The Case for Synchronous Delivery of Language Teaching in the Digital Era

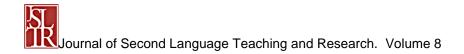Meredith Stephens, *Tokushima University, Japan*

Abstract

Technological innovation has afforded increased opportunities for second language learners in the mode of Face-to-Screen learning. Rather than simply reading graded readers, second language learners can simultaneously listen to and read an audiobook, reaping the benefits of bi-modal input. Nevertheless, not all students are able to apply themselves to online language learning, and many indicate a preference for live interaction in the second language. Face-to-Face learning offers unique advantages to second language learners; the interpersonal mode of embodied delivery continues to be important despite the proliferation of Face-to-Screen learning. Nevertheless, since the 2020 pandemic, Face-to-Face learning has been withdrawn in many cases and replaced by Live Face-to-Screen learning. Some of the unanticipated benefits of Live Face-to-Screen learning, which have become apparent since the transition to this mode of learning, are presented.

Keywords: *online teaching and learning; synchronous delivery; technology; face-to-face learning; face-to-screen learning*

Introduction

Online learning has enhanced delivery of ELT in teaching contexts where class sizes are large, and the teacher is unable to devote adequate attention to each student. It can be especially convenient in monitoring the amount and quality of homework that students complete. According to Sakamoto (2019), implementing technology in the language classroom extends contact time with English, extends learning beyond classroom walls, and personalizes language instruction (25-26). Furthermore, technology permits communication across geographical distance; the asynchronous nature of e-collaboration enables the receiver to reflect and craft their response (Ngo, Goldstein & Portugal, 2012).

In the present discussion, Face-to-Face learning refers to traditional classroom learning in which the teacher and learners share a physical classroom. An alternative mode of delivery, Face-to-Screen learning, may be delivered live (Live Face-to-Screen learning) or asynchronously (Automated Face-to-Screen learning). Live Face-to-Screen learning has evolved rapidly during the 2020 COVID pandemic, and has come to the rescue of teachers who have no longer been able to conduct Face-to-Face classes because of the necessity of social distancing.

Comparing Face-to-Face learning with Automated Face-to-Screen learning

Automated Face-to-Screen learning has clear advantages over Face-to-Face learning in terms of the availability of the time and place of learning. Kukulska-Hulme (2012) explained how mobile language learning may happen as part of a regular planned activity such as when commuting or during lunch breaks, or spontaneously, such as the "dead time" that becomes available when kept waiting. Some of her respondents reported that they appreciated learning with mobile technologies because they could simultaneously perform another activity. Mobile technologies permitted practice in private, and this enabled them to practise the second language without embarrassment. Nevertheless, as the adoption of Automated Face-to-Screen learning has become prevalent, the benefits of traditional Face-to-Face learning have been thrown into relief.

For example, benefits of Face-to-Face learning are apparent in the act of parents reading stories to children. Maryanne Wolf (2018) described the ideal introduction to reading for children learning their first language in the shared activity of caregivers and children in reading a story, citing human interaction, touch, feeling, shared attention and shared gaze: "Physical pages are the underestimated petri dishes of early childhood" (p.133). These key qualities are absent from Automated Face-to-Screen reading.

There may also be particular advantages in Face-to-Face learning for second language learners. The process of interpersonal communication begins as an embodied process, involving not just the exchange of verbal messages but also eye contact, facial expressions and posture. Interpersonal exchanges are facilitated by the synchrony that is made possible by immediate feedback. Language learning is a social practice rather than simply a cognitive activity. In the classroom it is not only the second language that is of importance but also the interpersonal interactions (Thornbury, 2013, p.73).

Surveys of English learners in Japan have confirmed a preference for listening to Face-to-Face delivery to Automated Face-to-Screen extensive Reading-while-listening (RWL). In a preliminary study Stephens (2017) had 21 Engineering majors provide their preferences for either Face-to-Face or Automated Face-to-Screen RWL. Nineteen preferred listening to the live reading. In a follow-up study by Stephens, Kurihara, Kamata & Nakashima (2018), 52 out of 64 students preferred listening to the Face-to-Face reading to the Automated Face-to-Screen RWL. The students gave the following reasons why they preferred the Live Face-to-Face reading, such as "mouth movements, facial expressions, warmth, kindness, and improved concentration" (p.111).

The student-teacher relationship

Language does not simply represent information; it is also an expression of interpersonal relationships. Wajnryb (2001) outlined the functions of language as *representation* and *communication*, neither of which are mutually exclusive. *Representation* refers to the informational aspect of language, and *communication* refers to the interpersonal relationship. These terms highlight the distinction between students listening to a teacher Face-to-Face and to an audiobook. Listening to a teacher entails both the representational and the communicative functions. Listening to an audiobook simply entails the informational function. An educator who knows each of their students individually possesses qualities that are lacking in much of Automated Face-to-Screen learning. Van Manen (2015) provided the following long list of various qualities of a good educator: "thoughtful, sensitive, perceptive, discreet, prudent, judicious, sagacious, perspicacious, gracious, considerate, cautious, careful" (p.103). He outlined the embodied nature of pedagogical relations, through eye-contact, voice, gestures and presence. In particular, he contrasted eye-contact in person and eye-contact on a screen; a look that crosses the path of the other, that is, genuine eye-contact, is not possible on a screen.

Emotions are key to learning (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2010), as is the chemistry between the teacher, learner and group (Dewaele, 2014). Language proficiency is facilitated by the emotional context of the interpersonal relationship (Harris, Berko Gleason & Aycecigi, 2006). Teachers and learners continuously both 'read' and respond to each other (Gregersen, MacIntyre & Olson, 2017). An inspiring teacher communicates a love of learning, because of the power of the student-teacher relationship in learning (Turkle, 2015). An extreme example is found in the case if the philosopher at Cambridge University, Ludwig Wittgenstein: "his students fell in love with the man and with his thought" (Seligman, 2011, p.57). Even in ordinary settings, some young people choose to become teachers because they were inspired by one of their own teachers. Van Manen (2015) explained how pedagogical contact is made by teachers via the subject matter; the teachers do not simply teach the subject, but rather exemplify it; "they teach in their being" (p. 118). He contrasted the shared atmosphere of a class discussion with an online discussion, and a Face-to-Face delivery of a story with a listening to a podcast.

The Power of Addressivity

The interpersonal relationship between the speaker and the audience was identified by Wajnryb (2001), who explained the significance of an embodied presence to a live delivery of a text: "the active collusion and complicity of the interlocutor whose involvement actually, if
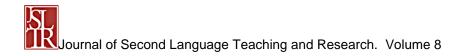
invisibly, shapes the unfolding nature of the text" (p. 176). She highlighted the importance of the interpretation the audience brings to their understanding of a spoken text, which she elegantly described as a "polyphonic perspective" (p. 176).

The critical role of the interpersonal relationship is evidenced in the act of speech accommodation. Crystal (2018) explained the influence of the behavior of interlocutors as they interact with each other, and the convergence of their speech patterns. Speech accommodation concerns intonation, rhythm, vowels or consonants, assimilation or elisions, or even volume (p. 206). The interlocutors' speech is partially shaped by how others respond to them. If the interlocutor identifies with the other person, they unconsciously take on aspects of their pronunciation and vocabulary. If the interlocutor wishes to differentiate themselves from the other person, they may instead unconsciously highlight differences in their pronunciation. The well-known phenomenon of speech accommodation illustrates how the interlocutor shapes our language choices.

A similar argument was made by the Russian scholar of the philosophy of language, Mikhail Bakhtin, who explained that language use is permeated with the intentions and meanings of others (Lodge, 1990). Our conversations express elements of a multitude of other dialogues with previous interlocutors. This has important implications for second language learners, as they interact in dialogue with proficient speakers. As second language learners negotiate meanings in real conversation they may adopt the intonation, rhythm, vocabulary and grammar of the second language.

An important distinction between Automated Face-to-Screen and Face-to-Face learning is that the latter integrates the act of personally addressing the other in a synchronous and embodied way into the learning process: "One voice alone concludes nothing and decides nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence (Bahktin, 1984, p.213, cited in Platt, 2005, p. 120). Ideas form when they encounter the ideas of another (Platt, 2005). In contrast, much of Automated Face-to-Screen learning is monological, positioning learners as the passive witnesses of others' ideas, without having a voice themselves. A monological utterance does not take cognizance of "the other's previous and possible future utterances" (Danow, 1991, p.61). Much of Automated Face-to-Screen learning, such as reading, listening, filling in the blanks, answering multiple choice questions and answering comprehension questions accords with this description.

According to Vitanova (2005), "it is impossible to voice oneself without appropriating others' words" (p. 154). She outlined how speakers appropriate the words of others permeating them with their own intentions. Similarly, British linguist John Firth explained how conversational utterances are interdependent: "what is said by one man in a conversation prehends what the other man has said before and will say afterwards. It even prehends negatively everything that was not said but might have been said" (1964, pp. 110-111). Exchange of meanings occurs in a context of interwoven utterances between the interlocutors. Each speaker recycles parts of the expressions of previous interlocutors past and present. This process can even be observed when learners exchange emails with their teachers. The students take on particular wordings of their teachers' emails, most notably salutations. In both Face-to-Face and electronic exchanges, meanings and expressions are shared and exchanged. The differences between Face-to-Face and electronic exchanges is that the latter are often asynchronous, and lack the scaffold of embodied communication.

Live Face-to-Screen Learning

Next, I discuss Live Face-to-Screen learning in the context of the widespread transition to this mode of delivery during the 2020 pandemic. Live Face-to-Screen learning maintains many of the benefits of traditional Face-to-Face learning, because both involve synchronous exchange. Both modalities enable the interlocutors to perceive the critical features of facial expressions and gestures. Somewhat counterintuitively, certain features of Face-to-Screen learning present distinct advantages over traditional Face-to-Face learning. The unanticipated experience of the 2020 pandemic led to the author to suddenly switch from Face-to-Face delivery to Live Face-to-Screen delivery. She was stranded in her country, approximately 8000 kilometres from her university classroom in Japan, but because the time zones were very close, she was able to conduct her classes during normal waking hours. As she made this transition, she noted the following advantages and disadvantages of Live Face-to-Screen teaching and learning.

Volume of the Teacher's Voice

One benefit of Live Face-to-Screen learning is that the teacher can deliver the lesson in a quiet voice and does not have to expend energy projecting her voice to the back of the classroom. Not all teachers will necessarily view this as an advantage, but those who are quietly spoken may find that they can focus more easily on the content of their delivery and less on attending to whether the students in the back row can hear them adequately.

Saving Time in Setting up the Classroom

Another benefit of Live Face-to-Screen teaching is the time saved setting up the classroom and organization during the class. Rather than setting up a screen and projector the teacher can simply press the screen share button and instantly share handouts and webpages. Instead of spending time organizing students into pairs during the class, he can press a button on the computer ('Breakout rooms' if they are using Zoom) and the students are automatically organized into random pairs. When the teacher wants the students to pair with a new partner, he can simply press 'Recreate' (if he is using Zoom) and students quickly find themselves with a new partner.

A disadvantage of Breakout rooms is that the teacher cannot be omnipresent in the way that she can in a traditional classroom. In a traditional classroom she can participate in individual paired discussion while maintaining an eye on the group as a whole. In Live Face-to-Screen classrooms she can join individual pairs but when she does so she loses contact with other members of the class. A related disadvantage is that when the teacher joins a pair in a Breakout room she sometimes finds that the students are not communicating with each other. This may be because they have finished the task at hand, or because of disinclination. The teacher cannot assume that just because the students have been assigned to pairs that they are engaged in the task.

Teaching Pronunciation

The camera offers a unique opportunity for teachers to demonstrate lip movement in order to aid the teaching of pronunciation. Some languages have fewer phonemes than English and students have not been taught how to form the pronunciation of unfamiliar phonemes. An example of a language with relatively few phonemes is Japanese (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2008). Japanese students may have learnt listening skills through audio materials without having viewed lip movement.

According to Van Wassenhove (2013) watching a speaker's face can facilitate comprehension: "the kinematics of the face articulating speech can robustly influence the processing and comprehension of auditory speech" (p.1). Sekiyama & Burnham (2008) compared native Japanese and native English speakers and posit interlanguage variation between the integration of audio-visual elements of speech perception. The English speakers rely more on visual cues for speech perception than the Japanese speakers. This is due to the relative phonetic complexity of English, manifested in the larger number of vowels in English (five for Japanese versus fourteen or more in English), and a higher frequency of consonant contrasts. They argued that the Japanese language does not

require as much audiovisual integration in speech perception as English does, arguably because English is a "phonologically complex and visually distinctive language" (p. 318). The ability to highlight lip movement using the computer camera is one way of promoting the audio-visual integration that Sekiyama and Burnham (2008) identified. The teacher can focus the camera on their lip movement as he demonstrates it in slow motion. He can pause to indicate lip positions of particular phonemes, and monitor the students' lip movements simultaneously on the screen (assuming the students have their cameras on). It is more effective to demonstrate this on the screen where all students are equidistant to the camera than in a traditional Face-to-Face classroom where the position of the teacher relative to the student differs for each one.

Presenting Realia

In the Face-to-Face classroom the teacher has to engage in considerable preparation in order to present realia. Traditional classrooms are physically distinct from real life contexts, so the teacher has to bring realia into the classroom, prepare flashcards, or use the projector. In Live Face-to-Screen teaching she can introduce the realia around her with less preparation. She can hold objects in her environment to the camera and explain vocabulary related to them in great detail. If she is in another country from the students she can bring her computer outdoors to present them with the images and sounds of local flora and fauna. She can introduce other speakers of her language to the students, who would not ordinarily be able to travel to the country where the students reside.

Class Unity

A drawback of Live Face-to-Screen learning is the weakening of class unity. The students participate from individual locations, and can only interact with each other when allocated a turn by the teacher, or when they are in Breakout rooms. They cannot engage in spontaneous eye contact or other non-verbal communication with other students. This lack of connection with others may be the reason that many students report that they prefer the embodied presence of traditional Face-to-Face delivery to Live Face-to-Screen delivery.

Conclusions

Technological innovation offers a multitude of benefits to second language learners, such as extending the possibility of learning beyond the classroom, and personalizing instruction (Sakamoto, 2019); mobile learning can make use of otherwise wasted time when one is kept waiting, can be simultaneously performed when doing another activity (Kukulska-Hulme, 2012). Nevertheless, there remain distinct advantages to traditional Face-to-Face learning,

which offers the unique advantage of embodied interpersonal communication in which the interlocutors exchange meanings not only with words but also eye contact, gestures and emotions in a shared time and space.

Despite these advantages of embodied communication in a shared time and space, the offering of Face-to-Face learning has recently been curtailed because of the necessity of social distancing during the 2020 pandemic. The resultant transition to Live Face-to-Screen learning has offered many hitherto unanticipated benefits. Teachers can exploit this new medium to deliver language classes efficiently, use technologies such as the computer camera and microphone to spontaneously highlight critical features such as lip movement, and present realia, as required.

Biodata

Meredith Stephens is originally from Adelaide, and works as an applied linguist at Tokushima University, Japan. Most of her writing concerns second language pedagogy, and has appeared in *The ELT Journal, English Today, Reading in a Foreign Language, The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching*, and *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*. In her free time she enjoys writing fiction and creative non-fiction.

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