

# REVITALISING ENGLISH MEDIUM INSTRUCTION

# Hyper-Blended Learning in China During Covid-19

During the Covid-19 pandemic, educators worldwide faced unprecedented difficulties, with unique struggles emerging for those teaching in China or to mainland Chinese learners. This chapter highlights how the teaching and evolution of one course over the three years of the pandemic led to the natural emergence of a 'hyperblended learning' environment; where teachers and students had to transition between online and in-person modalities, diverse platforms, and various situations. This chapter further explores the lasting impact of the pandemic on teaching practices in China, featuring a blend of technology, challenges, and enhanced flexibility.

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### Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic brought with it unprecedented challenges to education systems worldwide, forcing systems, educators, and learners to rapidly adapt to new learning environments. The widespread closure of educational institutions and the shift to 'emergency remote teaching' (Hodges et al. 2020) during that time underscored the importance of flexible teaching approaches to ensure continuity for teachers and learners. In China, these challenges were particularly significant due to the wideranging, changeable, and often strict anti-virus measures. These measures called for the implementation of a variety of approaches to learning and the dynamic reactive creation of resilient courses. This chapter is based on the emergent concept of hyper-hybrid learning spaces (Nørgård & Hilli 2020), an approach that combines and blends many aspects of course design, teaching, and learning. This chapter explores how this approach emerged and its implications for teaching and learning in China.

The primary objective of this chapter is to relay my own personal experience of teaching in China during the pandemic. Through this perspective, I will offer a view on how we implemented new learning approaches during the pandemic and how students adapted to these changing classroom dynamics, the role of technology in facilitating these changes, and the impact of these changes. By drawing directly from my own experience, I hope to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities faced during that time and offer experience-based recommendations for enhancing teaching and learning in the post-pandemic era. This chapter also seeks to contribute to the broader academic discourse on the future of education in the post-pandemic era.

To achieve these aims, this chapter will be structured as follows. Firstly I will present a brief overview of the context of the course. Then I will briefly detail the changes that occurred through each iteration of the course from 2019-2022. Following this, I will examine the emergent themes identified in the changes and finally I will draw some implications from our experience for course designers, teachers, and students.

### **Background to the Course**

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in China in early 2020 saw a massive uptake in alternative learning models in classrooms across the country. Over the next three years, education institutions at all levels would be tasked with adapting to pandemic control policies, while also ensuring that students maintained their course of study.

To properly illustrate the ever-changing situation of teaching and learning during the pandemic in China, I will focus on the experience of teaching one English for Specific Academic

Purposes (ESAP) course. This course is taught in the autumn semester of each year; I will briefly describe how we taught the course in 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022.

The course is taught at the University of Waikato Joint Institute at Zhejiang University City College, with the objective of cultivating second-year students' language proficiency and academic skills. The course builds upon the foundational language and academic skills acquired in the first-year English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and general English courses, and is intended to prepare students for their future studies in their respective majors. There is, on average, a total enrolment of 240 students who are divided into three streams: finance (120 students), design interface (60 students), and media (60 students). The students on the programme have been of varying levels of English proficiency, ranging from A2 to C1. The course is ordinarily taught by two instructors, with four 60 person lectures per week and eight 30 person tutorials per week. The semesters run for a total of 18 weeks, where the first 16 weeks are teaching weeks and the final two weeks are exam weeks.

### 2019

In 2019, the second-year English language program at the Joint Institute was a generalized course that primarily assessed students individually. The course was centred around one long written assignment that was marked first as a draft and then as a final assignment. In addition, there were three 'reading critiques' where the students had to submit a critical analysis of a reading from a set reading list. The students finished by taking a final in person written exam which reviewed key skills learned throughout the term. The course was delivered in person onsite in Hangzhou for the duration.

### 2020

A decision was taken to comprehensively redesign the program in 2020 to incorporate more group-based assessment. As the dawning reality of the pandemic set in, this decision also attempted to integrate the best practice of blended teaching and learning by incorporating online components and integrating various technological aids. The main assessment changes are summarised in Table 1.

In September 2020 the course was initially started in online format, but instructors arrived in China after the first week of class. The rest of the semester passed without too many issues as the Covid-19 pandemic was largely controlled in China. During this semester, we replaced the original individual assignment with a group assignment and a poster presentation. We also augmented the assessments by adding a portfolio of 'academic discourse' (AD) tasks which directly related to skills needed in their chosen discipline.

| 2019 ALL  | 2020 BBF   | 2020 BDI / BDM   |  |
|---|--|--|--|
| Individual<br>problem solution<br>essay based<br>on'listening in<br>lectures' | Group report<br>(Draft, final)   | Group problem<br>solution essay, with<br>reflection (Draft,<br>final)  |  |
| Traditional presentation.   | Poster presentation  | 'Traditional' in class<br>presentation   |  |
| Reading critiques   | 5 academic<br>discourse tasks  | 5 academic<br>discourse tasks  |  |
|   | Case study analysis<br>Reflective<br>paragraphs<br>Article analysis<br>Email writing<br>Peer review task | Note taking<br>Reflective journal<br>Email writing<br>Critical thinking<br>task<br>Article synthesis<br>task |  |
| Final exam  | Unchanged  | Unchanged  |  |

**Table 1.** Main assessment changes, ENSLA100 2019 to 2020: Bachelor of Business (Finance) (BBF); Bachelor of Design (Interface) (BDI); Bachelor of Design (Media) (BDM), University of Waikato Joint Institute, Zhejiang University City College.

### 2021

The 2021 iteration of the course started in face-to-face format. The big change we made from 2020 was the introduction of McGraw Hills Connect adaptive learning software. This was introduced to give us options for asynchronous teaching. By this time, pandemic controls had been stepped up in China and all assessments needed to be available to be delivered both in-class and at home. Average attendance was high throughout the semester, but each week a small number of students would be quarantined due to either a school or city Covid-19 protocol. This meant that, without fail, each week students would need to be accommodated. Often the students would be quarantined at short notice and so would struggle to complete work on time. This created a situation where we needed to offer both online and offline options for all assessments and both asynchronous and synchronous options. In the final two weeks of the semester, one of the teachers was quarantined. This meant that the course was delivered fully online for the final two weeks.

Some examples of adjustments that we made during the semester were: we allowed video submission for the presentations; feedback sessions could be conducted via video call; we accepted 'online' peer review sessions using *WeChat* and we also encouraged students to include screenshots

of *WeChat* conversations as part of their work. In addition, we offered a one-week extension to all assignments, where possible, and recorded some classes to share with students.

### 2022

The 2022 autumn semester began with one teacher onsite and one teacher delivering remotely from outside China. This resulted in the course being delivered in a hybrid format, where lectures were delivered synchronously online (these were also recorded) and tutorials were handled in person by the onsite instructor. The Connect learning platform was removed from the course due to content issues, but the rest of the assessments remained largely consistent. In autumn 2022 the Covid situation was quite severe in China and over the semester many students were guarantined or isolated due to sporadic Covid outbreaks and being close contacts. All assignments had to be offered in-person and offline both synchronously and asynchronously. Towards the end of the semester Covid-19 measures were relaxed in China, which resulted in large numbers of students contracting the virus simultaneously; due to this, the final three weeks of class were delivered fully online including the presentations and final AD tasks. The final exam was converted to a take home exam which students were given a week to complete, and they had to submit a video as part of the assessment. Although we also offered students the option of returning in February 2023 to sit an in person written exam, no student took this choice.

## Discussion

Although the demands of teaching EAP in higher education necessitate ongoing reflection on course design (Freddi 2015), it is true that many modifications to our course were driven by the rapidly evolving Covid-19 response at all levels in China. The term 'emergency remote teaching', introduced earlier, is defined by Hodges et al. as 'a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances' (2020). For us, however, this 'temporary' shift evolved into a gradual transformation over three years, during which time we steadily incorporated diverse approaches to assessment and learning.

This transformation resulted in significant alterations to the course structure and assessment methodologies between 2019 and 2022. Firstly, we placed greater emphasis on group work, both in class and for assessment purposes. Secondly, students were assessed through various methods including online and offline formats, and synchronous and asynchronous strategies. Thirdly, while the 2019 course structure was relatively inflexible with fixed schedules for each class and assessment, subsequent iterations of the course introduced greater flexibility. We began to allow students to submit their work in diverse ways, at times more convenient to them. In addition, the traditionally rigid roles of the student and teacher evolved. We increasingly encouraged students to take a more active

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role in their learning and gave them the freedom to devise unique approaches to their tasks. The resulting shifts in course design, assessment strategies, and role dynamics represent our adaptive response to the challenging circumstances imposed by the pandemic.

# **Hyper-Hybrid Learning Spaces**

What emerged during our four-year experience is a sort of 'hybrid pedagogy' (Stommel 2012). The 'hybrid' here signifies more than the mere blending of spaces—it also encompasses the emergent intersections within our teaching. Our classroom and its various digital extensions became a 'hyper-hybrid learning space' (Nørgård & Hilli 2020), where multiple elements of pedagogy and course design simultaneously integrated to forge a novel mode of teaching and learning. This process occurred gradually over the course of four years. Our tasks required students to assume both passive and active roles in their learning, blending formal and informal learning methods. We mixed digital and physical tools within the same activity or class and overlapped synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning. This approach enabled a course pace that was simultaneously swift and gradual, and an overall approach that was, at times, radically student-led.

Numerous studies have attested to the potential of this form of learning to enhance education in a variety of ways (Bayne et al. 2020; O'Byrne & Pytash 2015). Yet these methods go against traditional 'transmissive pedagogy' (Liu, Lin & Zhang 2017) where professors have been expected to be all-knowing fonts of knowledge leading and controlling the classroom, with students viewed as passive knowledge recipients (Tam et al. 2009).

Our experience from 2019 to 2022 indicated that there is room for alternative pedagogies in China. When given the chance, our students embraced a more active role in their learning, reaching out to their instructors over various platforms and arranging one to one or one to group meetings to discuss work. At the same time, students also became more engaged with each other by setting up *WeChat* groups, hosting meetings, and sharing iterations of work for peer review. This backs up research which has shown positive learner attitudes towards technology-enhanced learning, particularly regarding collaborative learning through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) during the pandemic (Dewi & Muhid 2021).

The potentials of learning in hybrid or hyper-hybrid learning spaces come from modifying and manipulating dimensions such as time, space, place, pace, and educational structures to empower teachers and learners to collaborate across contexts beyond the campus (O'Byrne & Pytash 2015).

# **Embracing Technology in the Classroom**

The evolution of our pedagogy was facilitated and shaped by the tools that we came to rely upon during the pandemic. Due to institutional, cultural, and practical constrains, our choice of tools was not always 'pedagogically driven'. However, we used a variety of tools to ensure our students had access and were likely to engage with the course.

Table 2 provides a summary of all tools used, the years we used them, and their function within the course.

| Tool               | Function  | Years used |
|--------------------|---|------------|
| WeChat             | Creating class groups, one to one conversations with students, sharing resources, planning sessions, communicating with colleagues. | 2019-2022  |
| Zoom               | Synchronous teaching  | 2020-2022  |
| Panopto            | Recording classes, transcription  | 2020-2022  |
| Tencent<br>Meeting | Synchronous teaching  | 2021-2022  |
| Dingtalk           | Synchronous teaching, communicating with class groups, taking attendance, class administration.                                     | 2021-2022  |
| Blackboard         | Managing class files, sharing resources, grading assignments, sharing links.  | 2019-2022  |
| Turnitin           | Checking assignments for plagiarism, grading assignments.   | 2019-2022  |
| Connect            | Adaptive learning, instant feedback to learners.  | 2021       |
| Kahoot             | In class quizzes for students.  | 2020-2022  |

**Table 2.** Tools used to deliver ENSLA 100: English for the Professions courses at University of Waikato Joint Institute, Zhejiang University City College, 2019 to 2022.

Based on the above, we can see that over the four years of the course technology played an increasingly important role in our teaching. Language learners value social interaction (Luan et al. 2020) and we were able to offer this with tools such as: *Zoom*, *WeChat*, *DingTalk*, *Tencent Meeting*, and *Panopto*.

### **Evolution of Assessment**

Assessment plays a crucial role in EAP writing instruction, shaping and guiding the learning process (Gibbs 2006; Higgins & Thompson 2010). It is also an integrated facet of language curriculum design (Nation & Macalister 2010). As the paper we teach serves as a gatekeeper paper for later courses, the design and implementation of our assessments carry significant weight for us and other stakeholders within the Institute. Although some changes we implemented were reactive in nature, they largely echoed broader trends in assessment design in other educational contexts during the pandemic. For instance, we gradually moved towards qualitative and continuous assessment methods as opposed to the examcentric approach that was common pre-2020 (Montenegro Rueda et al. 2021). This led to us promoting more consistent and continuous learning (González et al. 2020).

Providing students with feedback is one of the major objectives of writing assessment. In 2019, the most demanding aspect of course delivery was managing how to give this feedback. The course design necessitated significant amounts of written individualized feedback, imposing considerable strain on instructors. However, by 2022 we managed to maintain crucial formative assessments but pivoted to a group-focused approach, significantly alleviating the burden on teachers. At the same time, we introduced additional modes of feedback on student work, including peer review, group meetings, and reflective exercises. These changes not only mitigated the instructors' workload but also facilitated multidimensional feedback, fostering an environment conducive to comprehensive learning and self-assessment.

Amid all these changes, student performance remained largely consistent, with only minor fluctuations from year to year.

# **Implications**

EAP is not simply a matter of teaching academic literacies. It is about a combined academic and cultural education in a 'context sensitive' approach (Hyland 2006: 16). This context-sensitive model has been thrown into sharp relief by the Covid-19 crisis as the context evolved and shifted from week to week. According to O'Byrne and Pytash, the potential of hybrid or hyper-hybrid learning spaces lies in their capacity to adapt and transform dimensions like time, space, place, pace, and educational structures, empowering teachers and learners to collaborate across contexts beyond the campus confines (O'Byrne & Pytash 2015). This experience illustrates that by embracing new pedagogical models, we can create engaging and effective learning environments, even in the face of challenging circumstances. This has implications for course designers at the higher education level.

From a course design perspective, our shift towards a more flexible, hyper-hybrid learning space underlines the importance of adaptability in course design. The successful integration of synchronous and asynchronous elements, digital and physical tools, and active and passive learning roles calls for designers to consider multiple dimensions in the learning process. The experience also emphasises flexible assessment design. We moved towards qualitative, continuous assessment methods and gradually included various forms of feedback, like peer review and group feedback. Effective course design goes beyond just content delivery and needs to incorporate varied and flexible modes of assessment (Black & Wiliam 2009) and feedback that align with the learning objectives and the learning environment. Our experience is also relevant for teachers. Rather than acting as the sources of knowledge, we needed to adapt our role to be facilitators and guide students towards active participation and the ability to navigate both digital and physical learning spaces. We also needed to adapt to providing various forms of feedback, taking on the role of a facilitator or coach in addition to the traditional role of an instructor. Given that one of the aims of EAP is to socialise learners into particular academic discourse communities (Alexander, Argent & Spencer 2008), as a result of taking on these new roles we placed responsibility back into the hands of our students and our approach gradually socialised our learners into participating and engaging with their own learning. This means that teachers in the higher education context, especially in deeply hierarchical societies like China, should explore alternative roles and modalities for their teaching.

For students then, this experience and the lessons one can draw from it illustrate the potential of active participation in their learning. Course design that allows for flexibility and choice encourages students to take ownership of their learning process, seek help when needed, and engage in collaborative learning. The shift towards more flexible learning environments requires students to develop self-regulation skills, time management, and adaptability. The various forms of assessment and feedback also provide students with multiple avenues to understand and improve their learning. This can lead to deeper engagement with the course material and improve their learning outcomes.

### Conclusion

Looking ahead, the challenge is to carry forward the lessons learned and translate them into long-term productive change. According to Rapanta et al. (2020), the pandemic holds the potential to bring about improved teaching and learning practices in the post-digital era—if course designers could only implement them. Design frameworks for hybrid learning are not readily available (Fawns et al. 2022). So, it would be a start for designers to begin developing frameworks for integrating hybrid approaches to a variety of contexts.

Ultimately, the implementation of a hybrid pedagogy in EAP could enable educators to go beyond merely preparing learners for English studies. Instead, they will cultivate new types of literacy—'equipping students with the communicative skills to participate in specific (and changing) academic and cultural contexts' (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons 2002).

Furthermore, more research is needed to assess the efficacy of these changes, and to explore the long-term implications of hyper-hybrid learning spaces in different disciplines and contexts. Research suggests that Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners appreciated online learning during Covid-19 and that they were well adapted to group work and using various learning technologies (Han, Geng & Wang 2021). Our findings support this. However, we need more empirical data to back this up. Research should also focus on the intersection of pedagogy, technology, and course design to optimise student learning outcomes.

In conclusion, the Covid-19 pandemic has underscored the necessity for readiness in the face of unforeseen challenges and the flexibility to adapt our pedagogical approaches to best serve our students' needs. Our experiences in China have yielded insightful, albeit context-specific, lessons. The interpretations presented in this chapter are limited by the fact that they focus on a single setting and the absence of student surveys to gather first-hand feedback on the course. These limitations suggest caution when trying to generalize our findings. Nonetheless, the insights gleaned provide valuable perspectives and will hopefully encourage further inquiry into alternative approaches to EAP instruction in the post-pandemic era.

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