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William J. Comer

Portland State University, wcomer@pdx.edu

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Citation Details

Comer, William J. and deBenedette, Lynne (2021) "Hybrids 2.0: Forward to a New Normal in Post-Pandemic Language Teaching," *Russian Language Journal*: Vol. 71 : Iss. 2 , Article 16. Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj/vol71/iss2/16>

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Hybrids 2.0: Forward to a New Normal in Post-Pandemic Language Teaching

WILLIAM J. COMER, LYNNE DEBENEDETTE

1. Introduction

Faculty members who primarily use face-to-face instruction probably anticipate a post-pandemic time when groups will gather again in physical classrooms, and when facemasks will be special occasion accessories for Halloween parties. Once beyond the pandemic, faculty may feel an almost overwhelming desire to banish the pandemic and its effects to oblivion and to return to how life was before. And yet, that would suggest that language instructors who generally work in face-to-face formats have nothing to learn from their resilience during the pandemic or from their many pandemic-induced adaptations made since the sudden move to remote instruction in March 2020. In this article, we will reflect on how current changes to teaching practice can be adapted for post-pandemic language teaching.

We recognize that current COVID-related online or remote¹ language instruction is new in three ways: 1) the pandemic brought into the world of remote teaching and learning practitioners and students who otherwise might never have considered delivering or receiving language instruction online; 2) much of the switch from face-to-face to online work was mandated by institutions rather than chosen by instructors or learners; 3) remote learning went from being a possible subset of a student's coursework to the dominant form of instruction in virtually all of a student's academic subjects. These factors cannot help but color both instructor and student attitudes towards online work in both positive and negative ways.

We also recognize, however, that in response to the necessity of providing remote learning, many second language (L2) instructors have worked hard to adapt and acquire additional tools and practices that facilitate communication online. Faculty have enriched face-to-face formats

¹ We will use the terms "online" and "remote" here as catch-alls since we know that institutions have tried out many delivery formats since the start of the pandemic, including synchronous remote; synchronous remote with limited physical classroom work ("hyflex"); mixture of asynchronous work with limited synchronous remote, and others. As local infection rates climbed, institutions sometimes changed formats or the admixture of formats in the middle of a term.

transplanted to remote instruction with new applications and new types of online activities. Although many of these applications and practices were new to face-to-face instructors, they had already been well explored by teachers and materials designers working in online asynchronous, hybrid and “flipped classroom” instructional models (Hojnacki 2018; Russell and Murphy-Judy 2020). However, many teachers doing remote instruction for the first time had to learn these new practices quickly and implemented them with widely varying levels of institutional support and training.

As Gacs, Goertler, and Spasova (2020) have noted, the relative speed with which crisis-prompted remote teaching practices were adopted in 2020 meant that there was little time for most instructors used to face-to-face instruction to think about how to implement these online practices in an intentional way following best practices in instructional design. As the pandemic-induced remote teaching ends, we have the opportunity to take some time and evaluate all our practices and tools; some applications and tools teachers have deployed in the last year may not transfer back to a world of face-to-face class meetings, while others, which have shown their utility in remote instruction, should be retained as valuable occasions for out-of-class learning. In other words, the waning of the pandemic presents an opportunity to create new models of hybrid language instruction, where instructors, informed by findings from second language acquisition (SLA) research, can select and deploy practices, matching them to the most efficient environments for students to complete them in. These new hybrid models ask us to rethink (and rationalize) how and where we draw the boundaries between face-to-face classroom activities, asynchronous online activities, testing and “homework.”

In evaluating online tools and practices used during the pandemic, we are guided by the SLA research notions of input and interaction, two essential elements for language learning (VanPatten 2001; Gass 2003; Mayo and Soler 2013). Input can be defined as “message-bearing discourse in the second language” (Comer 2020, 169). While input is necessary for language learning, and no language learning can happen without it, input by itself is insufficient (VanPatten 2001, 38). Learners need opportunities to interact with the input, and we conceptualize this interaction in two ways. First, learners need structured opportunities to interact with the input itself: first, so that they can demonstrate that they have understood its message, and then so that they can start to map the input’s meaning to the lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic form(s) that express that message (Comer, 2020, 170-72). Second, learners need opportunities to interact and use the input in order to produce output in which they exchange message-

bearing discourse in order to complete various kinds of communicative tasks (Comer 2020, 176-78). Thus, interaction in our sense is a useful concept encompassing both learners' output (i.e., communication in the interpersonal and presentational modes), but also in learners' processing of input (i.e., communication in the interpretive mode).

In the last 25 years, language learners' access to input and interaction online has greatly expanded. They can encounter many forms of authentic and semi-authentic input (in text, audio and video materials) in the target language. Similarly, the range and functions of Web 2.0 tools (i.e., chat programs, voice recording, video conferencing) that allow users to easily interact with each other by exchanging text, audio, and video messages have also greatly expanded since the mid-2000s. While it would seem that these internet communication tools have created sufficient opportunities for students to encounter input and to communicate with others using that language input, both well-planned online instruction and pandemic-enforced remote instruction have shown that these tools need curation and pedagogical structuring if they are to be efficient for instructed language learning.

In the rest of this article, informed by the concepts of input and interaction, we will consider which tools and practices should remain in the structuring of our teaching in the "new" post-pandemic normal, and where each tool or practice is best deployed.² We think that reflecting on the experience of remote teaching and learning will encourage teachers to construct new hybrids (i.e., courses that incorporate elements of face-to-face, synchronous remote and asynchronous learning and teaching) that prioritize those aspects of language instruction that are most valuable for learners' communicative ability and growth in intercultural understanding, in awareness of effective learning strategies, and in conceptual knowledge of how language works.

2. Questions for reflection

To give this new iteration of hybrid shape, we will consider two sets of questions:

1. What do we want face-to-face classroom time for? For students,

² In this short reflection we will only consider the structure of the language teaching experience, primarily thinking about language learning at the first and second years of instruction. The conversation about the content of our teaching practice and how it addresses equity, diversity and social justice is vital for our profession and has started to be addressed elsewhere (Stauffer 2020; ASEEES 2020 webinar series "Race in Focus: From Critical Pedagogies to Research Practice and Public Engagement in Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies").

what is the “value added” of the face-to-face time in a classroom with an instructor? Are there face-to-face practices that we should make even more common post-pandemic?

2. What activities and practices can or should we do online? For a course with a face-to-face component, are there traditional face-to-face classroom practices that are more effective when converted into online learning activities, whether synchronous or asynchronous? In what ways can online instruction and activities increase learners’ interaction with language input, and with one another?

The discussion of these questions in higher education is not new, since the essential notion of “flipping the classroom” has been to move traditional teaching (i.e., lecturing) out of the classroom and learning activities into the classroom (Hojnacki 2018, 37; Vitta and Al-Hoorie 2020, 3). The pandemic offers us an opportunity to think anew about the division of activities among learning formats and the usage of classroom time and out-of-class time. What will we do now that we recognize that having students in the same physical space at the same time is a really precious resource?

3. What do we want face-to-face time for?

3.1. Conversational interaction

Teaching in a remote synchronous classroom in the past year in our experience has brought into stark relief the best aspects of face-to-face instruction. Face-to-face classroom instruction allows for the kinds of interpersonal interactions (both on and off task) that create community and a sense of comradery among students and between instructor and students. The strength of the interpersonal relationships that grow out of those interactions and the shared experience of the classroom can have a strong positive impact on learner motivation. For us (and we assume for some students) it has felt isolating and challenging when all interaction has been mediated through a screen. When we are able to meet again in face-to-face classrooms, our practice will need to capitalize on the potential for social interaction and community building. In a post-pandemic world, classroom activities should highlight even more interaction in student pairs and small groups and between learners and the teacher, in the co-construction of explanations when they are needed (Adair-Hauck and Donato 2010).

Face-to-face classrooms allow pairs/groups of students to exchange conversation with more natural turn-taking, which is characterized by

overlaps (when two people speak simultaneously) and spontaneity (which turning a mute button on and off in Zoom currently inhibits). For the teacher, managing the “cacophony” of multiple pairs and groups speaking in the same face-to-face space generally is not a problem, and the experienced teacher can be with one group while covertly listening in and monitoring the activity of other groups. Visual and auditory cues during paired and group work can let the experienced teacher know where in the classroom instructor support is needed. Since virtual breakout rooms exist in their own separate visual and sound spaces, a teacher has more limited ability to monitor pair work globally and pinpoint problems.

3.2. Providing immediate and collective feedback

While it is not impossible to deliver audio and visual feedback at the same time to a whole group in Zoom, it is harder to do so with an individual learner in a group Zoom class. The face-to-face classroom allows for side conversations between teacher and student that can address a specific learning problem, highlight an ineffective strategy, or arrange for additional consultation. Establishing a rapport between teacher and students and delivering effective individualized spontaneous feedback may be particularly crucial at the very beginning of learning Russian, where learners sort out visual and phonological processing issues (e.g., misprocessing *это* as *ето*, *можно* as *мошно*, or *хочу* as *хожу*) at different rates, and a few may need sustained feedback to overcome these challenges or face falling behind.

3.3. Engaging the senses

The physical face-to-face classroom can engage all the learners’ senses, not just the sight and sound that videoconferencing currently affords them. Face-to-face teaching offers many instructors immediate visual feedback from learners based on their facial expressions and physical gestures. That non-verbal feedback from students can help modulate instruction effectively and pace classroom work. While Zoom and other videoconferencing platforms offer the ability to see one another in real time, that visual connection is not unproblematic: students without strong internet access often cannot effectively use their cameras; laptop screens – or iPhones – have limited space for video and text; students are inhibited in showing their workspace because it is shared with others in the family or shows aspects of their socio-economic status. Teaching remotely online to a set of avatars or plain black squares on a computer screen challenges a teacher’s sense of when to provide feedback and how to pace activities.

When teaching in general purpose classrooms, we will want to find ways of adding some culturally-appropriate visual stimuli to the four walls.

The physical classroom offers tactile and kinetic opportunities that can help connect language forms with the actions that they represent. This can encompass a really wide variety of activities, from using clapping (or foot stamping or table top drumming), when first helping students fix the stress placement in a new word or word form to sorting/matching physical cards (e.g., words with pictures for vocabulary learning, pronouns with verb forms for getting the notion of conjugation, sentence starts and endings, etc.). Classrooms are a natural place for language activities that have a performative or Total Physical Response (TPR) component: sing alongs, charades (i.e., pantomiming basic verbs while students guess the action), cued actions (i.e., learner draws a card with a phrase like *выйти из аудитории* and they carry out the action silently while the others in the class come up with words to describe the scene), roleplay situations with props, paired picture labeling (i.e., students using textual words and phrases to label elements in pictures that illustrate a text/story that they have read and then to narrate that episode from the story to the whole group), and readers' theatre (i.e., students act out an episode from a text that they have read).

The physical classroom offers more opportunities for whole group mixers, where each student needs to note down on paper the responses of their classmates. Physical classrooms offer opportunities for students to work collaboratively to make a poster summarizing/capturing what they have learned on a topic. Those posters can be hung on the classroom walls and then students can conduct a "gallery walk" of those posters, looking for similarities and differences which they relay in a whole group after the walk.

3.4. Community building

In post-pandemic times, we will want to emphasize those activities that really build community and stimulate collaborative work that leads to tangible products. The experience most missing from virtual teaching has been sharing food or snacks from the other culture. While we do not necessarily need to make shared food a daily part of classroom culture, occasional treats that bring something from the target culture to students promote positive affect in the classroom and create moments of community.

Having a fixed class time and space does require students to organize their lives around those commitments to a space and time. But that fixed time also ensures the regular presence of Russian happening in a

student's life. It is a truism that when a task can be done at any time at all, there is a great chance that the task will never be done. Students who have chosen to pursue higher education through asynchronous online learning have the motivation to continue their studies in that format. However, based on attrition trends at one of the authors' institutions, it seems that for students who are used to face-to-face instruction, the remote pandemic experience may have decreased their internal motivation and commitment to language learning. The communal ritual of coming to class at a regular time in a designated space provides motivation and personal accountability as well as a structure for interaction and shared experience.

3.5. Neutral space

Physical classrooms create something of a neutral playing field for all students.³ Trying to participate in a virtual classroom as a student (or a teacher) when your physical environment is filled with reminders of your other social and intimate roles (e.g., parent, child, caretaker, cook, janitor, lover, etc.) requires significant concentration. In the Zoom classroom, the visuals of students in their private space can bring to the foreground all the social, economic, and educational disparities of our society. The physical classroom space, devoid of those personal reminders, can help students and teachers get into the mindset required for teaching and learning. In the post-pandemic times, we anticipate continuing efforts to address those disparities, as well as efforts to make the physical space of our classrooms more visually appealing and intellectually engaging.

4. What do we want online time for?

Surveys of university students' reactions to COVID-era remote learning in formerly face-to-face courses suggests that students have found both positives and negatives about their new online learning conditions (Lederman 2020, Dengub 2021). Dengub's survey of 100 university-level language students of Russian from 10 institutions doing remote instruction (2021) reports that, assuming no technology glitches (not always a given), learners value being able to "get to" class and office hours easily. Students note with approval that they can access reference materials and dictionaries

³ We recognize that the face-to-face classroom has its own inequities: students arrive in face-to-face classrooms with enormous differences in academic, economic and lived experiences. Some people, because of those inequities and geography, do not have access to the physical classroom at all. However, seeing the home contexts that our students work in during remote instruction makes the disparities between learners much more visible and therefore less ignorable.

more quickly during a remotely conducted class. But they also mention difficulties with remote learning enumerated above: technology issues; harder turn-taking; loss of focus and motivation; distraction; stunted interpersonal relations. These considerations should inform what online work we deploy upon returning to face-to-face instruction.

Another factor guiding our recommendations is the role that comprehensible input and meaning-based interaction play in language learning. Online work can contribute to the pedagogical structuring of input and interactions.⁴ We suggest a sequence where front-loaded online work with new language input then segues into the classroom. Learners encounter new input (text, story, dialog, podcast, blog), presented in both aural and written form, and check their comprehension, pinning down details of the input's message, all online. In class, they 1) interact with others using language from the input in scaffolded communication exchange activities; 2) notice new language forms; and 3) learn to manipulate new language forms in output (deBenedette 2020). Examples linked below come from the open-access first-year Russian textbook, *Между нами* (deBenedette et al. 2015), and from our own experience at our own institutions.

4.1. Encountering and comprehending new input

Instructors often introduce the texts, dialogs and conversations that form the basis of learners' new language input in face-to-face class sessions, even when learners are asked to read and listen to input outside of class. However, in class it can be problematic to monitor all students' comprehension, and some students need more "passes" through audio and written material to understand it well. Front-loaded online encounters with new language can collocate related audio and visuals on the same screen, allow easy access to glossing of new lexicon, and can link to an online comprehension checks incorporating both listening and reading, which create low-stakes but scored accountability. We may initially demonstrate in class how students should do this online work. But subsequently moving it largely online means that the instructor knows that learners have understood new input and that they can interact with each other in class using the new input.

4.2. Guided and enhanced explanations about language

Describing the flipped language classroom, Russell and Murphy-Judy (2020) suggest that "flipped learning allows for more interactive, engaging,

⁴ Two models for this are PACE (Adair-Hauck and Donato 2010), and Structured Input or SI (Lee and VanPatten 2003; VanPatten 2004).

and meaningful instruction because classroom time is used to develop communicative goals while learners focus on grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and other linguistic features outside of class on their own” (135). We agree that the explanation of new grammar forms and vocabulary can occur productively online; however, we see just as vital a role for work with language input online outside of class. Online presentations should supply audio with any examples and check students’ comprehension of message (ex: Машу видит Коля vs Маша видит Колю) and of concept (ex: who is the do-er of the actions in the above sentences?) This is true whether the material is presented on a website or via an instructor-narrated video or slideshow.

4.3. Homework 2.0: increasing communication outside class

Even in a program with 4-5 contact hours per week, learners’ interactions with one another during the classroom session are limited. Certain formats of online tasks can allow us to increase those interactions. Instructors can use apps like GoReact that permit students to video (or audio) record themselves in pairs to record a dialog, act out a situation, interview one another, or even work together to read and comprehend a new text, filling out a reading matrix together in a shared Google doc.⁵ Rubrics for scoring those activities show students what is expected, and the online environment allows us to provide video and written models of speech for students to do the activity. This synchronous video pair work by students, done at convenient times for them and submitted online, can increase learners’ out-of-class work interacting in real time in the language. The recorded sessions also give the instructor the opportunity to offer more sustained individual feedback than would be realistic in a face-to-face class, where there are time constraints on every activity.

Note that we are not advocating increasing learners’ overall time spent outside of class on homework. Instead, we encourage instructors to prioritize those activities that increase interaction outside the classroom. This includes information-gap activities (e.g., each member of a pair of students is provided with half the info needed for a task; the pair must talk to share and write down all the information); problem-solving (the pair exchanges information and uses it to solve a problem like making room assignments for the guests). Such speaking activities – with clear instructions and ample scaffolding – can serve as interactive outside-class

⁵ Social reading apps like [Hypothesis](#) and [Perusall](#) also allow students to annotate text and demonstrate comprehension.

work that reinforces the interactions happening in the classroom. In other words, we advocate taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the technology to carry over the communicative interaction of the face-to-face classroom to learners' online work.

For online work, instructors need to account for the challenges of learning to write in Russian, especially in the first year. Instructors might replace written exercises with regular assignments where students audiorecord themselves within the learning management system (LMS) or via an app while completing a specific activity. This regular, low-stakes work prepares students for performative assessments like show-and-tell videos (Это комната, где я живу / Что у меня в рюкзаке? / Вот наше общежитие). In this way students can regularly demonstrate that they are able to use the language independently to communicate.⁶ Options for feedback to learners depend on the format in which the assignment is submitted. For example, in GoReact the instructor can insert detailed audio and written feedback tied to specific places in a student's recording. Assessment of these assignments can be done simply (completed / not completed) or using a rubric that targets features to be used in the learner's output. For online writing, teachers will need to teach typing in Cyrillic early in the course and set reachable goals for online posting. Teachers need to encourage students to process words deeply both when typing and writing by hand, i.e., students should say what they write aloud as they write or type, think about meaning and sound out words they read on screen. We need to remind students why copy-pasting words into online activities and discussion posts is a poor strategy for learning the pronunciation and spelling of new words.

4.4. Leveraging the LMS: student accountability and improving learning strategies

In the new hybrids, the course's LMS will become the central hub for connecting classroom work with online work and for instructors to use the online space to guide students in developing and deploying effective learning strategies. The "getting started" orientation modules that are essential to courses offered online should also become a regular feature of face-to-face instruction, including checking how students approached assignments (e.g., making sure everyone did the comprehension check after the text); presenting strategies for sequencing homework tasks; and

⁶ Apps that allow students to make and respond to video posts, like Flipgrid or GoReact, or to post and caption images, like Harmonize, can take on this function.

modeling effective ways of learning vocabulary. Online instructor-made videos, low-stakes graded diagnostics and learner self-checks can help students understand and self-monitor for effective strategy use and check that they are meeting weekly goals (expressed as can-do statements such as "I can talk about a city, comparing its pluses and minuses"). The online space can become a forum for encouragement, guidance toward goals, and reminding about can-dos.

4.5. Increase student-instructor contact

Instructors should consider continuing to hold at least some of their office hours online. A student who may find it difficult to come in person may find an online meeting easier and less intimidating. The availability of online office hours is especially important at institutions where students commute to campus or may have jobs and family obligations that take up significant amounts of their non-class time. Brief online meetings can also be used at intervals during the term to check on students' progress.

4.6 Virtual visits: interaction with other speakers of Russian outside class

One powerful way of bringing target culture perspectives to our students has been the relative ease of arranging "virtual visits" with Russian speakers, whether from other campuses, the local community, or from Russia or other parts of the former USSR. First-year students who practice doing an interview with the instructor can later conduct interviews with other Russian speakers in an online conference meeting. Alternately, students can post their videos and questions and receive answers the same way.

5. Assessment and accountability

Measuring student progress in language learning is one area that will require continued rethinking when face-to-face instruction becomes possible again. Options for assessment will grow significantly when teachers fully leverage the strengths and controls of both face-to-face and online formats. The move to remote synchronous instruction in March 2020 forced many teachers to step away from traditional classroom tests as the way to measure student progress; instructors recognized the difficulty of preventing students from using outside resources when completing tasks that have convergent answers, like discrete point grammar questions. With that kind of traditional testing unavailable, teachers who had previously relied on traditional forms of testing have worked to implement other kinds of measures of accountability, i.e., small low-stakes graded activities

that can signal to instructors that students are keeping up with the class work, are grasping key concepts, and engaging in specific performances that will help them learn and control the material. The assignments that students needed to complete for accountability often take advantage of the testing functions built into the course's LMS, including automatic grading and feedback on incorrect answers. Such features allow teachers to monitor student progress without having to grade more assignments.

When face-to-face instruction returns, teachers may want to continue requiring more small accountability measures that students complete outside of class. The traditional classroom test that featured sections for listening comprehension, reading comprehension, discrete grammar work, writing activity, and possibly cultural reflection can be divided up when face-to-face instruction returns, with some sections – particularly listening and reading comprehension – conducted outside class time, using the LMS's quiz functions.⁷ Vocabulary quizzes can use audio, rather than written, prompts to elicit words, which can prevent easy recourse to a dictionary. Removing these kinds of assessments from in-class work allows the teacher to reserve proctored, face-to-face time to check what learners can really do with the language on their own, both in writing and in speaking.

6. Conclusion

In Hybrids 2.0, face-to-face courses can have a more robust and purposeful online component than before the pandemic, one in which meaning-focused online components both feed into and segue out of face-to-face sessions. Online components of the types instructors have learned to deploy in the past year can enrich face-to-face work at every stage, from first encounter with new expressions to assessing student performance.

As the restrictions of the pandemic recede, universities will be counting costs. It is not unreasonable to expect that debt-challenged institutions may pressure faculty to limit face-to-face time and keep some former face-to-face courses online or to reduce in-class hours for courses rather than return to the previous status quo. As a profession we need to be prepared to fight for the precious face-to-face time we need with our students. And we also need to be ready to combine that work with online experiences that will help us make the most of the time we have with

⁷ It will be important for instructors to learn more about the detail of designing online quizzes, considering question types and the implications for choosing different features offered (such as, number of attempts allowed, time allotted, etc.).

students in the non-virtual space that we now know is a most precious commodity.

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