Problematizing the Hybrid Classroom for ESL/EFL Students

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Abstract

Hybrid courses—which replace 20% – 80% of class meetings with online activities—are predicted to increase as educators embrace the benefits of blending online technologies with face-to-face class meetings. Also expected to increase are enrollments of ESL/EFL students. As these growth trends intersect, an increased number of ESL/EFL students are expected to enroll in hybrid courses, especially mainstream courses populated by a majority of native-English-speaking students. Despite these growth trends and research showing hybrid courses as positive for most students, the TESOL community has not yet opened a discussion of the implications of hybrid delivery of mainstream classes for ESL/EFL students. In an effort to start the discussion, this article investigates potential problems related to issues of identity, forced individualization, and muting; gives several strategies for instructors of hybrid courses with ESL/EFL students; and concludes by calling for TESOL researchers to focus attention on hybrid delivery.

Introduction

The recent proliferation of internet access has led to an explosive growth in the use of hybrid, or blended, course delivery, with current estimates ranging from 5% (Allen, Seaman & Garrett, 2007) to 21% of all college courses (Sener, 2003). These courses, which replace 20% to 80% of face-to-face meetings with online activities (Allen, Seaman & Garrett, 2007; Kaleta & Aycock, 2004; Kurthen & Smith, 2005/2006), are predicted to increase as educators embrace the notion that hybrids have the potential to offer the higher success rates of online courses coupled with the higher retention rates of ground courses (Aycock, Garnham & Kaleta, 2002; Duhaney, 2004; Garnham & Kaleta, 2002; Welker & Berardino, 2005-2006). Such thinking has led researchers to proclaim this delivery to be "the best of both worlds: the infinite freedom of the Internet enhanced and made manageable by regular classroom interactions" (Stine, 2004, p. 66). Also growing are the enrollment numbers for ESL/EFL students in U.S. schools. During the last two decades, "the number of English language learners (ELLs) in the U.S. over age five has grown from 23 million to 47 million, or by 103 percent" (Fu & Matoush, 2006, p. 10); currently one in every five K-12 students nationwide resides in a home in which a language other than English is spoken, and by 2030, this number

is projected to double (Urban Institute, 2005). Further, NAFSA (2007) predicts continued slow growth in international student enrollment in the U.S., with 55% of its surveyed institutions reporting growth. As these two growth trends intersect, it is not unrealistic to expect a higher number of ESL/EFL students to enroll in hybrid courses, especially mainstream courses populated by a majority of native-English-speaking (NES) students.

Despite this impending collision of growth trends, the TESOL education community has not yet opened a discussion of the implications of hybrid delivery of mainstream classes for ESL/EFL students. The educational research surrounding hybrid delivery in general is overwhelmingly positive and demonstrates the benefits of replacing face-to-face class sessions with internet-based tasks for most students (Aycock, Garnham & Kaleta, 2002; Duhaney, 2004; Garnham & Kaleta, 2002; Stine, 2004; Welker & Berardino, 2005-2006). However, this dual delivery has not yet been investigated for the impact it might have on ESL/EFL students specifically. In an effort to start the discussion, I investigate the potential problems raised for ESL/EFL students enrolled in hybrid mainstream classes and call for TESOL researchers to focus attention on hybrid delivery. The potential problem areas grow mostly from the overarching topic of identity, but I also explore the concerns of forced individualization and muting, both of which can be heightened in hybrid courses.

The Need for ESL/EFL Hybrid Research

Within the large body of literature on the intersection of technology and language learning, research on the effects of hybrid delivery on ESL/EFL students is minimal. Lai & Kritsonis (2006) wrote of the advantages and disadvantages of computer technology and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) programs, but the disadvantages they list are problems faced by all students enrolled in hybrid courses and are not specific to ESL/EFL students. Al-Jarf (2004a) deals specifically with ESL students, but the online activities he describes are in addition to, not in place of, the regular ESL-only face-to-face sessions, and so does not address true hybrid delivery. Three recent articles specifically address language learning with true hybrid delivery, although all focus on non-ESL/EFL students—Blake, Wilson, Cetto, and Pardo-Ballister (2008) and Chenoweth, Ushida and Murday (2006) who focus on oral proficiency among American L2 foreign language learners, and Long, Vignare, Rappold, and Mallory (2007) who focus on communication access primarily for deaf students. DePew (2006) addresses the use of technology as instructional aides but mostly as coping strategies for international teaching assistants, not as instruction deliveries. Campbell (2007) addresses ESL/EFL student performance using technology in a mainstream class and the benefits it brings to ESL/EFL students, but as with Al-Jarf (2004a), it was used in addition to regular class sessions, not in place of instruction delivery as it would be in a hybrid course. Even two of the most-respected researchers who address technology and its effects on language learners, Stephen Thorne and Mark Warschauer, have yet to address the effects of hybrid's dual deliveries on ESL/EFL students. While both have detailed the uses and effects of various individual technologies in ESL/EFL classes, neither has addressed the issue of using technology *to replace* part of the face-to-face instruction delivery. It is also important to draw on Warschauer (1996) to mark a distinction between the research conducted on computer-assisted language learning (CALL) or computer-assisted language instruction (CALI) classes and hybrids; CALL and CALI are instructional tools, not instruction deliveries, and while it is possible for a hybrid course to incorporate CALL or CALI technologies, CALL or CALI by itself cannot constitute a hybrid course.

Therefore, while much research shows positive results when using technology to enhance language learning for ESL/EFL students (e.g., Sykes, Oskoz, & Thorne, 2008; Thorne & Black, 2007; Thorne & Payne, 2005; Warschauer, 2006), research on the potential of hybrid instruction delivery for ESL/EFL students in mainstream classes has found itself in a metaphorical No Man's Land, stuck between research on individual technologies and research in ESL/EFL only classes. The effect of dual instruction delivery has been ignored. Villalva (2006) notes, "While writing studies often explore what a person can do under particular circumstances, the circumstances themselves often are neglected" (p. 32). Campbell (2007) also acknowledges this neglected focus on mainstream courses: "although there is a sizable volume of literature on the pedagogic use of online discussion in general, there is comparatively little that focuses on how the medium could benefit ESL/EFL students in a mainstream class" (p. 38). This lack of research on hybrid's dual instruction deliveries is an oversight which needs to be corrected, and we can start by identifying areas of potential problems related to classroom community and academic identity, discourse switching, forced individualism, and muting.

Issues of Classroom Community & Academic Identity

The unique feature of hybrid classes is that it offers two instruction delivery methods, in effect creating two distinct classroom communities. When ESL/EFL students enroll in hybrid classes, they unknowingly enter the debate surrounding the extent to which these communities are established and of the social interactions of their members. Educators who advocate online-only instruction often cite the opportunity for students who might normally be shy or feel intimidated in a face-to-face classroom to find their voice through online activities; this, they claim, allows marginalized students to establish themselves as part of the classroom community (for a list of these benefits and researchers see Palmer, Holt, & Bray, 2008). Others argue, however, that an online environment draws attention to writing deficiencies and lends itself to miscommunication, and students who feel self-conscious about their writing will either limit their participation or stop it completely (Yena & Waggoner, 2003); muting still occurs, then, but for a different student population than in a face-to-face class. Muting has not been prevented, only shifted. Those who champion hybrid instruction believe that hybrids provide a middle ground. They argue that combining face-to-face interaction with online discussion solidifies the classroom community in ways that online only and face-to-face instruction cannot by themselves, thus providing students with the opportunity to engage in both mediums or choose between them, as necessary, for the best way to express themselves (Aycock, Garnham, & Kaleta, 2002; Stine, 2004).

What this debate suggests is that two distinct, and often exclusionary, classroom communities exist: the community of face-to-face interaction and the online community, both with their own social dynamics and interactions, which can be so strong as to generate self-muting in one of the communities. In this regard, the hybrid's opportunity to choose between mediums is not so much a positive choice as a negative self-exclusion from half of the academic discourses necessary to be a full participant in the classroom community.

Even for those students who are able and willing to participate in both, this separation can cause problems by forcing them to constantly switch between the two communities. Academic identity development is a dynamic process linked to discourses and literacy, and literacy is a social practice (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton; Harklau, 2000; Heath 1983; Villalva, 2006). Street (1984) shifted the view of literacy from one of an autonomous nature

to one of ideology, moving away from the traditional definition of literacy as simply the ability to read and write to one that incorporates a social dimension. Drawing from this shift, Gee (1994) posited that literacy cannot be separated from its cultural context, thus in school, which is a cultural institution, "academic literacy facilitates the transmission of norms, values, and beliefs of the specific discourse community in which is it rooted" (Bao, 2006, p.2). Gee's idea, then, suggests that ESL/EFL students' literacy results from not only becoming literate in English but also in the norms and values of U.S. culture and in U.S. academic discourse (Bao, 2006). Therefore, for a complete formation of academic literacy, it is important for students to engage in both communities and learn the different academic discourse provided by each delivery. But for students unfamiliar with U.S. academic discourse, the time split between the two discourses limits the exposure to both. To what extent, then, can ESL/EFL students learn these two academic discourses when the time spent in each is effectively halved?

Further, constant switching between the two social communities might result in a fragmented and incomplete identity development, a sort of instructional schizophrenia in which ESL/EFL students remain in neither community long enough to establish their identities within the group and learn the different academic discourse of each. If we work from the premise posited by Harklau (2000), that "identities are locally understood and constantly remade in social relationships" (p.104), and that there exists two separate and disparate communities within the hybrid course, then students in hybrid classes must create two separate identities: one for the online community and one for the face-to-face community. Further, these identities are constantly being shaped by their communities. Despite perceptions that identity is stable, unitary, and self-evident in a given context, identity formation is actually characterized as highly unstable, disjunct, and interactionally rendered (Harklau, 2000). As Harklau explains, even though an identity or representation "may seem self-evident, its meanings are in fact constantly renegotiated and reshaped by particular educators and students working in specific classrooms, institutions, and societies" (p.104). If switching between communities can create changes in identity based upon changes in perceived representations by teachers and fellow students, what becomes of the identity and representation of an ESL/EFL student who is forced to switch constantly between two academic communities on a daily basis? The result could be the interrupted creation of student identity, resulting in a disjointed, incomplete sense of self, who is unable to function fully in either community.

Issues of Discourse

Despite the varying language proficiencies demonstrated by ESL/EFL students, they all have to acquire new discourses and conventions and represent themselves in novel ways (Canagarajah, 2002) each time they step into a new classroom. However, a hybrid class's continuous shift in delivery places the focus not on learning the discourses but on learning to shift between them. Because ESL/EFL students in particular are already adept in switching between discourses (Canagarajah, 2002), what they learn is redundant and unnecessary for further language and discourse development. In fact, it could be seen as harmful. When their focus falls on discourse switching, rather than discourse development, what might occur is the failure to further enhance their academic discourse. This could potentially position them academically behind their peers who took the same course with only one form of instructional delivery. Minority students have also expressed dissatisfaction in adopting the split personalities necessary to switch between discourses and identities (Canagarajah, 2002). This dissatisfaction, if heightened by hybrid delivery's forced switching, might result in muting in

one or both of the class's communities or in resistance to develop or enhance discourse. Either way, the results are the same: a failure to develop an advanced academic discourse.

This continuous shifting between discourses also has the potential to negatively affect development of the authorial self for ESL/EFL students. A concept which describes to what extent writers see and present themselves as authors (Ivanic, 1998), the authorial self is shaped by social context: selfhood "does not exist in a vacuum" but is "shaped by individual acts of writing in which people take on particular discoursal identities" (Ivanic, 1998, p. 27). Ultimately, then, writing is a presentation of the self (Canagarajah, 2002), inseparable from issues of identity (Ivanic, 1998). In addition to the potential failure to create a full academic identity in a hybrid class, as discussed above, the authorial self also could be impacted by issues of self-consciousness. The overwhelming majority of online activities are writing-based, and what they all have in common is the potential for highlighting the differences in language proficiency of ESL/EFL students for all community members to see. Ivanic (1998) highlights how these differences relate to identity construction when she writes, "individuals do not define themselves entirely in terms of group membership(s). They also have a sense of themselves as defined by their "difference from others they encounter" (Ivanic, 1998, p. 14). The self-consciousness of being different, along with unrealistic comparisons of language use to their native-speaking or more proficient ESL/EFL peers, can led to negative effects on the development of the authorial self. This could create feelings of inadequacy not only as a writer but also as a student (Canagarajah, 2002). These feelings of negativity and devaluing of the self might be compounded for those students who also have poor oral skills and compare themselves to others' more proficient skills with speaking in the face-to-face component. Students who would otherwise be able to hide their language deficiencies from other community members by employing various coping strategies in either of the course deliveries now find that their weaknesses are on display. Their self-valuation as participants in the classroom community in affected, as well as their ability to become full members within the larger academic community (Mays, 2008). This, in turn, has the potential to restrict the creativity and risk-taking necessary to advance literacy skills and develop as a writer and scholar (Scarcella, 2002).

The online portion of hybrid delivery presents a minefield of potential discourse problems for ESL/EFL students. The large number of online activities—which Stine (2004) refers to as having "infinite" possibilities (p. 66)—might pose learning problems for ESL/EFL students in a hybrid class instead of providing the positive effects that instructors anticipate. Online discussion boards, streaming audio and video, real-time chatrooms, electronic portfolios, blogs, micro-blogs, and websites such as a YouTube.com and SecondLife.com have all found their way into online course instructional materials, adding to the now "old" technologies of email, PowerPoint presentations, databases, and electronic comments in Microsoft Word (DePew, 2006). This proliferation of technology is potentially problematic for ESL/EFL students. They might not have the computer literacies needed to switch between these various technologies and the individual discourses each technology represents, while at the same time establishing their own academic identities and attempting to learn the course content. And all of this takes place within an instructional delivery component which is "mediated through the written word" (DePew, 2006, p. 175), which might pose additional problems for ESL/EFL students who lack proficiency writing in English.

Issues of Individualism

Hybrid course delivery also raises the issue of forced individualism, especially in writing classes. The individualized nature of U.S. writing courses already causes problems for ESL/EFL students whose native cultures tend toward group participation and harmonization, rather than individuality and dissent. As Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999/2006) point out, individualism is strongly favored in U.S. academic writing, implied in such elements as voice, peer review, critical thinking, and textual ownership. Voice and peer review, in particular, hold difficulties for ESL/EFL students, whose native cultures might see these practices as alien (Campbell, 2007). In a hybrid class, this forced individualism is further heightened by the two delivery methods that are often heralded as providing greater opportunity for inclusion. For ESL/EFL students, ironically, the dual deliveries hold the promise not of inclusion but further marginalization.

This is seen first in the individualistic, sometimes isolating, nature of the online component, which is often used for discussion of readings or issues; completion of tasks is done alone with the student sitting at a computer terminal, isolated from his or her fellow classmates, and calling upon his or her own thoughts and experiences to complete them (Lai & Kritsonis, 2006; Al-Jarf, 2004b). The face-to-face instruction of hybrid writing classes is also problematic for ESL/EFL students who feel uncomfortable in situations of forced individualism. Because the hybrid writing class has limited face-to-face time, writing instructors will use a greater percentage of this time to conduct peer reviews when compared to the percentage spent by traditional ground classes. (Although it is possible to conduct peer review in an online environment, the process is substantially different from its face-to-face counterpart, resulting in most instructors still holding face-to-face sessions (Kastman Breuch, 2004).) This means that ESL/EFL students are most likely forced into an individualistic-centered learning environment for a greater percentage of time than their counterparts in traditional classes, increasing the discomfort inherent in the practice for ESL/EFL students (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999/2006).

Muting

Instead of drawing the ESL/EFL student into the social community of the classroom, hybrid's dual deliveries and the resulting conflicts with identity and individualism might result in *muting*. This is especially likely in the online component where language differences are difficult, if not impossible, to hide and draw attention to the differences of ESL/EFL students rather working toward their inclusion in the classroom community. This muting takes two forms, discussed here as *self-muting* and *imposed muting*.

Self-muting is done by the ESL/EFL students to themselves; they make a conscious choice to either limit their participation or to exclude themselves from participating in the community, muting their voices completely. The potential for self-muting occurs in both delivery components. In the online component, online discussion boards show promise for ESL/EFL participation, even in mainstream classes (Campbell, 2007). However, student perceptions of their technology skills, their ability to complete assignments, and their insecurities stemming from the ephemeral nature of online instruction—such as, worry that they may have missed important information—has the potential to create communication anxiety (Yena & Waggoner, 2003). Communication anxiety is also created by the lack of social cues in online delivery that are available in face-to-face instruction, such as eye contact, facial expressions,

gestures, and tone of voice; without these clues, students experience anxiety over whether their communication is being understood or not (Hara & Kling, 1999; Kurthen & Smith, 2005/2006). This anxiety is increased when the student is aware of the fact that the communication likely affects their course grade (Yena & Waggoner, 2003). ESL/EFL students are also unlikely to find refuge in the face-to-face component in a mainstream class for a variety of reasons, stemming from insecurities over language proficiency to conflicts of culture (for more detailed information, see Campbell, 2007 and Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999/2006). Both hybrid communities, then, produce the potential for anxiety. This anxiety could create a failure to engage, whether partially or completely, in the classroom communities.

Imposed-muting—which occurs as a result of others' actions toward ESL/EFL students—is much more insidious. At its best, it is a result of insensitivity, and at its worst, it instills feelings of intimidation and inferiority in ESL/EFL students. Imposed-muting can result from NES students excluding ESL/EFL students from discussions, ignoring their comments or questions, or actively discouraging them from participation in a variety of ways. As Braine (1996), Harklau (1994), and Matsuda and Silva (1999/2006) conclude, ESL/EFL students often feel threatened, afraid, or embarrassed in mainstream classes. "Some ESL/EFL students," according to Matsuda and Silva (1999/2006), "tend not to do well in mainstream courses partly because may of them feel intimidated by their NES peers who are obviously more proficient in English and comfortable with the U.S. classroom culture" (p. 248). Braine (1996) found examples of imposed-muting in the students he followed in his study:

Many [ESL] students stated, generally, the [NES] students did not help them or even speak to them in class and that the teacher did little to encourage communication. During peer review of papers in groups, these [ESL] students felt that the students were impatient with them, and one [ESL] student said that he overheard a [NES] student complain to the teacher about her inability to correct the numerous grammatical errors in the [ESL student's] paper. (p.98)

Harklau (1994) cited similar reactions from ESL/EFL students, who did not speak up in class, blaming negative reactions from both the teacher and the NES students, and Campbell (2007) noticed that, while ESL/EFL students had no trouble interacting with each other, they often fell silent around NES students. A telling sign of student behavior in online discussions is seen in the proliferation of rules for online behavior or online civility—such as writing without insults, name-calling, or belittling. The necessity for such rules has permeated online discussions to the point that many online instructors are now assigning their creation as the first assignment in the course (D. Fordham, personal communication, June 10, 2009). Thus, the opportunity for NES students to impose muting on ESL/EFL students does not necessarily diminish with hybrid delivery's addition of a second instruction component but, rather, might increase.

Considerations for Hybrid Instructors

As ESL/EFL enrollment in hybrid courses increase, it will not be enough for instructors to simply take into consideration the variety of language proficiencies and developing discourses while planning and evaluating class activities; they also have to learn to recognize situations in which potential problems might occur that not only hamper learning but possibly stop it all together. However, until further research is conducted on the potential of hybrid delivery for

ESL/EFL students, instructors can take several steps to make the course more inclusive and lessen the possibility for muting:

- Make certain that students have access to the online technology and know how to use it before online tasks are assigned; this will help deter the anxiety created by working in an unfamiliar online environment. Although this seems like an obvious point, ethnic and language minority students are least likely to have computer/internet access or to use them for challenging, problem-solving activities (U. S. Dept. of Commerce, 2004; Warschauer, 1998).

- Monitor ESL/EFL participation online and gently prompt those who are not participating to engage with the community. Some ESL/EFL students will not post to online discussions without direct prompts from the instructor or if the instructor does not post new topics and a sample response; some will cut and paste from previous information rather than writing new responses or starting new threads, and others will just read rather than respond (Al-Jarf, 2004b).

- Consider taking a non-participatory role once the discussions are underway. Students from Asian countries might be reluctant to disagree with instructor's views (Campbell, 2007), muting discussion rather than encouraging it.

- Assign the creation of a list of "Rules of Online Discussion" as the first online discussion task (Campbell, 2007). This task helps develop an awareness of civility when interacting with fellow students, as well as giving the instructor a document to refer back to when students break the rules. It also works toward building a sense of online community by giving them a group task to complete and find consensus.

- Give ESL/EFL students the opportunity to choose one-on-one tutoring at the college writing center or language center instead of participating in group peer review activities.

- Monitor face-to-face discussions to discourage NES students from dominating the discussions and muting ESL/EFL students.

Conclusions

Hybrid delivery holds much potential for all students. In addition to providing opportunities to learn various types of technology, it provides for a more flexible schedule, and the focus on writing allows for greater opportunities for improving writing skills for ESL/EFL and struggling writers (Al-Jarf, 2004a; Bao, 2006; Lam, 2000; Stine, 2004). It also has the potential to knock down many socio-economic obstacles, such as problems with childcare, transportation, and parking; scheduling class time around family and work obligations; and feeling part of the academic community (Carpenter, Brown & Hickman, 2004). Based upon growth projections and a very favorable reception by administrators, this instructional delivery method will be a growing part of higher education for a long time to come.
But we must not become so enamored of the benefits that we overlook the potential problems that such delivery brings, especially in light of the exponential growth of ESL/EFL students who will also be turning to hybrid delivery for the same benefits as their NES peers. The two, disparate communities created in the hybrid classroom have the potential to include but also to exclude. The same technologies which hold the promise of improving ESL/EFL students' writing also hold the potential for creating feelings of acute self-consciousness and anxiety;

increased opportunities for open discussion and sharing of ideas also create increased opportunities for intimidation. The same classroom social community which should allow for the creation of an academic self also has the potential for fragmenting that self, perhaps even preventing its creation all together.

Despite these potential problems, however, hybrid course offerings should not be restricted, and neither should enrollment in these classes by ESL/EFL students. On the contrary, all students need to be exposed to the technology used in such deliveries, and all should be given the opportunity to develop an online academic discourse. What am I advocating, however, is a greater awareness by instructors and administrators of the potential problems that could be encountered by ESL/EFL students. These problems must be anticipated when designing assignments, requiring task-based and peer group work, evaluating student participation and/or performance, and monitoring student interaction, both online and during face-to-face class sessions. To practically assist these instructors, researchers must begin to investigate the issues regarding identity, discourse development, forced individualism, and muting due to switching between the two instructional delivery methods and their dual classroom communities. Otherwise, the dual elements of hybrid delivery Stine (2004) posited as having infinite possibilities might prove not to be the best of both worlds for ESL/EFL students after all—but the worst.

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