

Students' Perspectives on Hybrid and online Arabic classes: A Case Study

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Abstract

This case study reports on first-year Arabic classes that were taught in hybrid and online formats in an American university during Fall 2019 and Fall 2020. A specifically designed curriculum was developed and made accessible as open-source material for teaching elementary classes. Seventy-six learners of Arabic responded to an online survey by the end of Fall 2019 within the hybrid modality. Another pool of 21 students in Fall 2020 completed a questionnaire on the quality and appropriateness of the online material when the modality was completely virtual. Thematic analysis of responses indicated that students enjoyed the overall experience of having a hybrid Arabic class and welcomed the flexibility that it provided them in their schedules. Most

students self-reported that the online component developed their language skills and enhanced their preparedness in class. Reflecting on the material used during remote learning, students emphasized issues of accessibility, organization and interactivity of the online sources, and their appropriateness for understanding course material and recycling different concepts with instant feedback. The paper discusses the open-source material as a pedagogical innovation that can be used as a model for online program developers in Arabic language in particular and instructors in Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTL) at large to enhance the implementation and quality of the online pedagogy particularly in the post-pandemic education environment.

Keywords: Hybrid and online Classes, Students' Perceptions, Foreign Language, Open Pedagogy, Technology

Introduction

Before the emergency of COVID-19, Online and hybrid courses were fairly common in college Education (Pallof & Pratt, 2007). According to Jafari et al. (2006) online and hybrid courses have “exploded in higher education” (p. 50). Roach and Lemasters (2006) reported that online college courses and programs have significantly increased at a rapid rate. Language programs have taken the trend in the light of the increasing body of literature that show that hybrid, or blended, instruction can meaningfully enhance foreign language instruction (e.g., Arispe & Blake, 2006; Rubio, 2012; Scida & Saury, 2006; Strambi & Bouvet, 2003). Amongst the many benefits commonly associated with hybrid instruction are time and space flexibility (Scida & Saury, 2006), improved class participation, increased access to active learning opportunities, and higher enrollment retention (Rubio, 2012). The combination of face-to-face instruction and online learning can optimize foreign language instruction by diversifying target language interaction opportunities (Arispe

& Blake, 2012). A dramatic shift in education has been witnessed since the outbreak of COVID-19, making fully online or remote learning a reality that we needed to cope with (Ali, 2020; Ferri, Grifoni and Guzzo, 2020; González-Lloret, 2020; Kohnke, & Moorhouse, 2022).

Research on pedagogical practices discussed the effectiveness of online and hybrid courses in foreign languages including Spanish, French, and German (Chenoweth, Ushida, & Murday, 2006; Green & Youngs, 2001; Scida & Saury, 2006; Murday, Ushida, & Chenoweth, 2008). They reported positive students' feedback and significant learning outcomes. Arabic, as a less commonly taught language, received less attention in the past regarding the use of technology (Winke et al., 2010) but with the new reality, there is obviously an increased interest in enhancing online pedagogy for Arabic learners (Al-Subaie, 2022; Hess, 2021). More studies are exploring perspectives and pedagogical challenges in Arabic teaching post-pandemic (Kerras, & Essayahi, 2022; Saad, & Ghani, 2021).

The field of teaching Arabic in the US is currently shaped by available textbooks. The most popular one is *Al-Kitaab* series (Brustad, Al-Batal, and Tunisi, 2015). Other less commonly used ones include *Living Arabic* (Younes, 2006), *Ablan wa Sablan* (Alosh and Clark, 2013), and *Al-kitab al-Asasi* (Badawi et al., 2008). Teachers would perhaps perceive language abilities of their students based on the textbook's vocabulary and grammar content rather than actual set of standards. Students get little to no interaction with authentic Arabic material online and they barely read through outside resources beyond the classroom.

Motivated by the need to address several pedagogical challenges, a project for teaching hybrid courses was initiated in an elementary Arabic course for first- and second-year students at an American university. The first implementation of the project involved four class meetings and one weekly hour to be completed online asynchronously. In the following semester, these were extended to two online asynchronous hours. Students were surveyed by the end of the academic

year to measure their perceptions of the online portion of the class, their interaction with the material, and their opinions regarding the learning outcomes of the newly developed hybrid Arabic class. Based on previous research, instructors hypothesized that the hybrid class will result in students having more control over their learning (Hooper, 1992; Saunders & Klemming, 2003); improve students' achievement and overall satisfaction (Byers, 2001; Kendall, 2001), address differences in learning style and pace (Piskurich, 2004) and foster communication and closeness among students and teachers (Joliffe, Ritter, & Stevens, 2012). Findings from this case study on the implementation of hybrid Arabic at the university level provide implications for further improvements in pedagogical practices in Arabic as Foreign Language.

Literature

Previous Research compared student performance in traditional versus hybrid courses in several contexts. For example, Murday, Ushida, & Chenowet (2008) showed that

students' learning in both online and offline French and Spanish was comparable, even for oral communication. students who were more comfortable with technology tended to favor online classes. Overall satisfaction increased over time to the point that most online sections had higher satisfaction than offline sections. Scida and Saury (2006) compared one traditional and one online Spanish class taught by the same instructor. Based on the same assessment, results showed that more students received higher grades in the hybrid course than in the traditional course. They also concluded that the computer works best with automatized skill building, and that the hybrid course encouraged students to take more responsibility for their own learning. Green and Youngs (2001) compared traditional and hybrid instruction in elementary French and German. Students reported more positive aspects of the online components but there were no significant differences in performance between the two formats. Warschauer (1996) compared English as a second language (ESL) students' behavior in face-to-face

communication and in electronic discussions. He found improvements in the quality of English used in the electronic discussions, including more complex language and more formal expressions. Results also showed that students felt they could express themselves more freely in electronic discussions.

Other studies focused only on the outcomes of hybrid classes. Lee (2005) investigated a third-year Spanish hybrid class where students spent an hour every week participating in web chats and writing essays. He found that the online component helped students learn, increased their organizational skills, and made them more self-sufficient. Ushida (2005) investigated the role of students' attitudes and motivation in three hybrid classes, finding that there was a positive correlation between student motivation and achievement. Motivated students participated more and were able to direct their own learning. Results showed that students' attitudes toward French and Spanish culture grew more positive over time in all three courses. Stepp-Greany

(2002) studied the perceptions of 358 students in a hybrid elementary Spanish program in which the online component included visiting Spanish language websites and performing simulated real-life tasks, threaded discussions centering around a chapter theme, grammar explanations, and an optional drill and tutoring program. Students in the hybrid course reported learning more about the culture than they would have in a traditional course, but there were problems relating to a lack of integration of the online and classroom components. Grgurovic's (2011) case study, on the other hand, showed that the ESL hybrid and classroom components were connected because the instructor integrated both successfully. A large part of the online component consisted of voice recording software, and online activities closely matched the textbook. Results showed that most students thought online pronunciation and speaking practice was helpful.

More recently, Batainah et. al. (2018) and Akla (2021) were some examples of studies that investigated the hybrid

approach at Malaysian universities finding positive outcomes on personalized learning and the role of the hybrid learning in enhancing language skills. Capanegra (2021) explored the hybrid model with Spanish educators. Yaniafari, and Rihardini (2021) compared Face-to-face and online speaking practice in terms of anxiety and outcomes.

Taken together, the use of computer-based activities in the foreign language classroom has been shown to improve language skills, increase a sense of community among classmates, and foster culture learning. We believe that hybrid classes can enhance students' performance as they give students more time and flexibility in doing the tasks assigned. Hybrid classes can provide teachers flexibility to design activities that not only meet the pedagogical requirement of the class but also meet students' different needs and individual differences that might be missed in the assigned textbooks. Schwieter (2008) reported on the success of a Spanish hybrid program that was established on theories of second language acquisition with the goal of preparing

students for class. The philosophy of the program relied on the flipped-classroom technique where students learned the material online before coming to class. The results showed that students were more prepared for class and the instructors were able to devote more class time to meaningful communicative activities in Spanish.

The Theoretical Framework of Hybrid Arabic Classes

In the present paper, we aim at exploring benefits and shortcomings of the hybridization of Arabic classes at a major university in the U.S. The motivation of this study is to set the stage for further pedagogical inquiries into the field of Arabic language online teaching in the United States and bring awareness to teachers and students that Arabic language can exist and function in the virtual world. More specifically, the impact of COVID-19 has made it a necessity to adapt to the new reality. The online component of the Arabic class is motivated by pedagogical objectives and language-acquisition theories. While addressing the four language skills, the online

tasks were guided by proficiency standards as set by ACTFL as cited in Swender et al. (2012). More specifically, these standards were translated into can-do statements for different proficiency stages from novice to superior. In designing learning activities, more consideration was given for what students should be able to do with language at this level and what they can be pushed to do. Another pedagogical consideration underlying the online modules was based on VanPatten's (1996, 2006) input processing model. Under this model, structured-input activities promote the process of input to intake. Providing input in such a manner in the online activities would help focus learners' attention on certain grammatical and lexical aspects so teachers can use class time in more meaningful communicative activities. Additionally, learner output was emphasized through writing and speaking tasks, and vocabulary was recycled through multiple exposures to provide opportunities for retention.

Implementation and Course Design

The hybrid modality was launched in Fall 2019 with (4 F2F + 1 online asynchronous) and extended later in Spring 2020 to (3 F2F + 2 online asynchronous). However, with the abrupt transition to remote teaching due to COVID-19, all class plans shifted to the remote modality (3 synchronous + 2 asynchronous) . In the first semester, online content was delivered through D2L (the learning management system used on campus). Later, we compiled these activities in a sequenced manner as open-source material to implement open education practices and foster an inclusive learning community in our classes. Based on ACTFL proficiency standards, Two Arabic OER books were created:

Elementary Arabic I : An open textbook on Beginner Arabic for undergraduate students who are taking Arabic in their first semester. It addresses letters and sounds of Arabic along with basic skills in reading, speaking and writing. The book can be used as a self-study resource or as the main textbook in beginning Arabic classes.

Elementary Arabic II : An open textbook on Elementary Arabic for undergraduate students who are taking Arabic in their second semester. It addresses language structures in theme-based modules that cover the four language skills. The book can be used as a self-study resource or as the main textbook in beginning Arabic classes.

The online books were created using the platform (<https://pressbooks.com>) under a university account funded by a library grant. The books were used as a learning platform inside and outside of class and were linked in the weekly schedule so that students are prepared for what is done for each zoom session. The main goal of building these was to address issues of affordability, access, and equity in providing learning materials for all students and ensuring an optimal and up-to-date learning experience beyond the textbook, which has been outdated in many ways. The online book material is enriched with interactive learning tools utilizing self-check H5p modules to enhance students' self-study experience.

Research Questions

The present paper seeks to address the following research questions:

- 1) How do the hybrid and online Arabic classes influence students' perceptions and attitudes towards their learning experience and affect their overall enjoyment and satisfaction?
- 2) What are the challenges involved in the implementation of the online component within the communicative Arabic language classes at the university level?
- 3) How can open-source material influence students' learning experience in hybrid and online modalities?

Method

Participants

Seventy-six students (23 males, 53 females) in Fall 2019 who took hybrid classes reflected on their experience with the material used and their learning experience. Students represented all levels of undergraduate study at the university

(19 freshmen, 27 sophomores, 21 juniors and 9 seniors). Their native languages were mostly English (49 students), six of whom were heritage speakers of Arabic as they spoke or understood Arabic at home with their parents. Other 27 students were native speakers of other languages including Malay, Hindi, Chinese, Russian and German. Another pool of 21 students who took completely online classes in Fall 2020 responded to a shorter questionnaire about the quality of the open-source material that was used in their online classes and its appropriateness for their learning.

Survey components

Two different surveys were used for the study. The first survey was focused on students' experience with the hybrid approach. It contained opinion statements with a 5-point likert rating scale (from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree). Additionally, there were statements addressing overall satisfaction and enjoyment and open-response questions for students to express pros and cons of their hybrid learning

experience. The opinion statements and the open questions targeted the following themes:

- 1) Comfort with technology using Arabic
- 2) Enjoyment and satisfaction with the course
- 3) Flexibility of self-paced study
- 4) Targeting language skills
- 5) Pros and cons of hybrid lessons vs. face-to-face classes

The second survey, during remote teaching, focused on the quality of the online material, and their appropriateness for the students' learning experience. It contained opinion statements addressing different aspects of the online material and whether they support students' learning, and help them understand the course content. Other statements asked about the organization and the interactive features of the material. Students were then given open ended questions to express their overall reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the course material.

Results

Quantitative results

Based on the survey of hybrid learning, responses from the 5-point likert scale were coded to values from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The mean and standard deviations reflected the attitudes of students towards the online component of the class. Descriptive statistics revealed that students enjoyed the overall experience of having a hybrid Arabic class ($M=4.36$, $SD= 0.92$). They welcomed the flexibility that it provided them in their schedules ($M=4.60$, $SD= 0.87$) and the ability to work at their own pace ($M=4.57$, $SD= 0.81$). Students tend to encourage more online hours ($M=3.05$, $SD= 1.18$) and indicated that they were more comfortable expressing themselves online rather than face-to-face ($M=3.71$, $SD= 1.29$). There was a high rating for the structure of the class and that it prepared them for the upcoming class ($M=4.37$, $SD= 0.83$). Students agreed that the online component developed their reading and writing ($M=4.0$, $SD= 0.96$) as well as listening and speaking ($M=4.01$,

$SD= 1.03$). Most students reported that the online platform was accessible and supportive ($M=4.37$, $SD= 0.87$) and that technological issues did not impact their performance as much ($M=2.52$, $SD= 1.31$). Based on the students' responses as shown in table 1 (*Descriptive statistics for students' survey responses*), students encouraged the idea of having more online hours. Table 1 lists the descriptive statistics for the major survey items.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for students' survey responses

| Question | Mean (SD) |
|---|---------------|
| I generally enjoyed the hybrid Arabic class | 4.36 (0.92) |
| The hybrid class allowed flexibility of my schedule | 4.60 (0.87) |
| The hybrid class allowed me to work on my own pace | 4.57 (0.81) |
| I would rather take more class time | 2.96 (1.14) |
| I would rather take more online hours | 3.05 (1.18) |

| | |
|--|-------------|
| I am more comfortable expressing myself online | 3.71 (1.29) |
| My feelings towards class improved over time | 3.93 (0.84) |
| The online hour prepares me for class | 4.29 (0.98) |
| The online material was well connected to class work | 4.37 (0.83) |
| The online component was well planned and structured | 4.84 (0.83) |
| The online component improved reading and writing | 4.00 (0.96) |
| The online component improved listening and speaking | 4.01 (1.03) |
| I perform better online than in class | 3.25 (1.10) |
| The online platform is accessible and supportive | 4.37 (0.87) |
| My performance was impacted by technology issues | 2.52 (1.31) |

Based on the survey on online remote learning, 76% of students reported that the online books supported their learning and that they were extremely helpful in helping them

understand the course material (89%). More than 79% of students reported that the books provided clear and constructive feedback and 93% of them confirmed that they were quite organized and easy to navigate.

Qualitative results

The survey on hybrid learning elicited students' perspectives on the hybridization of the Arabic class by reflecting on some pros and cons of their experience. Students indicated that Arabic hybrid classes improved their written communications (typing, writing etc.) and their reading skills. In their weekly online assignments, students were asked to type their answers and responses to the different picture-based, listening or reading-based activities designed by their instructors in the H5p interface. This opportunity allowed students to work on their typing skills on the computer, an opportunity that would probably rarely take place in traditional classrooms. These hybrid-based activities also helped develop their vocabulary reservoir, according to the students' responses. One feature

of H5p is the opportunity to get immediate feedback and self-check while working on assignments.

Hybrid classes allowed students flexibility in completing the online component and homework assignments of their class, according to their daily schedule as well as their social obligations. Almost all students appreciated the flexibility that hybrid classes granted them. Students felt that not meeting in the class time for one day or two a week gave them an opportunity to manage their time better and, consequently, better execute their busy daily tasks as well as reduce pressure from doing these tasks at specific times. One student, for instance, reflected on the flexibility factor by saying that “I like to visit my family on the weekends. The hybrid class allowed me to leave campus on Thursday instead of Friday. After morning Arabic class on Thursday, I was free for the weekend and could do the online homework wherever I was.” Students reported that they used their time outside the classroom to complete their other commitments and used class time to practice speaking, a skill

that they need most according to them. Such flexibility could lead to better performance as it alleviates pressures and stress from doing their homework assignments at a specific time and in a particular setting.

Relevant to this discussion is another advantage: alleviating the pressures of speaking in class. Some students have different aptitudes regarding avoiding speaking or speaking too much in class. Hybrid classes offer a milieu that encourages students to speak when recording their own. In other words, hybrid classes offer a fear breaker for those who are intimidated to speak in front of class. This finding is in agreement with that of Guidera (2003), who stated that hybrid classes help students remove any possible psychological or social barriers to interactions.

The online modules gave students the opportunity to experience a vast variety of Arabic material online. Unlike traditional face-to-face classes, hybrid classes can make students do various activities that not only communicate the four skills and culture but also attend to the students'

different tastes, needs, wants and methods and styles of learning. Some students, for example, stated that the online classes encouraged them to listen to online audios and music more than they would in class. This discussion points out another advantage of the hybrid classes: appropriateness of the difficulty of the online classes. Addressing students' different needs and styles of learning would by default entail taking into account the students' linguistic differences and designing the online activities accordingly. This is particularly important given the fact that Arabic is considered to be exceptionally challenging by native English speakers (Attia, 2008; Farghaly and Shaalan, 2009).

Students viewed online classes as pre-preps for what will be covered in class time since some of the online assignments included preparation for Monday's classes. Students gave a high rating for the structure of the class and that the online material prepared them for the following class ($M=4.37$, $SD= 0.83$). The successful implementation of the hybrid course entailed that it should be designed to be

student-centered. Among the many things that this program should accomplish in the college foreign language classroom is that it pushes students to be better prepared for class time. This is believed to be an effective way of ensuring that class time can be devoted to contextualized, communicative activities in the target language that help confirm or disconfirm the learning processing outcomes that students receive from the input.

Hybrid classes have their own shortcomings at least according to the students' text responses. Lacking face-to-face interaction leaves students with no opportunity to receive their teachers' oral feedback while conversing in the target language. Lacking face-to-face interaction makes it also difficult for students to ask questions. These findings go in line with those of Boyd (2008), who stated that there are some reasons why students felt unsatisfied with the online instruction, which include the lack of interaction with their instructors as well as the uncertainty of the evaluations of their work and confusions about the instructors' expectations.

Instructors of hybrid classes should ensure that their instructions for the online classes are crystal clear. They also need to make sure that the objectives of the online materials are explicit through meta-commentary on the online course assignment. They may need to go over the instructions of the online activities inside the classroom prior to the online class. There may be a need to create a structure for providing online written feedback on students' submissions.

Few students raised concerns about some technological hiccups. It is worth noting that 50% of the students reported that that technology helps them learn a foreign language; 48% showed that technology used in their hybrid class is within their range of capabilities; 47% indicated their comfort using technology for language learning, whereas only 2% believed that technology did not help them in their hybrid course; and 37% of the students feel their inability to use some technology in the hybrid class will impact their grades. Overall, these percentages show that technology plays a role in encouraging and facilitating

learning, and that students perceive hybrid learning to be more effective and beneficial with the integration of technology. So, technology is seen as important, but it remains both as a facilitator and a barrier. It is worth noting, however, that most students reported that the online platform was accessible and supportive, and that technological issues did not impact their performance.

Some students also stated that they sometimes lacked self-motivation for completing the online work, something they would not experience if they were in a classroom. Even though hybrid classes are based on the assumption that they facilitate social competence and enhance interactions among students and between students and teachers, some students stated that they found some difficulties in asking questions about the hybrid material. This could be attributed to some pre-assumptions students had that since the materials are posted online and are given some flexible time to submit their answers, they may not have the “right” to ask their instructors questions about the online materials. In other words, this

dissatisfaction is due to the confusion about the instructors-students' expectations. Therefore teachers should always remind students to ask questions about the online materials and encourage them to communicate among each other as well. Furthermore, some students reported that they did not have immediate assistance when confusion occurred. One recommendation to address this issue is by creating a discussion forum among students so they can collaborate and interact while working on their online modules.

Students' reflections on the online material that they used through remote learning highlighted the themes of affordability, accessibility, interactivity, and feedback that they appreciated throughout a challenging semester.

One student stated "It helped me learn and remember vocabulary more effectively by using repetition in many of the drills to reinforce the lesson. The ability to submit, see what's correct and what's not, and fix instantly is nice because a lot of online modules don't offer that. It's also nice to not have to pay for another textbook or online course

material. Tuition, fees, housing, books and course materials make college a financial burden for a lot of students from low-income backgrounds and this is one less barrier to being able to attend higher education”. On the same theme, another student reported: “Organization and interaction, It is accessible especially because of the digital format making learning on the go easy and it's free! This levels the playing field for all and is appreciated.”

Another student commented on the accessible way the material was presented: “It would explain concepts in different ways other than the main textbook we would use. This helped me understand information if I was confused. The practice examples were also beneficial for learning/understanding new concepts”. Other students highlighted the fact that it was relevant to what is being taught in class: “It followed along with what we were doing in class which made it extremely easy to use effectively.”, and that it provided instruction in various ways: “The resource provided numerous ways to learn the material”.

On the other hand, students provided suggestions of improvement to address some gaps from their perspectives as learners. Some of their suggestions were: “More interfaces with vocab and sound and letters and sound, perhaps an interface that allowed you to click on a letter and hear its sound and another that allowed you to repeat the sound and gave accurate feedback to how well you pronounced it”. Another student requested: “Having one grand-master vocabulary set at the very end would be very nice. I often find that I “lose” words where I can’t remember which unit or lesson a word is from and I struggle to find the correct form via online or hard copy dictionaries. Even breaking this list into verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc. would help”. On a similar note, one student was more specific about verbs: “The only thing I could think of to improve this book would be to have an extensive database of verbs and their tense conjugations”.

One amazing feature about open-source material is giving voice to students on their own curriculum. As content creators, teachers get feedback from students and can

instantly make changes to accommodate different objectives. In other words, students take part in writing their own curriculum.

Conclusions

This paper reports on the implementation of hybrid and online courses in Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) at a university level. We provide our pedagogical innovation and how we attempted to optimize our instructional design to enhance students' learning experiences either in hybrid or online modality. Students expressed mostly positive feedback on the first experience with hybrid Arabic and praised the organization and the interactive features of the open-source class material while doing remote learning. They enjoyed the course and believed it was a good outlet for improving their language skills. Technological tools were adequately compatible in achieving the objectives of the online tasks with few reports of technical failures. Results provide language teachers in general and Arabic teachers in particular with preliminary recommendations to accommodate the needs of

the students and the shortcomings of the online instruction. Future research is invited to conduct further experiments to measure learning outcomes from Arabic hybrid and online courses versus traditional classrooms. Further implementation of hybrid and online instruction in Arabic as a foreign language is highly recommended in the light of the current pedagogical advances in language teaching and learning and the ever-changing realities in the world of education.

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