Perceived Learning

Table 1 summarizes students' satisfaction ratings across various course components. All aspects received mean scores above 4.0 on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating strong overall approval of the hybrid course design, flexibility, and interactivity.

Course Aspect	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Overall course design	4.47	0.68
Video lesson clarity and usefulness	4.31	0.81
Engagement during synchronous activities	4.30	0.92
Appropriateness of asynchronous video length and content	4.40	0.81
Ability to complete tasks at own pace	4.37	0.85
Active participation (watching videos and exercises)	4.50	0.78
Willingness to take additional asynchronous English courses	4.20	0.99

Table 1. Student satisfaction survey results (N = 30)

B. Data Interpretation

- **Overall Satisfaction:** The uniformly high scores across all course components reflect strong learner approval of the hybrid learning format, which balances structure with flexibility.
- **Highest Engagement:** "Active participation," with the highest mean score (M = 4.50), suggests the course successfully encouraged consistent student involvement through videos and exercises.
- **Asynchronous Learning Benefits:** High ratings on asynchronous video content and self-paced task completion underscore the importance of flexible learning opportunities, especially for introverted or anxious students who benefit from a low-pressure environment.
- **Synchronous Session Variability:** While engagement during live sessions was generally positive (M = 4.30), the higher standard deviation (SD = 0.92) indicates some variability, likely due to individual differences in anxiety levels or occasional technical difficulties.
- **Future Course Interest:** Most participants expressed a willingness to enroll in additional asynchronous courses (M = 4.20), though some hesitation may reflect concerns about time management or access issues.

C. Speaking Confidence and Participation

Students reported perceived improvements in speaking confidence, attributing gains to the course's structured yet flexible design. Synchronous sessions—including live discussions and interactive games—fostered active oral participation and a sense of community. Meanwhile, asynchronous activities offered a psychologically safe space for practice, allowing learners to rehearse speaking tasks without the immediate pressure of live performance. These findings align with prior research emphasizing hybrid learning's potential to support hesitant or less confident EFL learners in developing oral communication skills [1], [9], [12], [17].

D. Qualitative Feedback

Open-ended survey responses provided additional insights into learners' experiences. Representative comments include:

- "Games and questions helped me understand English better."
- "I liked being able to review videos at my own pace."
- "Sometimes, I was hesitant to ask questions in live classes."

These reflections align with quantitative findings, underscoring the value of flexible, interactive elements within the hybrid model while also highlighting areas where learners may experience hesitation in synchronous environments.

E. Summary and Recommendations

The combined quantitative and qualitative data suggest that the hybrid distance learning model effectively fosters learner engagement and speaking confidence among EFL learners, particularly by leveraging the complementary benefits of synchronous and asynchronous instruction. To further enhance outcomes in future implementations, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Strengthen scaffolding of asynchronous speaking tasks** to maintain a low-pressure environment conducive to oral practice, especially for learners experiencing anxiety.
- **Provide timely, constructive feedback** on speaking and written tasks to support ongoing learner progress and motivation.
- **Address technical issues proactively** to minimize disruptions and anxiety during synchronous sessions.
- **Incorporate explicit time management strategies** to assist students in effectively balancing asynchronous workload with other academic responsibilities.

These targeted enhancements aim to maximize the benefits of hybrid learning while addressing the specific needs of learners in EFL contexts.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study affirm that hybrid distance learning can effectively enhance learner engagement and speaking confidence in university EFL contexts. The integration of synchronous and asynchronous components provided flexible learning pathways while maintaining opportunities for interactive speaking practice. Notably, the asynchronous format created a low-pressure environment conducive to building oral confidence, particularly among students who may experience anxiety in traditional classroom settings. These results align with prior research highlighting the value of hybrid learning in supporting hesitant or less confident learners [1], [9], [12], [17].

However, the study also identified ongoing challenges related to technical difficulties and time management within the hybrid model. Variability in student engagement during synchronous sessions suggests that individual differences in technological access and learner anxiety may influence participation, underscoring the need for continued instructional and infrastructural support.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that a well-designed hybrid distance instruction model can foster learner engagement and speaking confidence among university EFL students. To further optimize learning outcomes, instructors implementing hybrid models are encouraged to:

- **Design clear, scaffolded asynchronous speaking tasks** that facilitate structured, low-pressure oral practice.
- **Provide prompt, constructive feedback** to support learners' progress and sustain motivation.
- **Monitor and address technical issues proactively** to reduce barriers to participation during synchronous sessions.
- **Teach and reinforce effective time management strategies** to assist students in balancing asynchronous learning with other academic commitments.

Future research should explore the long-term impacts of hybrid instruction on language proficiency and learner autonomy. Additionally, examining the scalability of hybrid EFL models across disciplines and educational levels would contribute to developing best practices for sustainable implementation in diverse higher education contexts.

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