

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN HYBRID LEARNING: PERSPECTIVES FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The aim of the research is to examine the theoretical background, creating a taxonomy for the diverse terminology associated with online teaching and learning, to examine the theoretical foundations of hybrid learning, and to identify the benefits and drawbacks of the hybrid approach to teaching English for Specific Purposes. The present research explores the experiences of Latvian and foreign students studying in a hybrid format at Turība University, aiming to offer insights into its effectiveness and challenges from an interdisciplinary perspective in the post-pandemic era.

Methods. Mixed-method research investigated how students perceive a hybrid style of learning from linguistic, pedagogical, and intercultural perspectives and identify the challenges and benefits observed. Methods included lecture observation, analysis of teaching sessions, questionnaires, and qualitative content analysis.

Results. Findings show students value the hybrid learning approach for flexibility, accessibility, and time-saving. However, significant challenges include managing complex, multi-layered communication and unexpected technical disruptions. Linguistically, students faced difficulties with pronunciation and understanding diverse accents, hindering communication. From an intercultural point of view, varying educational styles, expectations, and time zone differences posed challenges. Despite these hurdles, students improved self-confidence, communicative and language skills, as well as cultural awareness, suggesting that with appropriate strategies, this approach can effectively support diverse educational needs in a globalised learning environment.

Conclusion. A hybrid learning style, while offering flexibility and accessibility for international students, requires careful preparation, strong motivation, technical

readiness, and continuous engagement from both lecturers and students to ensure effective participation and a meaningful learning experience.

Keywords: hybrid learning in the intercultural context, online synchronous lectures, English for Special Purposes, educational globalisation, post-pandemic tertiary education

INTRODUCTION

The post-pandemic era in higher education has been characterised by a shift from the conventional in-person/face-to-face (F2F) format of education to the digitalised form of education and the co-existence of online learning in parallel with synchronous F2F studies. This change was caused by the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic that forced global academia to adjust to various online approaches, raising questions regarding applicable and effective forms of education, especially in the context of international students in a university setting. As Cameron W. Smith and Stephanie Arnott (2022) noted “the pandemic upended traditional educational models and forced the world to learn more about teaching from the ‘other side of the desk’,” (p. 89) indicating a shift in the future that goes beyond mere technological adaptation.

For example, a private higher educational institution in Latvia, Turība University, immediately responded to the Covid emergency and introduced several online teaching and learning (OTL) platforms, such as Skype, WhatsApp, and Cisco Webex platform (Turība University, 2020a, b). Academic personnel were trained to operate the Webex platform; students were provided with guidelines on the use of the software, integrating it into the educational process. Thus, online synchronous lectures took place, switching from F2F to online or blended styles of studies.

The academic year 2022/2023 was resumed in-person, however, a part of students continued attending lectures online for various reasons (Turība University, 2022b). Since the academic personnel were already trained and had experience working with students both online and in-person simultaneously, changes were introduced at the ‘organisational level’ (Scherer, et al., 2021). Both students and academic personnel have had to adjust to, as stated by Mingyue Michelle Gu and Corey Fanglei Huang (2022), “the new normal modes of learning and communication,” which include not only adapting to an online software but also engaging in digitally realised collaborative learning (Harasim, 2017; Harasim, et al, 1995; Hmelo-Silver, 2013), and knowledge management (Sandaruwan & Luka, 2024) approaches. This shift signifies a move away from traditional F2F or in-person education to more blended and hybrid styles in the post-pandemic era.

The rapid shift from F2F to online studies during the Covid-19 pandemic equipped the academic personnel of higher educational institutions with the necessary digital competence that would be unwise to lose if returning only to the F2F method of education. Consequently, this new educational framework prompted the following

research questions for the current study: how do international students perceive a hybrid style of learning from the linguistic, pedagogical, and intercultural perspectives, and what challenges and benefits are observed by international students studying in a hybrid style?

Hence, the present research examines the transformation in educational strategies from traditional F2F learning to a hybrid approach (Munday, 2022) that combines in-person and online methods realised synchronously in a university setting. It assesses the benefits and challenges associated with hybrid language learning among international students at Turība University in Latvia – a higher education institution that has provided globalised education for nearly 15 years and where 43% of the students are international (Turība University, 2022a).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Terminological Diversity

The theoretical framework of the research is based on theories about different forms of online teaching and learning (OTL), particularly a hybrid style, and presents the Hybrid Style Lecture Interactional Model developed by the author. It focuses on the hybrid style of education, defines it and distinguishes benefits, drawbacks, and implications of hybrid learning for foreign students in a university setting. The study examines hybrid education from an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating insights from language studies, pedagogy, communication studies, and intercultural communication. A broad range of terms - often similar, sometimes distinct, and occasionally interchangeable - emerges in discussions of educational approaches from the period during the Covid – 19 pandemic in 2021 to the post-pandemic realities, reflecting the complexity and evolution of teaching and learning methods in recent years. This terminological diversity may cause misunderstandings, so the author has made an attempt to classify all the terminology within a single framework to provide a description of the teaching/learning approaches (based on sources from 2020 to 2023).

Table 1

In-Person and Online Teaching and Learning Approaches

Teaching / Learning Approach	Description	Author
Online learning	The educational process that is realised in a virtual space using technological devices and /or with the application of some Learning Management System (LMS) typically obtained by the higher educational institution, e.g., Cisco Webex and others.	Defined by the author

Teaching / Learning Approach	Description	Author
Online education	A general term that involves online teaching/ learning processes	Defined by the author
Online teaching and learning (OTL)	“Activities that provide learning content and resources, creating experiences and interactions, communicating and collaborating using online platforms or tools”	Scherer et al, 2023
On-site / F2F teaching	A conventional type of teaching that takes place F2F (in-person) on campus as opposed to online teaching.	Defined by the author
E-learning education	The collocation is used in the meaning of online learning	Bi, 2023
eLearning/ electronic learning	“Education using electronic devices and digital media. It encompasses everything from traditional classrooms that incorporate basic technology to online universities”.	(Matete et al., 2023, TechTerms, n.d.
Blended learning / bLearning	“The practice of teaching and learning through both online and offline models in a way that is equally distributed; meaning half of the lesson is taught F2F and the other half takes place virtually. The approach uses synchronous and asynchronous methods and is meant to complement F2F learning activities.”	Ashraf, 2022
Hybrid coaching / hybrid learning	“A development from blended learning, where there are elements of online learning and F2F learning, but with a hybrid approach there is no separation made between the digital and on-campus cohorts.”	Munday, 2022
Flipped learning	“A teaching method by which students learn instructional material before class (e.g. by watching videos) and apply the content of the instructional material during the class”.	Van Alten et al, 2021, p.1
Flipped classroom (FC)	“Information transmission component of a traditional F2F lecture is moved out of class time, which can engage students and support their learning in F2F, blended and online environments”.	Divjak et al., 2022
Dual-mode teaching	“Refers to teaching both in-person and online. In a dual-mode setting, students may attend class in-person, or take part in online learning.” Is synonymous to “hybrid learning”.	Olsen-Reeder, 2022
Hyflex instruction / Hybrid-flexible approach	“An instructional approach that combines F2F and online learning. Each class session and learning activity is offered in person, synchronously and asynchronously online. Students can choose the time and place in which to study”.	Ferrero, 2020, as cited in Gil et al., 2020

Teaching / Learning Approach	Description	Author
Emergency remote teaching (ERT)	“A temporary and abrupt shift to instructional delivery due to crises such as weather, war, or health.”	Moser et al., 2021
Distance education	“An education model in which the learner makes progress according to his/her own learning style and pattern, regardless of time and place”.	Uysal et al, 2022
Digital learning / dlearning	“Application of a wide spectrum of learning practices including blended and virtual learning”.	Davis, 2020, as cited in Shrestha et al., 2022

Source. Own research.

Table 1 provides various teaching and learning approaches, comparing traditional F2F method with different forms of online techniques. *Online learning* (Gu & Huang, 2022), online teaching (Daumiller et al., 2021), online teaching and learning (OTL) (Scherer et al., 2021, 2023), or *online education* (Shrestha et al., 2022; Zou & Jin, 2021; Zhao & Xue, 2023) describe teaching / learning processes taking place via use of digital platforms as opposed to *on-site / F2F teaching / learning* which describes a physical setting.

Discussing the benefits of online learning, Smith and Arnott (2022) noted that learning languages in an online format serves as “a way to augment in-person teaching” (p. 90), where technology supports language learners through enhanced engagement, learner-centeredness, and opportunities to build confidence and linguistic competence.

Blended learning (Ashraf et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2022; Luka, 2022, 2023; Tonbuloglu & Tonbuloglu, 2023) or *bLearning* (Galvi & Carvajal, 2022) involves both physical and distant form of studies. *Flipped learning* or *flipped classroom approaches* presuppose learners having a prior access to the learning content and applying knowledge in the classroom. In the *hybrid-flexible* or *hyflex model*, as described by Beatty (2008) and further detailed by Ferrero (2020), each class session and learning activity is available both in person and online, synchronously and asynchronously. This allows students choosing when and where to engage with their studies (Gil et al., 2020), so place and time can be chosen by students individually. Furthermore, *emergency remote teaching* (ERT) (Yang, 2023; Sum et al., 2022) is an educational approach of delivering across distances, particularly under urgent circumstances. Finally, *hybrid coaching* (Fidan et al., 2022, Munday, 2022) or *hybrid learning* (van Alten et al., 2021; Chen & Hsu, 2022) uses a combination of digital and in-person work without separating learners into distinct groups.

Hybrid learning (Wang, 2023; Kortemeyer et al., 2023; Munday, 2022) was discussed by many scholars. However, Munday (2022) clearly distinguishes hybrid learning from blended learning; the former typically involves the integration of online

and in-person learning without a distinct separation of learner cohorts, whereas the latter typically involves distinct portions of learning conducted online and offline.

It is important to notice the difference between *synchronous* and *asynchronous approaches* (Gamage, 2022) in online learning, where in the first case learning takes place in the real time, whereas in the second case students have access to teaching materials or pre-recorded videos of a lecture and study individually at a time suitable for them without direct contact with the academic personnel.

In the context of the present research, the term “hybrid style” is employed to denote a teaching approach that merges online and F2F modes without differentiating between remote and on-campus student engagements. This approach is particularly relevant when working with local and international students at Turība University, who are occasionally obliged to be physically distant from the university setting for various reasons. However, they join lectures F2F whenever possible, ensuring the study process is uninterrupted and both in-class and remote students study synchronously.

Theoretical Insights into Hybrid Learning Challenges

A hybrid approach to studies was chosen by Turība University when studies resumed in person after the COVID-19 pandemic, as some students are temporarily distanced from the university campus. For example, Latvian students studying part-time in the Security Management program cannot attend physically while on military duty. Similarly, students from India, who are forced to wait longer for their visa documents, can attend lectures online and join later in person when they arrive in Latvia. This section analyses the benefits and challenges of the hybrid approach using secondary data.

Ronny Scherer et al. (2021) studied university teachers’ readiness to shift to online teaching and highlighted factors that may hinder the transition to OTL. These factors include “individual, institutional and cultural” (p. 1) elements, as well as components such as gender, academic disciplines, and cultural aspects that influence a teacher’s readiness to work online (Scherer et al, 2021). The researchers also identified key requirements for academic staff to deliver online education effectively. These requirements include the integration of online teaching technologies, pedagogical support, and strong leadership.

Jingxuan Bi et al. (2023) compared the effects of F2F and e-learning on learning, retention, and interest in English language courses during the pandemic period. They found that online students “outperformed the F2F group,” with higher interest levels observed in e-learning classes. Additionally, students attending online classes were noted to be more motivated than their in-person counterparts.

Martin Daumiller et al. (2021) explored two poles of “occupational engagement” in the context of teaching online: engagement and burnout. The researchers emphasised

the importance of considering “interindividual differences” when managing unexpected shifts from an F2F teaching mode to online teaching.

Vincent Ieni Olsen-Reeder (2022) reported deficiencies in online learning, including the need for students to work individually and a lack of engagement and interaction among online students. The author also pointed out inequality of access to technology as another drawback for students studying online

The digital divide, encompassing differences in access to modern technologies and Internet connectivity, as well as a lack of digital literacy, was highlighted by Gu and Huang (2022).

Sagun Shrestha et al. (2022) analysed digital learning in Bangladesh and Nepal and emphasised constraints such as poor networks, lack of digital skills, and insufficient technological support from institutions. However, they also noted the “perceived usefulness and satisfaction of learners in higher education” after the COVID-19 pandemic. They concluded that “blended learning (a new normal) will get normalised in university settings in the near future” (Shrestha et al, 2022, p.259).

The necessity of focusing on student-centred or learner-centred approaches in online course delivery has been emphasised by Kelum A. A. Gamage et al. (2022). They also noted that hybrid classrooms should be made “more effective, interactive, and engaging” (Gamage, 2022, p.1). Moreover, they highlighted the benefits of the hybrid style in a post-pandemic era, particularly for providing access to higher education for students who may otherwise lack the means to engage due to financial constraints or connectivity issues. They stressed that the hybrid model offers educational opportunities to traditionally excluded groups.

Researchers looked at the requirements needed for hybrid style use by academic personnel and learners. According to Berta Carrasco and Stacey Margarita Johnson (2015), who described hybrid learning methodology long before Covid-19, academic personnel must act as “information curators and facilitators” who are “trusted, prepared, present online, and accessible for students” (pp. 22–23). On the other hand, students are required to be “open, self-directed, community-oriented, and prepared.” These requirements highlight the need for both academic personnel and students to adapt to new roles and expectations to ensure the success of hybrid methodologies.

Additionally, Carrasco and Johnson (2015) state that “instructors need to maintain a close degree of coordination between the online and in-person activities” (p.13).

The hybrid approach’s potential to foster the internationalisation of education has also been recognised. Gu and Huang (2022) pointed out its ability to create a “more democratic learning environment” and to practice “internationalisation at home,” allowing students to effectively complete their education (p.2).

As Alberto Fornasari and Matteo Conte (2023) noted, transitioning to online learning requires adapting teaching to technological advancements and realising the potential of hybrid teaching methods. They observed that during the pandemic, academic personnel often “reproduced their class activities on a screen,” reflecting a need for innovative

pedagogical strategies. Post-pandemic researchers agree that educational institutions should retain the valuable experiences gained during the pandemic while addressing its challenges (Foransari & Conte, 2023, p.88).

Xin Zhao and Wenchao Xue (2023) studied the transition back from online to offline education in the post-pandemic era. They concluded that “reversion back to the traditional face-to-face model is not a perfect option” (Zhao & Xue, 2023, p. 9). According to the authors, the pandemic prompted innovations in education, including the development of digital skills among learners and educators, as well as the integration of digital resources and pedagogy. These “irreplaceable benefits” should be retained to enrich future educational practices (ibid).

Therefore, it is essential to analyse the challenges, advantages, and drawbacks of the hybrid approach currently applied at Turiba University to enhance understanding of the processes involved in its implementation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The theoretical framework was developed based on the analysis of secondary data derived from scientific articles published between 2020 and 2023. The empirical part of the study was qualitative research (Dörnyei, 2007) consisting of three stages: lecture observations, analysis and description; a mixed-format questionnaire; and a descriptive analysis of the findings. Lecture observations, analysis and description were conducted by the researcher during the English for Business Studies course in semester 2 of the 2022/2023 academic year. The researcher conducting the lecture observation is referred to as the lecturer-researcher (Ismailov, 2022) in this article for clarity. The survey, as a method of data collection, with a questionnaire as a research instrument, was conducted during the 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 academic years.

The research followed a structured approach with several key steps. First, a literature review and theoretical framework development were conducted to provide the study's foundation. Then, systematic lecture observations and analysis identified patterns and issues in the teaching process. A survey instrument (questionnaire) was designed to gather data from participants about their experiences with hybrid language learning. Data collection was done through surveys and other sources to provide a comprehensive view. Finally, qualitative content analysis (Dörnyei, 2007) was used to summarise key findings and draw conclusions.

The survey respondents were 95 students at Turiba University, studying both online and in person. These included first- and second-year bachelor's students, as well as first- and second-year master's students in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) programs. The respondents were enrolled in programs such as Business Administration, Public Relations, Security Management, Information Technologies, and Tourism, and represented countries including India, Latvia, Sri Lanka, Ukraine, Uzbekistan,

Spain, Sweden and Pakistan. Some students attended lectures in Latvia, either F2F on-campus (Munday, 2022) or online, while others studied online from their home countries for various reasons. Some students who initially attended lectures online later arrived in Latvia and joined the F2F classes.

Teaching was conducted in a hybrid style, synchronously, with online students using the Cisco Webex platform, the official teaching platform chosen by the university. Communication also took place via email, WhatsApp, and Batis (an internal system used by the university for administration, academic purposes, and communication between students and the university), depending on the purpose – whether it was urgent contact with a student during a lecture, a timed test, or sharing homework and teaching materials.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The paper presents three sections of findings based on the three stages of empirical research: a) analysis of lecture observations from the perspective of the lecturer-researcher, b) a hybrid-style lecture interactional model designed based on the lecture observations, and c) a description of the survey based on the analysis of questionnaires.

Findings from the Lecture Observations

The lecturer-researcher delivered a course of English for Business Administration to a study group of 14 EMI students from India, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine in a hybrid style and made observations in a written form. The findings of these observations, as well as the theoretical findings from the literature analysis, formed the basis for the development of a questionnaire for students, aiming to identify the challenges, difficulties, and advantages of using the hybrid approach in language learning in a university setting.

It is important to note that language teaching in higher education differs from soft science (Hyland, 2000) lectures delivered in a university setting in that it requires active participation, involvement, and engagement from students (Drozdova, 2024), in contrast to soft science lectures where a lecturer presents to a large group using presentation software, for example, PowerPoint and may expect student feedback only during assessments.

This involvement requires online students to have access to high-quality technical equipment, including a microphone, video camera, and audio system, to participate actively in a lecture. Technical challenges, such as poor Internet connections, inadequate equipment, or a lack of computer skills among students, were observed during the lectures, underscoring the importance of adequate preparation. Therefore, students must be informed prior to the beginning of the semester about the necessity of being

equipped with the required electronic devices and the installation of appropriate software. Additionally, students should be made aware of alternative forms of communication and provided with an opportunity to contact a lecturer outside of lecture time in case of emergencies, such as a power outage or Internet loss.

Some technical difficulties were observed among students who studied online while being physically in India, as some of them lacked a satisfactory Internet connection, experienced poor sound quality, discrepancies, and occasional Internet loss. There were cases when a student informed, closer to the end of the lecture, that they had used almost all of their Internet data limit and that the connection would soon be lost. Another student from Ukraine, who was in their home country during the study period for some time, occasionally experienced power outages. These situations prompted the lecturer-researcher to implement contingency plans, such as alternative forms of communication, and to encourage affected students to adopt a flipped learning approach by completing tasks offline and submitting them later when connectivity was restored.

In addition, it was observed that online students are more frequently left to manage their own learning processes compared to F2F students, which results in a greater responsibility being placed on the learner, as the teacher cannot fully monitor the learning environment and progress of online students.

The lecturer-researcher emphasised the need for more thorough and time-consuming pre-lecture preparation, including uploading materials to the Batis system and providing clear, detailed instructions on what to do in case of technical disruptions or loss of Internet connectivity. Alternative technical solutions should be explored to engage online students, and clear guidelines should be given regarding the use of the “screen on” feature, rather than relying on passive, anonymous attendance methods.

The lecturer-researcher has adopted the practice of repeating instructions clearly and several times to ensure all students understand the requirements. For example, tests and tasks must be submitted in .doc format to allow the teacher to review, correct, spell-check, and send them back to online students.

Another observation made by the lecturer-researcher regarding what online students often lack and may complain about is the lack of contact with other students and the lecturer during the lecture. One of the solutions to improve communication and foster this interaction could be the use of multiple means of communication to provide immediate feedback during the class. For example, the use of the WhatsApp application allowed the lecturer-researcher to send photos of additional tasks that arise during the lecture or share the works written by online students in the class. For instance, in a business letter writing task that required a reply from the students, the procedure was as follows: students sent their work, written on a computer or laptop, to the teacher via email. The lecturer printed it, made corrections, distributed the letters to the students in the classroom, corrected the works of those present, and then sent them to the online students for their replies. This way, immediate communication among all students took place, making everyone feel engaged in the learning process.

Homework assignments and tests were completed by students on electronic devices and sent to the teacher via email. Communication between lectures occurred through the Batis system, where the lecturer wrote notes to students, providing instructions about the materials to be used during the lecture. Additionally, WhatsApp was used for more individualized inquiries about students' performance. In other words, students should be informed about the multiple sources of information and communication available for their studies. Moreover, considering that students from remote areas of India sometimes experienced technical difficulties with Internet connectivity or lacked electricity, it was concluded that a hybrid-flexible approach should occasionally be used with them, allowing students to complete lecture tasks and submit them later.

Another aspect that was noticed during the lecture observation process is the linguistic-intercultural dimension. English is a second language in India, whereas in Latvia or Ukraine, it is taught as a foreign language. This distinction is reflected in the fluency and faster speech rate of Indian students and, as a result, in linguistic misunderstandings between students, which become particularly noticeable when students participate online, and the sound is distorted.

An additional characteristic observed during the lecture observation is the pronunciation of Indian students, which is influenced by their first languages and contributes to the role of English in India (Kachru, 1986) and the distinct characteristics of the *Indian English* (Sahgal et al, 1988), making it sound unclear to other users of English. Additionally, such peculiarities of prosodic elements as placement of stress, accent and pace (Pandey, 2016) as well as the construction of sentences and the rate of speech, which is faster than that of students from Latvia or Ukraine using English, for example, were noticed and emphasize intercultural communication differences. All these factors combined may affect the perception of their speech by academic staff and students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and may be further hindered due to technical imperfections.

Another challenge encountered during the lectures was the time zone difference. For example, the time difference between Latvia and India is two and a half hours. When a lecture was scheduled for 5:00 PM Latvian time, it was 7:30 PM in India, meaning the lecture would finish at 9:00 PM there. Since many students in that region studied from home, they were occasionally disturbed by other family members present at that time of day.

Based on systematic observations during the lectures, the lecturer-researcher concluded that self-discipline and strong motivation – evident in some online students – along with clear guidelines and rules established by the instructor, may contribute to academic outcomes comparable to those of in-class students. Data from semester tests and final examinations suggest that online students can achieve academic success similar to their in-class counterparts, although further research with a larger sample size and more detailed analysis is needed to confirm these findings.

Hybrid Style Lecture Interactional Model

The major challenge that was encountered in hybrid style lecture observation was heterogenous multi-layered form of communication among all the participants. For example, a difficulty may occur in communication between online students and an in-class student or among online students in a course of a lecture. Table 1 shows modes of interaction during a hybrid-style lecture.

Table 2

Modes of Communication in a Hybrid Lecture Environment

Communicative Pair	Interaction Type	Mode
Teacher ↔ in-class students	Teacher-student	F2F, synchronous
Teacher ↔ online students	Teacher-student	Online, synchronous
In-class student ↔ in-class students	Peer-to-peer	F2F, synchronous
In-class students ↔ online students	Peer-to-peer	Online, synchronous
Online students ↔ online students	Peer-to-peer	Online, synchronous

Source. Own research.

A sophisticated mode of interaction among all participants – the lecturer, online, and in-class students – is required. If any communication fails, it can disrupt other modes of interaction, so it demands careful management and observation from the lecturer. This likely involves the use of instructions and rules on how to behave in different unexpected situations, such as poor sound quality or the sudden loss of Internet connection for remote students, for example. Online students were informed about the possibility of using WhatsApp, which is more accessible in a dynamic lecture where the lecturer has little time to look for solutions to problems during the class.

Survey Description and Analysis

Based on the findings from the literature review and lecture observations, a set of questions was designed to gather detailed information on student experiences with the hybrid learning approach for language learning. Ninety-five students completed twenty-nine questions. Students were introduced to the concept of hybrid learning. The first block of questions aimed to collect demographic information about the respondent, including gender, age, country of origin, and current year of studies. Students were asked about their prior experience with hybrid learning and participation in such classes at Turība University. They were asked about their mode of participation: whether they participated online or F2F and the reasons for their choice. Inquiries were made about whether students were in Latvia or their home country during online classes. Students shared their perceptions of the advantages and challenges of hybrid learning, particularly in relation to language and intercultural aspects. They reported on any tech-

nical difficulties encountered during online learning as well as about their assessment of learning outcomes, including their satisfaction with hybrid learning compared to F2F learning. They provided feedback on the impact of online participation, specifically how it affected the learning process and intercultural interaction.

Findings from the Survey

Sixty-two students (65.26%) were male and 33 students (34.74%) were female. 10 students were under the age of 20 (10.53%), 67 students were in the age group 20–25 years old and 18 students in the age of over 25 years old. The survey was completed by the representatives of eight countries, including Latvia (40 students), India (43 students), Ukraine (4), Uzbekistan (4), Spain (1), Sri Lanka (1), Sweden (1) and Pakistan (1).

Sixty-eight students were first year students of the BA program: Security Management (8), Finance Management (6), Business Administration (44), Public Relations (1), and Information Technologies (9). Thirteen were second-year BA students: Business Administration (8) and Information Technologies (5). Six of the respondents were first year students of the MA program in Business Administration, while eight students were second-year MA students studying Business Administration.

Sixty-one students, representing approximately 64.21% confirmed that they had had first-time experience of studying in a hybrid style format, whereas 34 representing around 35.79% accepted that they had had this experience before either at secondary school or at the university.

Fifty-four students (56%) reported studying the English course only in a F2F format, 25 students (26.3%) used both F2F and online methods of study, while only five students (5.2%) studied only online.

However, comparing two biggest groups of students – Latvian students and Indian students it was concluded that Indian students relied more on online lectures, with 25% attending 70–100% online, while Latvian students favoured F2F, with 9% fully F2F and 15% attending only 30% online.

Table 3

Online Attendance Percentages at Turība University

Percentage of online attendance	Number of respondents	% of Total
0 % – 10 %	34	37.36%
11% – 30 %	23	25.27%
31% – 50%	14	15.38%
51% – 70 %	6	6.59%
71% – 100 %	14	15.38%

Source. Own research.

Table 3 shows lengths of studies online in percentage and the number of respondents in numbers. Ninety-one of the ninety-five students provided clear answers to questions concerning the frequency (%) of their online attendance at Turiba University. It is evident that 34 students attended lectures mostly F2F, 14 students attended from 71 to 100% of the time, and generally, it can be seen that almost two-thirds of the students attended lectures online in a hybrid style for some period.

Table 4

Reasons for Choosing Online/Hybrid Learning by Region

Reason	Latvia (%)	India (%)	Other countries* (%)
Health-related issues	34.9	30.0	24.0
Work commitments	23.3	7.5	20.0
Time management	16.3		
Flexibility/convenience	14.0	20.0	32.0
Visa/travel issues	11.6	25.0	12.0
Preference for technology		12.5	
Location/travel flexibility			8.0
Other	0.0	5.0	4.0

Note. * Other countries – students from Spain, Sweden, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

Source. Own research.

Table 4 shows the reasons for choosing to study online by students from Latvia, India, and other countries in percentage. It is evident that all three categories of students stated *health reasons* as one of the main motivations for attending university lectures online. Students from Latvia and other countries, except India, cited *work commitments* as the second significant factor preventing them from F2F attendance. Students from Spain, Sweden, Ukraine, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Uzbekistan mentioned *convenience* as the most important factor in choosing the online form of studies, which was also important for the other two categories.

Students from India indicated the *need to wait for visas* and other documents as one of the reasons for studying online. Of particular interest was the observation that students from other countries highlighted the *possibility of traveling* and *matching travel with studies*, whereas only students from India mentioned a *preference for technology* as one of the factors influencing their choice of an online format of studies.

Benefits in the Hybrid Approach Noted by Respondents

Students were asked an open-ended question: “If you attended lectures online while physically located in your home country, was the hybrid learning style a benefit for you? What possibilities did it give you?” Six main categories of answers emerged based

on the responses. Table 2 presents these categories along with the most prominent answers provided by students.

Table 5

Summary of Student Responses on the Benefits and Possibilities of Hybrid Learning While Located in the Home Country

Category	Example quotes	Responses and % of Total
Time-saving aspect and convenience	"Because of studying online, I can also find time to complete other assignments faster." "I can also save money on petrol due to studying online." "More time, saved fuel." "I save my money because I live 160 km from school." "No need to commute, I could study from the comfort of my home or anywhere else." "A chance to record and listen to lectures multiple times." "I could learn at home or any other location while not attending lectures."	8 14.8%
Flexibility and work/study balance	"Easier to combine studies and work." "Yes, very easy to connect work and studies. If I am sick, I can still learn and not miss school." "Online studies gave me a possibility to explore the world." "Allows multitasking – combining work and studies." "For some people, like myself who needs several hours to get to school, it is a benefit, as well as the possibility to attend lectures while being ill."	6 11.1%
Health and accessibility	"To attend online while being ill, so I did not miss any information." "It gave me a chance to attend the course from the start without any problem." "I could learn, though being ill and not fall behind." "It was beneficial because not all students live in Riga, but some 200 km from Riga." "Yes, because at home I felt calmer and more peaceful than in the university. I did my job better, and I felt more productive and prouder about the job I did."	5 9.3 %
Learning effectiveness	"Yes, I did not miss the important information." "It gave me a possibility for work while studying." "I was able to manage my studies and work." "I did not miss the class." "It was a benefit being in my home country." "A chance to attend the course from the start without any delays." "An ability to attend all lectures."	8 14.8%

Category	Example quotes	Responses and % of Total
Comfort and personal space	"I could stay at home in my personal space and learn online." "More relaxed time at home on my own, being busy." "A bit more comfortable; better studying."	2 7.4%
Other benefits	"It gave me a chance to attend the course from the start without any problem." "Being closer to family and friends." "Allowed studying while being in the home country." "Allowed attending lectures that would be missed otherwise." "Easy access to lectures." "It is highly beneficial to me. It allowed me to study in my home country and not take physical classes in Latvia. I passed all exams successfully too." "A good possibility for me to study."	11 20.4%

Source. Own research.

As can be seen from Table 5, the benefits of the online format while studying in a hybrid approach primarily relate to *time management*, *flexibility*, and *learning effectiveness*, as well as *the ability to manage work and study simultaneously*. The ability to study while sick or being in a more comfortable environment was also positively noted. Many respondents highlighted the possibility to combine work and studies as well as the convenience of studying close to the family or in their home country, as well as saving money on relocation and fuel. However, while most students appreciated the convenience and accessibility of hybrid learning, there is still a minority preference for F2F learning, primarily due to technical difficulties and the desire for more personal interaction in classes.

Challenges of a Hybrid Style Noted by Respondents

Students were asked an open-ended question about the challenges they encounter when studying using a hybrid style. Table 6 provides responses of 38 students, while other 57 students mentioned that they do not see any challenges in the hybrid approach. The provided answers can be divided into five main categories: linguistic difficulties encountered while attending lectures online, technical hurdles, learning and comprehension obstacles, challenges in communication and interaction, and engagement and participation challenges.

Table 6*Categorized Challenges in Hybrid Language Learning with Student Responses*

Category	Example quotes	Responses and % of Total
Technical hurdles	"Audio or video buffering makes it hard to understand subjects or words." "Ambient noises disturb audio, affecting pronunciation." "Quality of audio devices impacts understanding." "Network problems and disturbances from others while online." "Requires a stable network to participate." "Depending on the internet connection, it can be hard to follow the lecture."	8 21%
Communication and interaction challenges	"F2F is better for asking questions." "No group work." "Not talking F2F; better when things are explained in person." "Harder to communicate and learn languages without physical presence." "Lack of communication reduces confidence." "Can't have F2F conversations." "Those online feel vulnerable, hesitant to ask, sometimes due to technical problems."	7 18%
Linguistic difficulties	"Pronunciation of different words is hard"; "unclear pronunciation", etc. "Difficult when other languages are involved." "Might be difficult for students who cannot pick up some phrases." "Some students may have difficulties with English; F2F interaction is more valuable." "Better to study languages offline to understand specific features."	9 24%
Learning and comprehension obstacles	"Understanding can be a challenge." "May not have enough time for grammar or practice." "A teacher cannot be sure if all online students understand everything." "If there's physical work, everything seems challenging - tests, tasks, speaking." "Hybrid style is not the most applicable from a linguistic point of view." "Completely different from how I studied earlier."	8 21%
Engagement and participation challenges	"Occasional difficulties focusing on each individual student." "Lack of focus; easily distracted by other things." "You can always excuse yourself by saying your microphone isn't working, so you don't have to speak at all."	3 8%

Source. Own research.

It was noted that the largest number of students (nine) emphasized pronunciation and understanding of speech through the use of a computer; eight respondents stressed various technical problems, including audio and video deficiencies and internet connection issues; eight people specified learning and comprehension obstacles, though the answers were vague and not very informative; seven students mentioned that online communication is less successful compared to F2F interaction, as it does not ensure effective group work, students are hesitant to ask questions due to technical problems, and generally, they prefer working F2F for these purposes; three students mentioned a lack of engagement and focus while studying online.

Students were asked about the intercultural challenges they notice while studying in a hybrid style. Fifty-six students stated that they did not notice any intercultural challenges while studying online in a hybrid style. The answers provided include aspects such as socializing and communication challenges (eight students). Two students from India mentioned difficulties in understanding and making presentations, as they lacked previous experience. One student noted language barrier as a hurdle; however, it was added that this barrier is only initial and later disappears. Another student reported experiencing racism as a cultural hurdle. In general, the question about cultural differences was not answered by the majority of respondents, which may be explained by students' inability to clearly articulate what falls into this category.

Asked about the challenges students see from the linguistics point of view, 95 responses were received. Forty-four respondents do not see any linguistic challenges while studying in a hybrid style: responses were either absent or it was written that students do not experience linguistic challenges while studying in a hybrid style. However, 51 responses received can be grouped into the following categories: *language problems connected with technical issues*, for example, "pronunciation of nouns that are difficult to understand due to buffering of an audio or video lecture; ambient noises in the background can disturb audio. Therefore, it may butcher one's pronunciation of certain words"; "difficulty hearing everybody in the lecture room while being online"; "quality of audio devices influences the ability to understand and hear others"; "lack of a stable network to participate" and "network problems, being disturbed by other family members or other people nearby while being online."

The second category of difficulties students encountered regarding language was *communicational, interactional challenges, and engagement* as answered by ten respondents (7%). One student noted that he/she felt the "lack of communication that takes away confidence" while being online. Some students mentioned that the F2F approach was more successful for communication, especially for "asking questions" and "group work." One respondent preferred when content was explained individually F2F rather than online. One respondent stated that for him/her it was harder to communicate and learn languages when he/she "could not physically see a person: communication is more 'plastic' and unnatural." Another respondent stated that he felt "vulnerable" because he/she "felt lonely and hesitant and was afraid to ask."

Another category that was highlighted by the majority of respondents (23%) was *understanding pronunciation*: “pronunciation of different words,” “some pronunciation is not clear,” “difficult when other languages were involved,” “sometimes I couldn’t identify the pronunciation of some words,” and “students with lower English language competency may experience difficulties with understanding while being online.” Other respondents highlighted *learning and comprehension obstacles*, including, for example: “lack of time for grammar and practice while being online,” as well as the fact that the teacher “could not be sure if all online students understood everything.”

Hurdles of the Hybrid Approach

Students were asked in general what hurdles they experienced while studying online in a hybrid style. Twenty-five students did not mention any hurdles with respect to the hybrid style approach. Seventy responses that were provided may be grouped into categories of technical issues (25.45%), grammar, wording, and pronunciation (9.09%), difficulties with organizational questions and scheduling (5.45%), difficulty with communication and presentation making (7.27%), and some mixed observations (7.27%), including: “more difficult to understand tasks, rules, and find access to study materials,” as well as the mentioned factor that “sometimes results were not the same satisfactory from what it was when studying in person.”

Finally, students were asked about their overall satisfaction with the results of hybrid-style learning, regardless of whether they studied online or F2F. Ninety-four answers out of 95 were received. Forty-four respondents (46.81%) stated that they were satisfied with the use of this approach, 46 students (48.94%) said they were partially satisfied, and only four students (4.26%) were not satisfied.

CONCLUSIONS

A hybrid style is a form of studies that involves F2F and online students’ synchronous participation. An international cohort of students studying in a hybrid style is challenging and requires thorough, time-consuming preparation on behalf of the teacher, as well as self-discipline, strong motivation, and e-readiness of learners. This style is most appropriate for small groups of learners and requires the lecturer’s observation and instructions since it involves a complex form of interaction both in-class and online.

The use of a hybrid style requires all participants involved in the study process to be flexible, adaptable, and to adjust to changes easily and quickly. Online students are motivated and inspired to study in a hybrid style when they feel strong interest and involvement from the lecturer and other students. This interest can be expressed in communication before, during, and after the lecture to monitor students’ progress.

It was concluded that a successful hybrid-style lecture performance and organization require preparation, including educational, technical, intercultural, communicational, and linguistic aspects. Hybrid style is a valuable teaching-learning approach when there is high student e-readiness, including self-motivation and self-control. It is also essential to limit the size of online and in-class participants so the teacher can effectively monitor the process.

Hybrid style seems to be a viable approach for post-pandemic realities in the internationalized context of education. It provides a larger number of students who study online the chance to receive higher education abroad and to be involved in the educational process even when limited by geographical distance, financial constraints, illness, travel, work, or other reasons. This method ensures they always have the possibility to attend classes since it is open to both in-class and online students.

It was concluded that while using a hybrid teaching/learning approach, all parties should be technically equipped with all the necessary devices, as well as informed about the actions to be taken in case of any emergency situation, such as Internet disconnection or other technical hurdles. Lecturers should provide guidelines to students concerning linguistic and intercultural peculiarities and misunderstandings that may take place while studying online and face-to-face simultaneously—for example, control of pronunciation and the rate of speech, more accurate articulation. Students also need to be informed about the necessity of their active participation, even while being online, and lecturers should ensure that their lectures are engaging to all participants.

By having multicultural groups, such as students from India, Sri Lanka, Latvia, and Ukraine, studying in a Latvian university in a hybrid format, academic personnel can ensure that these “Global nomads or Third Culture Kids” (Wang, 2023) experience intercultural exchange daily by sharing part of their intercultural experience through “first-hand experiences of history, geography, languages, and cultures” (p. 3) that other young people learn only from books.

The conclusions made from lecture observations and analysis of students’ interviews summarized that, in general, online students are motivated and inspired to study using a hybrid style when they feel strong lecturer and peer involvement in the process. This involvement is key to ensuring progress and engagement in hybrid learning environments.

RESEARCH RESTRICTIONS

The primary limitations of this study included a limited sample size, as only students attending lectures of the English language completed the questionnaires. Difficulties in accessing respondents and encouraging online participation led to manual completion by students, with the researcher also relying on manual data processing, potentially introducing some inefficiencies and bias.

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