

“Till we meet again!”: The Synchronous Hybrid Teaching of English in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: This study explores the perceptions of Preparatory Year (PY) students and teachers at Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University regarding synchronous hybrid teaching. It also highlights the effectiveness of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) within the two modes of the hybrid system (i.e., *face-to-face* and *online*). The study employed a triangulation of instruments, including a survey, an interview and three focus groups (FGs). The findings show that each mode has its characteristics. While the students viewed hybrid teaching positively in terms of its logistics, finding it convenient and time-saving. However, they believed high-quality education could be better achieved in person as they understood and enjoyed face-to-face classes more than online learning. They also preferred the online mode for receptive skills and face-to-face interaction for productive skills. On the other hand, teachers found hybrid teaching challenging regarding technical issues and managing two groups (remote and in class) simultaneously. They expressed various views regarding the preferred mode of teaching English skills; some wished to abandon hybrid classes and teach all the skills in face-to-face mode. During the pandemic, hybrid teaching may have been the best option to continue teaching English effectively. However, after the pandemic, this method should be retained as a backup plan to reach students with disabilities and enrich advanced learners of English.

Keywords: English language skills/EFL context, face-to-face, Online, students' perceptions, synchronous hybrid teaching, teachers' perceptions

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic affected educational systems all over the world, including in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and forced teachers and educational institutes to suddenly modify their face-to-face academic practices and migrate to a mandatory online mode. Emergency remote teaching and learning was the optimal immediate response to maintain education. While it offered many advantages, it also posed many challenges, such as how to implement group work and peer interaction (Sellnow-Richmond, Strawser and Sellnow 2020). In an attempt to overcome some of these challenges, a synchronous *hybrid* method aimed at attaining a balance between face-to-face and online modes (Alfiras, Nagi, Bojiah and Sherwani 2021) was proposed and implemented at Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University (IAU) as a suitable option for teaching English language to Preparatory Year (PY) students.

Synchronous hybrid learning, or, as we prefer to refer to it, *teaching*¹ – may be defined as the effective integration, fusion even, of face-to-face and online learning depending on the educational need and purpose (Valverde-Berrocoso, Garrido-Arroyo, Burgos-Videla and Morales-Cevallos 2020). It is an instructional

method that offers the efficiency and opportunities for socialisation of the traditional face-to-face classroom, together with the digitally enhanced learning possibilities of the online mode of delivery (Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal 2004). The terms hybrid teaching and learning and blended teaching and learning are often used interchangeably by researchers (Margulieux, Bujak, McCracken and Majerich 2014; Meydanlioglu and Arikan 2014; O'Byrne and Pytash 2015). However, there is a difference between them in terms of the online element. In a hybrid classroom, the online aspect is used to substitute for the in-person class. In contrast, in a blended environment the online part complements and builds upon what has been taught in class (Singh, Steele and Singh 2021), i.e., supplementing rather than replacing.

While going hybrid may have been the ideal solution during the pandemic, it is necessary to determine whether it was a successful method and whether it will continue to be successful. Thus, this study aims to explore the students' and teachers' perceptions of synchronous hybrid teaching. Another important aim of this study is to investigate the feasibility and effectiveness of teaching English language skills through hybrid teaching from the perspectives of both students and teachers. The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the two modes of teaching (face-to-face and online) within the hybrid teaching model?
2. What are students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of teaching the four English language skills using the hybrid teaching model?

2. Study context

The study occurred at IAU during the 2021/2022 academic year, specifically in the Deanship of Preparatory Year and Supporting Studies. English as a foreign language (EFL) is taught with other subjects, such as *Islamic Studies*, *Mathematics*, *Physics*, and *Biology*, to equip students with the scientific knowledge needed to pursue their bachelor's degree. The PY program is divided into four tracks according to the specialties the student aspires to (health, engineering, science, and humanities). Male and female students study in separate locations, complying with the kingdom's regulations in terms of gender segregation. The English Language Department uses *Q Skills for Success* as the approved textbook to teach English for all tracks. This comprises a six-level series, from beginner to advanced, with two strands: (i) Reading and Writing and (ii) Listening and Speaking. The series is designed to promote the mastery of integrated skills.

To overcome the limitations of remote teaching introduced as an emergency measure and benefit from the face-to-face medium of instruction, the English Language Department approved the implementation of a synchronous hybrid teaching method, which has continued to be used for two consecutive academic years (2020/2021 and 2021/2022). This has allowed one group to follow the course on campus, and the other group to simultaneously follow the course remotely. Hence, the students were divided into two groups, A and B, rotating daily. On one day, those in Group A attend the class in person, while those in Group B attend the same class simultaneously online. The following day, the students in Group B

attend the face-to-face class, while the members of Group A attend online. This way, the two groups each have two days of face-to-face classes and two days of online classes a week (Tuesday is dedicated to exams and extra-curricular activities). The element of group rotation was introduced into this synchronous hybrid method to overcome issues of remote students' engagement and group membership, highlighted in the literature on online teaching. However, it is worth mentioning that the other subjects taught in the PY did not follow a hybrid system as they were mainly taught online to the whole group.

3. Review of the literature

A systematic literature review on synchronous hybrid learning was conducted by Raes, Detienne, Windey and Depaepe (2020). They found that the first study on this model dating back almost two decades and was qualitative in nature, examining the quantity and quality of human interaction between the instructor, the on-campus students, and the remote students in a blended learning course in the United States (Rasmussen 2003). The experience was positive overall, even though the two groups did not alternate (Rasmussen 2003). Only two studies implemented rotation in the hybrid teaching model: Bashir, Bashir, Rana, Lambert and Vernallis (2021) in the United Kingdom and Lee, Wong, Goh and Cook (2022) in Singapore. Both studies revealed positive insights regarding the hybrid mode but were conducted within the medical field. Although research on the effectiveness of hybrid teaching has also been carried out in different fields, such as engineering (Alfiras et al. 2021), community colleges (Schwarz 2018), and business (Baker, Unni, Kerr-Sims and Marquis 2020), the literature on synchronous hybrid teaching in relation to language learning is scarce. Salbego and Tumolo (2015) examined students' and teachers' perceptions of teaching a language course online and face-to-face. However, the online element in their study referred to one-to-one instruction rather than the whole class.

In the Saudi context, the effectiveness of implementing a blended learning method to deliver English courses and students' perceptions of using this method of teaching has been investigated by many researchers at most Saudi universities (e.g., Al-Nofaie 2020; Alsowayegh, Bardesi, Garba and Sipra 2019; Bin Dahmash 2020; Bukhari and Basaffar 2019; Gulnaz, Althomali and Alzeer 2020). In her case study, Al-Nofaie (2020) compared the synchronous and asynchronous aspects of Blackboard. She investigated the perceptions of 25 Saudi students majoring in English towards using Blackboard in learning during the pandemic. Although her findings from the students' learning logs and surveys show preference towards the asynchronous environment due to its flexibility, virtual environment was not always appealing for students. Similarly, Bin Dahmash (2020) found that while blended learning supported the students' writing skills as it encouraged them to search online and was an economical option, it affected teachers' performance negatively and included technological problems especially with online tests. On the other hand, Alsowayegh, Bardesi, Garba and Sipra (2019) examined the effect of blended learning activities using Blackboard tools to enhance the listening and speaking skills of 38 foundation level students. The analysis of their experimental

research revealed positive effects of using this method on students' engagement, satisfaction, teacher's role, the content and examination when learning English. In the same vein, Bukhari and Basaffar (2019) used a mixed method approach to investigate learners' viewpoints about blended learning. They also found positive attitudes towards this approach as it increased the learner's interest, interaction and autonomy. On a broader scale, Gulnaz Althomali and Alzeer (2020) investigated the perceptions and experiences of EFL teachers and learners towards blended learning. Their findings indicate students' satisfaction from being exposed to the target language through vivid images, videos, audios, reading texts, chatting and discussion forums which enhanced their language proficiency and illustrated the positive aspect of blended learning. With these various views on blended learning, there is a need for more research on hybrid teaching. In a recent study, Alhusban (2022) explored learners' satisfaction with the synchronous hybrid learning method at IAU. He reported that the students were generally satisfied with the experience. It provided them with a sense of equality, safety, and suited different learning styles. However, the effectiveness of teaching the four English language skills using this method and the teachers' perceptions still needs to be addressed, calling for more research on this topic.

Research comparing on-site and remote students' experiences has revealed that the two groups experience the lesson differently in the hybrid synchronous situation (Szeto 2014; Zydney, McKimmy, Lindberg and Schmidt 2019). Thus, this study adds to the literature by exploring the perceptions of both students and teachers regarding their experience of hybrid teaching. In particular, it attempts to address a limitation found in Alhusban's (2022) study of synchronous hybrid learning by considering teachers' voices along with the students, and the effectiveness and feasibility of teaching the four English language skills in this unique type of classroom. Hopefully, this will inform educational policymakers about best practices and help educators design optimal learning environments.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design and instruments

To gain as complete a picture as possible and answer the research questions, a mixed-methods approach was employed using two instruments: a survey for students and focus group (FG) discussions for students and teachers. While quantitative research methods enable generalisation, a limitation of existing studies found in the literature, qualitative research methods are valuable when researchers seek to examine phenomena “about which little is yet known” (Strauss and Corbin 1990: 19), in this case, “synchronous hybrid teaching”.

The survey explored the students' perceptions of the hybrid teaching method in general. It sought to make a comparison between the two modes of teaching – online and face-to-face – on three dimensions: logistical, academic, and social. The survey comprised five multiple-choice questions and 18 statements measured on a 5-point Likert-type frequency scale (*always, often, sometimes, rarely, never*). To test the applicability of the survey and determine any difficulties that might arise during data collection, the survey was sent to two instructors and their comments

were taken into consideration to make any modifications needed. For validity purposes, the survey was translated into Arabic (the students' mother tongue) to ensure understanding of the statements. The Cronbach's alpha value obtained for the 18 Likert scale items (0.81) showed that the instrument was reliable. The survey also included a section of open-ended questions that asked the students to make suggestions to improve their experience with hybrid teaching, as well as mention some of the positive and negative aspects more broadly. At the end of the survey, the students were asked to provide their contact details if they were willing to participate in further FG discussions.

Virtual FGs followed the survey. Dates and times were allocated to hold Zoom meetings for male students, female students and teachers independently, and emails were sent to the participants requesting their confirmation of attendance. Further details will be given in the following sections.

4.2 Study sample

The survey sample comprised 454 students out of 6,905 total in the PY at IAU in the 2021-2022 academic year. Of these, 83 percent were female students. The age range was 18–22 years and the majority were between 18 and 20, with Arabic as their first language.

At the end of the academic year, the link to the survey was sent to the coordinators of each track in the PY to share with the students, as the coordinators had access to the phone numbers of the group leaders, who could then share the link with the rest of the group. Teachers were also asked to participate in disseminating the survey link among their students.

Regarding the FG discussions, on the day of the male FG, unfortunately only one student joined the scheduled virtual session. This probably was because the meeting was held during summer break and most students were busy with their personal lives. However, the researchers had to hold the meetings as soon as possible so that the students' experience of hybrid teaching would remain fresh in their minds and not be confused with other experiences in their later studies. One of the limitations of FGs concerns logistical issues, but this was something the researchers had considered earlier, and thus, there was a plan B in case of any disruption: the FG was turned into an in-depth interview. This added an element of triangulation of instruments to the study. The in-depth interview lasted for about an hour and covered the comparison between the two modes of hybrid teaching, and how these different modes the learning of the four English language skills.

On the day of the female FG, six students joined the discussion. All female students took part in the discussion, and the two researchers acted as moderators. One ensured the flow of the conversation, and the other ensured that the topics were all covered. Dual moderation resulted in a highly productive discussion which lasted 60–80 minutes.

The interview and the FG were then transcribed for analysis. The anonymity of statements in the transcripts and the final report was ensured using pseudonyms. As the interview and FG were carried out in Arabic, the participants' mother tongue, translating relevant sections of the transcripts was vital. The translation was carried

out according to a “meaning-based, rather than word-for-word interpretation”, an approach highlighted by Esposito (2001: 572). Two bilingual translators undertook it and was then compared to ensure accuracy and agreement, thus minimising potential threats to the validity of the translation.

The teachers’ FGs were conducted in English as some teachers did not have Arabic as their first language, and English was the language of instruction. Eight teachers took part in total (four members in each FG). The participants ranged in age between 35 and 45 years and they were all female.

It is important to highlight our stance as researchers since sharing the same experience and cultural background positions us to a certain extent as “insider” researchers. However, our role as researchers places us in what Gair (2012) expressed as bringing insider voices and experiences to the outside. We found that holding similar positions in terms of occupation, and power diminished any issue of hierarchy, and the teachers were able to share their views openly and willingly.

4.3 Data analysis procedures

The survey data were analysed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS. The data gathered from the open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively and students’ responses were grouped into themes.

The researchers approached the interview and FG data as texts presenting the students’ perceptions and experiences and thematic analysis was applied as an analytic procedure. Braun and Clarke (2006: 79) explain thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data”. Themes and analytic codes were derived from the data inductively² (i.e., how the students themselves described their experience of hybrid teaching), not deductively based on hypotheses. Thus, the first step in the analysis was open coding³, which was done manually⁴. The researchers read the transcript more than once while listening to the audio recordings to familiarise themselves with the content before dividing the data into units (Saldaña 2013). A unit is a phrase, a sentence, or series of sentences expressing one idea. A code was assigned to each unit and each of these codes signified a theme or an idea about the data. Themes were derived according to frequency of occurrence and intensity of description. They were then compared and revised.

Maintaining the connection between the research questions and the data during the analysis was essential to eliminate the risk of adopting an inductive approach. In addition, when analysing the FG data, the group was considered the main unit of analysis rather than the individuals within the group (Kreuger 1994). Smithson (2000) points out a possible way of analysing group interaction in FGs by considering the outcome of group interaction as a “collective voice” that reflects the individuals’ already-held opinions.

Following the coding process⁵, six main themes were generated from the students’ FG and five main themes from the teachers’ FGs. These addressed the comparison between the two modes of hybrid teaching and the effectiveness of teaching the four English skills, as well as summarising the experience as a whole. Braun and Clarke (2006) believe that a theme captures something important or

interesting in relation to the overall research question. A detailed discussion of the study findings is presented below.

4. Results and discussion

The results are presented in two main sections: a quantitative analysis of the survey results and qualitative analysis of the FGs.

4.1 The survey

The first section of the survey included multiple-choice questions related to the logistics of attending the two modes of hybrid teaching. As illustrated in Figure 1, the results indicate that students had no problem accessing online classes. Most of the students used their own devices and only a small number used someone else's (33 students out of 454), mostly as an alternative, probably when they had problems with their own devices. In addition, as Figure 2 shows, many students were able to access online classes easily as they used their own Internet connection. Less than 14 percent used the Internet available at the university and less than 2 percent used an Internet connection borrowed from neighbours.

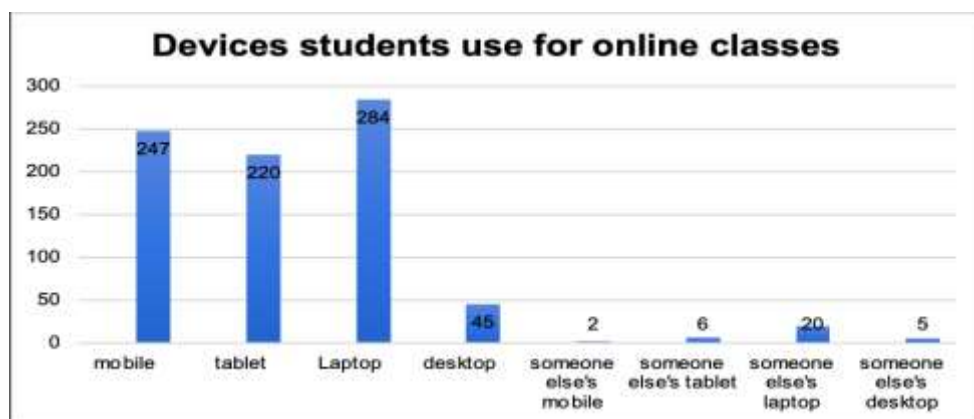


Figure 1. Devices used by students for online classes.

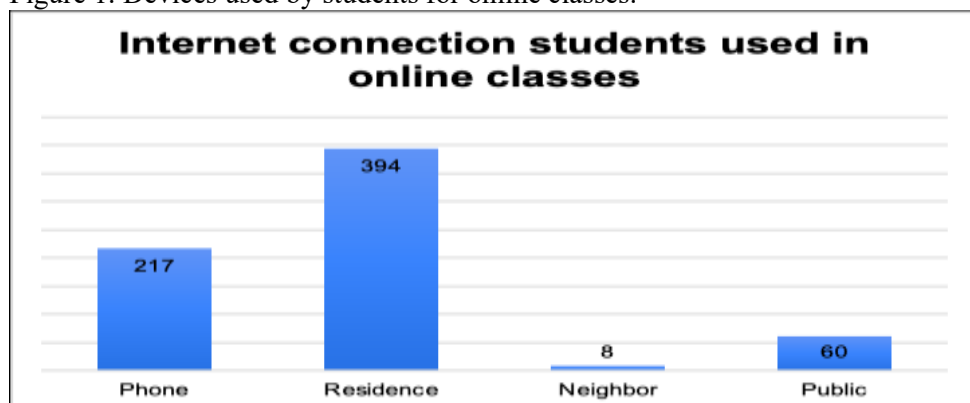


Figure 2. Internet connection used by students in online classes

When asked about the difficulties students encountered in attending online classes, more than 83 percent reported no difficulty at all, while less than 17 percent encountered some difficulties. These difficulties were mainly attributed to a weak and slow Internet connection rather than a lack of it. Other reasons for difficulties in attending online classes are presented in Figure 3.

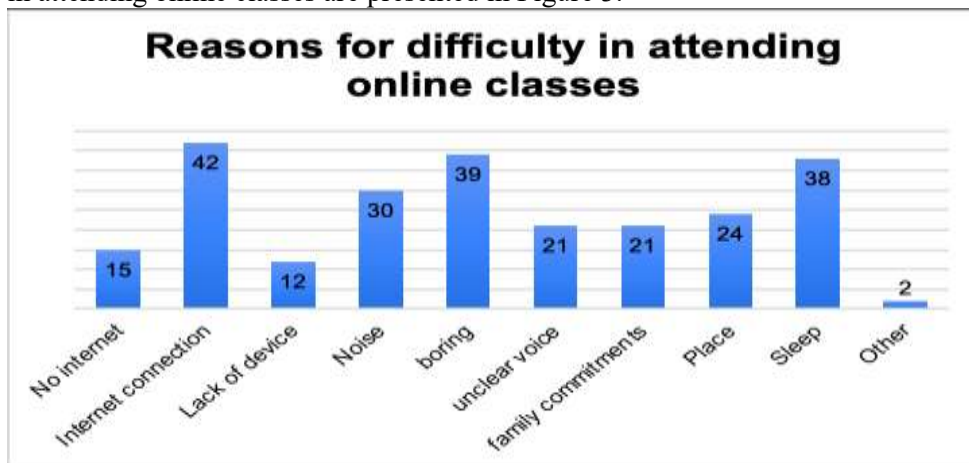


Figure 3. Reasons for difficulty attending online classes.

These results contradict those of Salbego and Tumolo’s (2015) study, which found technical problems experienced by students to be one of the disadvantages of hybrid classes. However, more recent studies, such as those of Alfiras et al. (2021) and Bashir et al. (2021), support our findings, reflecting that students nowadays are tech-savvy and find it easy to adopt hybrid teaching.

The results of the open-ended questions also indicate that hybrid teaching is an advantage in terms of its logistical convenience (179 students reported that it saved time and money in transportation, was flexible as one could access the lecture from any place in just few minutes, and facilitated time management). This result is in line with the findings of Schwarz (2018) and Goerke (2018), who identified that online teaching saved commuting time and transportation-related costs for both teachers and students.

When comparing this to accessing face-to-face classes, the means of transportation was considered (Figure 4). The results indicate that more than half of the sample (294 students) mainly used their family cars or their cars to commute to the university. Attending face-to-face classes seemed to be more challenging than attending online classes as 32.7 percent of students reported facing some difficulties due to transportation and living far from the university (Figure 5).

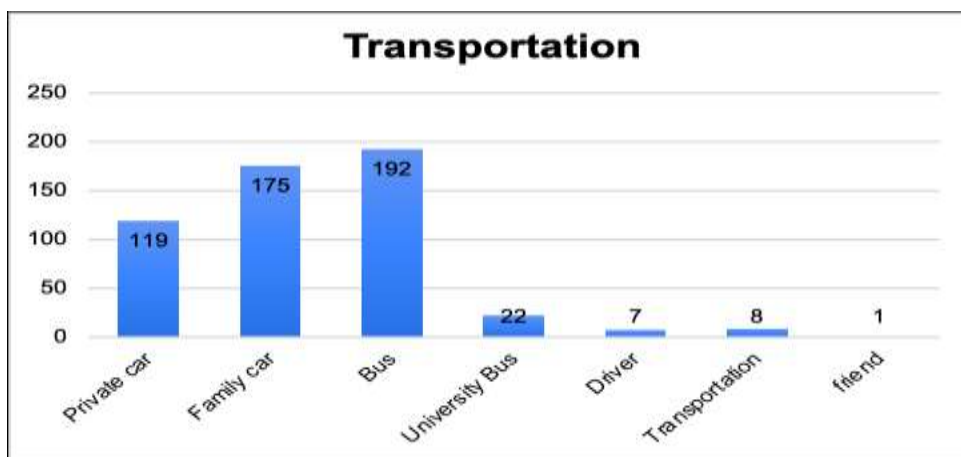


Figure 4. Transportation

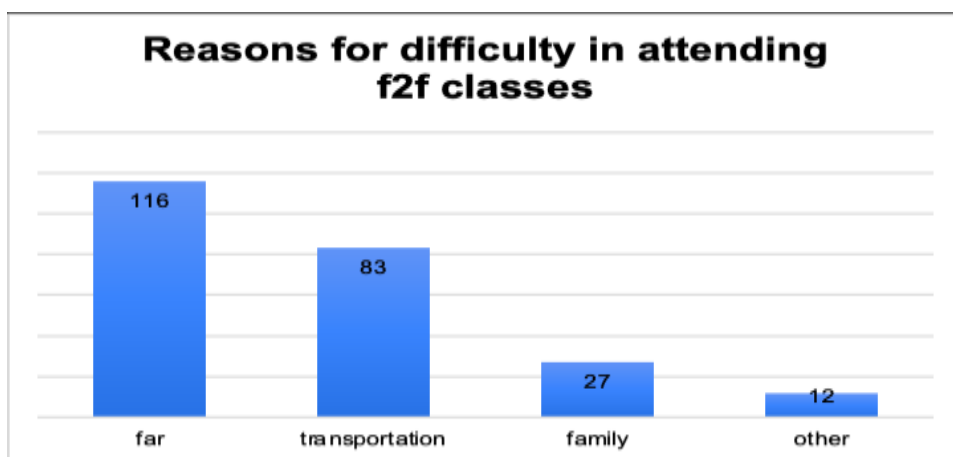


Figure 5. Reasons for difficulty attending face-to-face classes

Section two of the survey explored students' perceptions of the modes of teaching and compared them in relation to the academic and social dimensions. The results in Table 1 show that students generally perceive lectures in the hybrid teaching method to be understandable. Most students agreed that both modes of teaching allowed them to understand lectures most of the time. These results support previous studies that report the effectiveness of hybrid teaching (e.g., Alfiras et al. 2021). However, comparing the mean values, the difference between students' perceptions is statistically significant in favour of face-to-face classes.

Table 1. Understanding of lectures in hybrid teaching

No.	Survey item	Mean	SD	Mode	t-value	Sig.
1	Online classes allow me to understand the lectures	3.56	1.100	Most of the time	9.327	0.000
2	Face-to-face classes allow me to understand the lectures	4.06	0.947	Most of the time		

Although students may understand lectures in both modes of teaching, the enjoyment level of face-to-face classes is higher than that of online classes. Comparison of the means (Table 2) shows a statistically significant difference between students' enjoyment of the two modes of teaching in favour of face-to-face classes. The results of open-ended questions support this. When the students were asked about the disadvantages of hybrid teaching, many (around 130) mentioned that it was difficult to maintain concentration as they were easily distracted during virtual classes. In particular, 33 of them attributed this to a weak Internet connection, while 7 mentioned not having their own private space. However, 19 students mentioned feeling bored and lazy, while one mentioned that some teachers do not even share the screen with them, which contributed to their inability to focus.

Table 2. Enjoyment of lectures in hybrid teaching

No.	Survey item	Mean	SD	Mode	t-value	Sig.
3	I enjoy the lectures in online classes	3.38	1.387	Always	3.856	0.000
4	I enjoy the lectures in face-to-face classes	3.69	1.139	Most of the time		

Another academic aspect that was investigated was asking for clarification. The survey results, as shown in Table 3, indicate that while students were always able to ask for clarification in the hybrid teaching method in general, there was a statistically significant difference in favour of face-to-face classes when comparing the two modes.

Table 3. Asking for clarification in hybrid teaching

No.	Survey item	Mean	SD	Mode	t-value	Sig.
5	Online classes allow me to ask for clarification when needed	3.88	1.183	Always	4.133	0.000
6	Face-to-face classes allow me to ask for	4.13	1.086	Always		

	clarification needed	when					
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Students' participation was another important academic aspect explored in the survey. As illustrated in Table 4, the students felt confident about participating in both modes of teaching within the hybrid method. However, the mean value for participating online is higher than for participating face-to-face, which indicates greater confidence in participating in online classes. This is in contrast to Alhusban's (2022) study, which found that students feel embarrassed and shy about speaking English online. In this study, however, seven students in the open-ended questions stated that hybrid teaching boosted their self-confidence as they were able to participate without being self-conscious. These results support the results of Salbego and Tumolo (2015), which show that online interaction helps reduce the affective filter, making students feel more relaxed about speaking. However, there was a preference for group activities to be conducted in face-to-face classes with a statistically significant difference (Table 5).

Table 4. Participation in hybrid teaching

No.	Survey item	Mean	SD	Mode	t-value	Sig.
7	When online, I participate in class with confidence and no hesitation	3.77	1.236	Always	1.570	0.117
8	When face-to-face, I participate in class with confidence and no hesitation	3.67	1.207	Always		

Table 5. Group activities in hybrid teaching

No.	Survey item	Mean	SD	Mode	t-value	Sig.
9	I am excited to participate in group activities in online classes	3.11	1.385	Sometimes	5.764	0.000
10	I am excited to participate in group	3.5	1.250	Most of the time		

	activities in face-to-face classes					
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The effect of hybrid teaching on students' study skills, e.g., taking notes, was also taken into consideration as part of the academic element. The results show that the students seemed to find no difference in taking notes in either mode of teaching as there is no statistically significant difference between their responses (Table 6). However, more than 10 students mentioned the feasibility of taking screen shots and recording lectures in online classes when asked about the advantages of hybrid teaching. This is in line with the results of Baker et al. (2020), who list having online course material available for access at any time as one of the factors leading to a preference for the hybrid model.

Table 6. Taking notes in hybrid teaching

No.	Survey item	Mean	SD	Mode	t-value	Sig.
11	It is easy to take notes in online classes	3.77	1.224	Always	0.386	0.700
12	It is easy to take notes in face-to-face classes	3.80	1.071	Most of the time		

As for other study skills, a high percentage of students agreed that hybrid teaching always helped them arrange their study time and improved their self-learning (Table 7). In the open-ended questions, more than 130 students mentioned time management as the main advantage of hybrid teaching. Moreover, 19 students mentioned that hybrid teaching gave them a chance to break their routine by being exposed to a new, untraditional way of learning, which also enhanced their autonomy and self-learning. Similarly, in other studies, flexibility, the ability to work at one's own time and pace and self-directed learning are some of the most widely cited benefits of online learning (Kemp and Grieve 2014; Singh et al. 2021; Smith and Hardaker 2000). Students feel they have more freedom and autonomy in online learning and spend more time interacting with technology, enabling them to become self-sufficient and lifelong learners (Syed 2021; Yeou 2016).

As for English language skills (Table 7), generally, after spending a complete academic year in hybrid classes, students felt that their English language skills had improved. When the researchers elaborated on this aspect during the FG, it was clear that the improvement resulted from the curriculum and the extended hours of English they had to complete as a PY student regardless of the medium of instruction was online or face-to-face. This result indicates that hybrid teaching is effective in teaching the English language and is in line with the results of previous literature, which reports the effectiveness of the hybrid teaching method in other fields.

Table 7. Improving skills in hybrid teaching

No.	Survey item	Mean	SD	Mode
13	Hybrid teaching allows me to arrange my study time	3.67	1.307	Always
14	Hybrid teaching gives me a chance for self-learning	3.71	1.248	Always
15	I feel that my English language skills have improved throughout the year	3.86	1.152	Always

Regarding the social aspect, the students agreed that they sometimes felt they belonged to the group within the hybrid teaching method (Table 8). They also considered that hybrid teaching did not affect their relationships with their classmates and teachers. Indeed, the majority agreed that most of the time hybrid teaching helped them form relationships with classmates and lecturers. However, having synchronous classes meant that the students knew their online classmates virtually but might not meet them in person, which made them awkward. This will be discussed further in the following section.

Table 8. Social dimension within hybrid teaching

No.	Survey item	Mean	SD	Mode
16	In hybrid teaching I feel that I belong to the group	3.35	1.261	Sometimes
17	Hybrid teaching helps form personal relationships with my classmates	3.37	1.289	Most of the time
18	Hybrid teaching helps form personal relationships with lecturers	3.2	1.308	Most of the time

4.2 Qualitative findings

The qualitative findings are divided into two main sections related to students' and teachers' perceptions, respectively.

4.2.1 Students' perceptions

The analysis of the female FG and the male interview yielded six main themes related to the *logistic*, *academic* and *social* dimensions of hybrid teaching and the effectiveness of teaching the four English skills within the hybrid teaching method.

Theme 1: Inconvenient timing

Many female students reported that one of the main challenges was commuting between online and face-to-face classes on the same day. This was due to a lack of transportation or insufficient time between lectures, which caused them a lot of stress. As one said:

The only thing we suffered from was having an online class followed by a face-to-face class, we did not have enough time to reach the university or the other way around, and transportation was not available all the time ... the bus was only available to students living in the dorm. (Hanan)

Another student also reported that some teachers (of other subjects) had to change the mode of the lecture accordingly to be in line with the previous one, i.e., online or face-to-face, while one student mentioned living 72.5 km away from her university campus. This is in line with the quantitative findings of studies regarding transportation. Weber, Skodda, Muth, Angerer and Loerbroks (2019) identified the inconvenience of the timetable as one of the organisational stressors, particularly for students who commute.

Most of the students, including the male student, agreed that consistency in having all PY lectures one day online and another day face-to-face, regardless of the subject, would be more convenient, despite being less productive practising their English-speaking skills (see Theme 6).

Theme 2: Accountability issues

Students reported adopting a passive stance in terms of participation during online classes:

One of the disadvantages of hybrid teaching is that when we are online, we take a back seat, knowing that the other group will take over the participation and vice versa. (Hanan)

Actually, it is not my turn to tell stories. It is the face-to-face students' turn. (Abdullah)

They also mentioned that teamwork was unsuccessful, although it was assigned to them by teachers:

It was difficult, for example the teacher used to assign virtual rooms for each group to share their ideas and write a paragraph but we end up with one student or two doing the whole thing. (Zainab)

Yes, we suffered. There is no commitment from other girls in the group, so I had to do the job myself because I don't want to lose marks. But in class it is different because they can get embarrassed and feel obliged to do their part. (Nora)

These two aspects, *participation* and *teamwork*, involve social interaction, which was less effective during hybrid teaching than during face-to-face classes. Giddens (1984) argued that the positioning of the body in social encounters is fundamental to social life. This means interacting with others who are “physically co-present” (Giddens 1984: 64). Lowry, Roberts, Romano, Cheney and Hightower (2006: 633) defined social presence as:

...the degree to which a communication medium allows group members to perceive (sense) the actual presence of the communication participants and the consequent appreciation of an interpersonal relationship, despite the fact that they are located in different places, that they may operate at different times, and that all communication is through digital channels.

In virtual classrooms, the lack of physical presence disrupts reciprocal commitment and mutual accountability, so participants tend to be less responsive toward their counterparts because neither is perceived as real (Fleckenstein 2005). This could consequently affect the students' engagement and its contribution to their learning and development. Moreover, Dumford and Miller (2018) found that students in online courses were less likely to engage in collaborative learning than students in a face-to-face environment. This is consistent with the findings of other studies in the literature about student engagement and online learning.

Theme 3: Feeling left out

The nature of online classes and lack of physical cues annoyed some students during class interaction:

...by the time you raise your hand online, the teacher would have moved to another point, but when she can see us in class, questioning online is much more difficult. (Nora)

Harrington (2010) explains that a hybrid classroom creates two different communities (face-to-face and online). In the latter, self-muting may be a result of communication anxiety due to the lack of social cues in the online class, such as eye contact and facial expressions. This may prevent partial or complete engagement. In this study, one student expressed his feeling of being left out when they took the class online:

When the class is online and the teacher has a face-to-face class, we usually miss the small talks outside the teaching. (Abdullah)

The challenge lies at the heart of how to maintain inclusion in these two different communities:

...to be honest, yes! I just realized that I will meet some classmates for the first time next year, it is heartbreaking! (Hanan)

This stresses the need to belong and its effect on the overall learning experience.

Theme 4: Autonomous learner

The hybrid system released the learners' autonomy in this study as they tried to manage their time, focus during class and follow up on missing information:

One of the advantages is that I became more independent and focused. For example, if I miss a point while attending the virtual classroom because of a poor Internet connection, I search for the answer myself. (Nora)

This helped me a lot as I had to work and study at the same time so I was able to balance." I think I am different than most students. Because I had a job and I am that kind of person who learned how to depend on myself and organize my time. (Abdullah)

Studies show that the flexibility of online classes promotes autonomy (Müller, Goh, Lim and Gao 2021). In addition, self-determination theory states that if students are willing to make decisions and perform tasks (competence) and have a sense of relatedness (positive relationship), they will become highly motivated to perform well in class (Ryan and Deci 2000). While relatedness was not completely met among students in this study, as explained earlier, they exhibited self-discipline and

became autonomous learners. This finding was also stressed in Alhusban's (2022) study, which found that hybrid classes encouraged self-learning.

Theme 5: The power of the teacher's presence

The power of the teacher's presence cannot be overlooked in eliciting responses and encouraging language practice, as is clear from the following quotes:

Teachers in class give students space to talk and practise the language, but outside class, they are usually busy, so the class is the students' best chance. (Abdullah)

In face-to-face classes, however, it is much easier to communicate with the teacher and ask questions, and the atmosphere is friendlier. (Zainab)

This highlights the importance of speaking skills being taught face-to-face and of facilitating direct engagement with the teacher:

...you know, when in class, it would be embarrassing to hold my phone while the teacher is lecturing, but when online she would not notice. (Farah)

The importance of building a strong teacher presence was stressed by Stone and Springer (2019) as a means of making the online learning environment more engaging and supportive. Oraif and Elyas (2021) also emphasised the need to change the teacher's role from authoritative to cooperative in such a virtual environment. This could be achieved by incorporating different activities and games.

Theme 6: Passive vs. active skills

Most students agreed that some English language skills could be developed online while others are better-learned face-to-face:

I never imagined that my speaking skill, which is a very important skill, would improve this much! Thanks to the face-to-face class, we enjoyably interacted with the teacher in a very friendly environment, discussing different topics. (Hanan)

...we used to laugh and chat a lot in the speaking class, but some skills do not require our presence. (Farah)

When this was further elaborated on, the students pointed out the difference between receptive and productive skills:

...coming all the way from home, just to attend a reading or a listening class is a waste of time, we could have easily taken it from home. (Zainab)

The reading is perfectly done online there is no need for face-to-face, but the speaking is much better face-to-face. (Abdullah)

The relationship between receptive and productive skills is complex and interrelated in learning a language. For example, it is possible to improve one's writing skills by developing reading skills and the same applies to speaking and listening. However, students in the hybrid classroom could not improve their active skills when they were considered “*passive*” during the online class, albeit integrating receptive and productive skills in one lesson is one of the aims of the *Q Skills for Success* textbook.

4.2.2 Teachers' perspectives

The teachers' FGs regarding hybrid teaching yielded four themes, each addressed in turn below.

Theme 1: Here or there

Most teachers agreed that exposing two groups simultaneously to two different modes of teaching could be confusing and time-consuming, especially when dealing with technical issues or waiting for the online group to respond, as evident in this quote:

Having two different modes of teaching at a time confuses teachers. All skills should be taught either face-to-face or online. (T6)

This view was in line with the students' preference for having one whole day delivered online and the other day face-to-face, irrespective of being divided into two groups or not.

The two different modes of hybrid teaching necessitate two different teaching conventions, which poses a challenge for teachers in terms of managing both groups with the same efficacy and applying a suitable teaching strategy. In this regard, their comments demonstrated that their success in teaching was a result of accommodating face-to-face groups to fit the online teaching mode:

I was able to use online resources successfully with both groups because all students, even those in class were asked to join the class virtually using their phones so that teaching materials are displayed on their screens. They were physically present, but on their own devices! (T1)

Also, when the online group became less interactive, the teacher unintentionally focused on the face-to-face group. For this reason, one teacher concluded her statement by saying:

To be honest, all skills are better taught face-to-face. (T4)

According to Wuensch, Aziz, Ozan, Kishore and Tabrizi (2008), the preference for this mode stems from the fact that both social and intellectual interaction in face-to-face classes are immediate and dynamic. Students' body language and facial expressions in the actual class provide immediate feedback for teachers, so they can easily adjust their teaching style to meet students' needs. This privilege is not available in online classes.

From another perspective, a teacher noted:

...all skills, except speaking, can be taught online. (T3)

Moreover, the restrictions on using the camera⁶ in Zoom meetings affected teaching of the four English language skills:

Online students are deprived of seeing facial expressions and body language. (T1)

This was particularly evident when teaching speaking:

Speaking needs to be given face-to-face because students need to see facial expressions since cameras are not allowed. (T3)

It was difficult to know if online students are following or guarantee who is speaking behind the screen. (T5)

Bashir et al. (2021) raised another issue: even when students were allowed to use the camera to enhance interaction, half of them reported that they were uncomfortable doing so. This could have affected the assessment process, but this aspect is beyond the scope of the study.

Another teacher reported:

The reading skill is better taught online with the text displayed on the students' screens as well as the writing skill where we can use the white board on Zoom easily and add colourful annotation. Students were able to brainstorm and share ideas. (T1)

In contrast, though, some teachers stated:

I think hybrid teaching can work for vocabulary and grammar as there are many online activities that can be shared, but for reading and writing, students need close monitoring from teachers. (T7)

After using the hybrid method for two years, I think it is effective in teaching listening and speaking because students can listen and answer the questions that follow with minimal attention, but the reading and writing skills need the students' full attention. (T2)

Their view differed from that of the students in terms of taking the receptive skills online but the productive skills in the face-to-face classroom. Upon further elaboration on what was meant by minimal and full attention, it turned out to concern teacher–student interaction:

The reading and writing skills require one-to-one interaction which cannot be provided through hybrid teaching. (T2)

Reading involves practising different techniques (e.g., skimming, scanning, and guessing meaning from context) and writing involves following a certain structure:

Teaching different writing styles and giving feedback is much easier face-to-face. (T2)

The writing skill has not been taught properly in hybrid teaching because online students need guidance in teaching them writing and not being able to show the teacher their writing makes them frustrated. (T6)

However, providing templates proved to be a beneficial way of teaching the conventions of English writing, whether online or face-to-face, as some teachers highlighted:

I was surprised to see intermediate and beginner level students scoring high in writing. Thanks to the writing templates which proved to be so useful. (T1)

This demonstrates that limited face-to-face interaction boosted teachers' creativity in finding ways of attaining their goals, as is clear in the example above. This is similar to the results reported by Oraif and Elyas (2021).

Theme 2: No pain, no gain

When teachers were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of hybrid teaching in general, learning about new tools and applications were some of the positive recurring themes, although some teachers reported it was stressful at the beginning:

...when we first started the hybrid teaching, I used to stay up late preparing the online materials including “kahoot” and polls, this was the only way to engage students, but it was so demanding. (T7)

...despite the heavy workload, now I owe my technical expertise to that period! (T8)

Learning about Zoom and other convenient apps was beneficial. (T3)

In hybrid teaching, we discovered new features on Oxford bookshelf, and used different technology which made the class more fun. (T4)

Thus, helping teachers and students to keep up with advances in technology was one of the greatest gains in hybrid teaching.

Another advantage was related to class size, which did not just aid students' comprehension but also helped teachers identify and be attentive to their students' needs:

Having less students in class leads to better understanding. (T3)

When having small group in class, the teachers can easily figure out the weaknesses of their students and deal with them accordingly. (T5)

However, this was at the expense of the online group. Another teacher noted that this way of teaching also helped students with special needs. They could work at their own pace without feeling pressured to complete a task, a point of view supported by Greer, Rowland and Smith (2014).

In addition, at the organisational level, one teacher mentioned that hybrid teaching accommodated more students and required fewer teachers, also documented in the literature as one of the advantages of online classes (Lee et al. 2022).

Theme 3: The invisible guest

One of the interesting advantages of hybrid teaching, as one teacher mentioned, was promoting oral production in speaking and reading classes, as it encouraged shy and less confident students to participate online:

...some students were reluctant to speak in class, but I heard their voices online! (T7)

This reluctance could be due to a fear of making mistakes in learning a foreign language. Failure to meet certain academic performance levels may cause a degree of embarrassment that could result in a loss of face interpreted as one's dignity⁷. Goffman (1955: 213) defined face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [...] during a particular contact”, that is, one's presentation of self in social encounters. Social encounters could be experienced in face-to-face classes which might be considered a fertile environment for participation and engagement. Hence, the transition to online class in hybrid teaching created a sense of freedom and lessened the intensity of the encounter. This is in line with Müller et al. (2021), who found that online classes helped quiet students to interact freely with teachers and overcome the barrier of being shy in class by using the chat function. However, feedback on this kind of participation suggested it was not as instant as it should be because teachers had to attend to the real students in front of them, whereas it did help students ask for clarification regarding grammar and vocabulary:

I sometimes find a lot of questions in the chat box, I try to answer them immediately, but sometimes it is too late! (T8)

Theme 4: Work overload

A core disadvantage of hybrid teaching reported by the teachers concerned technical issues, particularly a weak Internet connection:

I have to repeat the lesson every time students face technical issues. (T1)

I had to use my own Internet most of the time, and it's costly. (T7)

This affected the teachers psychologically and financially. It also disrupted the students in class and wasted their time. What exacerbated the situation was that some teachers lacked basic computer skills. In addition, the absence of facial expressions and body language in the online mode made it more demanding in terms of preparing teaching materials, especially for lower-level students. As one teacher said:

Hybrid teaching can only be utilised with more advanced groups. (T6)

These issues may affect the communication time in online education, with the time required being 29 percent greater than in face-to-face learning (Kennedy 2002). Even though this was considered by providing teachers with intensive courses before the start of the system (Alhusban 2022), for the teachers, applying what they had learned and practising it in real life was different. Technical issues have been highlighted in the literature as one of the disadvantages of hybrid teaching (Huang, Zhao, Shu and Huang 2017; Olt 2018). Another disadvantage was the limited peer interaction in both face-to-face and online groups and within the online group itself. This was touched upon in the students' FG also (see *Themes 2 and 3*).

5. Conclusion

This study was undertaken to fill a gap in the literature and add to the limited number of studies regarding synchronous hybrid teaching. It explored two main aspects: students' and teachers' perceptions of the two modes of teaching within the hybrid method and their perceptions of the effectiveness of teaching the four English language skills. Regarding the first aspect, the students generally held positive attitudes concerning the synchronous hybrid method. With regard to the logistics, many students agreed that they found the hybrid method convenient. They faced more difficulties attending face-to-face classes than online classes due to transportation issues as many lived far from the university. Academically, most of the students' responses were positive regarding the two modes. However, the students preferred face-to-face classes in terms of understanding, enjoyment, and being able to ask for clarification. Moreover, while they felt more confident participating individually in online classes, they preferred face-to-face classes for group activities. The students' responses show that their experience of the hybrid teaching method helped them improve their note taking, time management and self-autonomy as learners. They also show that the hybrid teaching method did not hinder them forming social relationships as they felt that they belonged to the group and they had good relationships with their teachers and their classmates.

The teachers, in contrast, showed rather negative attitudes towards hybrid teaching. As the analysis of the FGs revealed, they encountered various challenges. Many found it hard to manage the two groups synchronously and to deal with the sudden shift to new tools and applications for online teaching.

Regarding the second aspect related to teaching the four skills through the hybrid teaching method, the students and teachers provided many suggestions. Some students preferred taking the receptive skills (listening and reading) online but the productive skills (speaking and writing) face-to-face. Some teachers, in contrast, suggested that all skills be taught online except speaking, whereas others thought that reading and writing were better taught face-to-face and listening and speaking were better-taught online. A third group mentioned vocabulary and grammar as being optimally taught online.

In the context of the critical health situation during the first year of the pandemic (2020–2021), the application of hybrid teaching was successful. However, by the time this research was conducted, the situation was much more settled. The findings of this study suggest that while hybrid teaching was a reasonable option at a certain point of time, it is not the most suitable approach for language learners, at least from the teachers' point of view.

We can conclude that hybrid teaching is feasible (in terms of the logistics), which contradicts the previous literature, but it poses some challenges (e.g., managing group interaction and finding a balance between groups in the two modes of teaching). Our view is in line with Wuensch et al. (2008), namely that it is not a matter of better or worse but rather of harvesting the benefits of online teaching. To do so, one needs a sound understanding of the environment and how the approach differs from traditional face-to-face teaching, especially with regard to the social and psychological dynamics, cognitive processes and technological elements. More studies on the pedagogy of a hybrid teaching system are needed to help educators and policymakers develop optimal learning environments.

The application of these results may be limited to similar contexts (i.e., synchronous hybrid classes without video). Further studies might consider the gender factor as it was not possible to compare female and male opinions in this study due to the limited number of male participants. Moreover, the data collection was carried out towards the end of the academic year and the participants may have overlooked some elements. Observation throughout the academic year may yield a better understanding of the situation.

Declarations: Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant committee at IAU and informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in this study.

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Endnotes

¹ It is worth mentioning the difference between *teaching* and *learning*. While the simple definition of teaching is the act or practice of sharing knowledge or experience and involves the interaction between two or more members, learning is the act or process of acquiring knowledge and may not involve other people (Gross 2015). In this study, the terms “hybrid teaching” or “hybrid classroom” are used.

² Inductive analysis is a process of coding the data “*without* trying to let it fit into a preexisting coding frame” (Braun and Clarke 2006: 83; emphasis in original).

³ A procedure based on the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

⁴ Computerised word queries do not consider “the existence of multiple synonyms” and may lead to “partial retrieval of information” (Brown et al. 1990: 136).

⁵ The coding comprised three levels: initial or open coding, focused or selective coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz 2006).

⁶ Camera usage was not preferred for cultural reasons.

⁷ Face is central to concepts such as “status”, “authority”, “prestige”, “dignity” and “honour” (Ho 1976).

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