MANAGING LARGE SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE EFL CLASSES

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Teaching and managing large EFL classes may be challenging and exhausting if communicative pairwork and groupwork activities are included sufficiently. In a traditional brick-and-mortar setting, facilitating communications among students of a class of approximately 50 students to some teachers has already been an overwhelming job. At UEH, the situation seems quite a dilema for those who would like to ensure the quality of in-class communicative actitivities. Hardly can students' speaking learning outcomes be met if instructors do not provide enough guidance and facilitation. Nonetheless, if they do support students diligently and thoroughly, they may very well end up being unfairly burned out. It has been a series of stories told but seemingly and perhaps pretentiously unheard by adminitrators who keep juggling incoming students into oversized classes and ironically hoping for decent English outcomes among prospestive graduates. The situation deteriorated when the COVID-19 hit hard at our community and serverly impacted our teaching practices. Classes were moved online without much preparation; instructors had to improvise as if it were their responsibility that the COVID-19 occurred and consequently had to take full charge for the online transfer process. In such setting, some unexpectedly valuable experiences of teaching online classes synchronously came along to me. In this brief paper, I would like to share those as a bitter sweet memory hoping it could help us to have a better online teaching preparation in case of another wave of mandatory online teaching.

The COVID-19 kept postponing our traditional face-to-face classes to a limit that our administrators eventually decided to officially announce we had to go online last Spring. If we recall our very first moments of that sudden transmission, UEH LMS BigBlueButton was introduced by our university's Information Technology department. The tool failed badly and kept crashing constantly due to a very predictable but unwarned reason, Moodle defaults that their system can only hold and function a maximum of 500 concurrent participants. After that incident, the IT department continued on introducing Google Meet and other tools. Some time later, MS Teams was announced by them to be a panacea and mandated among all instructors under the observation of the Inspecting Deparment who would allocate inspectors to actually have an account in MS Teams and check the attendance of instructors. Some of our colleagues in our SFLE department including me at that time were using Zoom and suggested the Vice Dean to ask for

permission and sponsorship from the more senior leaders to continue using Zoom. All in all, neither of those tools was ultimately mandated or strongly recommended by the supposedly responsible parties. In times of confusion and turbulence of moving online, instructors enjoyed the freedom of selecting the tools they liked or deemed appropriate for them to teach online. Many of us used Google Meet, some continued using Zoom or other tools. Online teaching methodologies was very much relied on instructors' improvisation. Although being not quite technologically or pedagogically prepared and ready for this transition, most of us apparently got through the online teaching season safe and sound. I started out using Blackboard Collaborate with Breakout Rooms for all the classes I taught as I figured my students would not have adequate chances to practice speaking and be engaged had I merely taught them asynchronously – posting materials on the LMS and interacting via emails or other asynchronous tools, or communicated via Google Meet or MS Teams. All those tools would not have offered the Breakout room function. I also chose Blackboard Collaborate for its sysyem sound founction which would allow me to play audio on my PowerPoint presentations and record my synchronous sessions seamlessly. However, later when the COVID-19 surged strongly in the United States, Blackboard stopped supporting the Breakout rooms for free accounts. I switched to Zoom free account which has similar functions as Blackboard Collaborate does and later used the monthly fee of US$14.99 to avoid annoying interruptions. Zoom later was reported to be unsafe due to hackers and unfaithful students' ill will. The process of choosing an appropriate, stable, and safe platform was not at all easy for me. Ultimately, I ended up sticking to Zoom because it allowed me to host breakout rooms to foster my students' speaking, interaction, engagement, and motivation. Additionally, I had no supreme secrets that might have been attractive to possible hackers out there. I also adjusted some of the safety functions suggested in Zoom manual guide to help avoid and minimize the vulnerability of being attacked by hackers. Here are the two links to Zoom breakout room setups and its security guide for instructors, respectively: https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206476093-Enabling-breakout-rooms and https://blog.zoom.us/best-practices-for-securing-your-virtual-classroom/?_ga=2.205669267.124396590.1594633062-1189582773.1581773646&_gac=1.187960154.1594633065.CjwKCAjwjLD4BRAiEiwAg5NBFhFKgdzMYNgS5h9I3dKq_oa8u63r6W-MksRXfxvwK8Q5GxufcMV5zBoCzYEQAvD_BwE

Technologies no matter how advanced should not be considered superior to pedagogies. Indeed, instructional strategies shed light on which technologies and how to use them to benefit

learners in achieving their learning outcomes. In the rest of this article, I will discuss several methods I found effective in engaging students in online synchronous sessions during the Spring semester of 2020. When we teach in a face-to-face class, sometimes we have to freeze the screen to spare time for students to focus on thinking and working on their assignments and discussions. Likewise, in a synchronous session, we might wish to show students what they are supposed to see only, i.e., without distractions from slide effects and transitions when we switch from slide to slide as we need to see what comes ahead to instruct them more effectively. I figured using dual monitors was very convenient for that purpose. I could easily switch from one monitor to another whenever I wanted without disrupting what my students were seeing on their end. That said, I could even look up materials and sometimes words to explain ideas and concepts to students throroughly. This was particularly important to me as I felt a minute of silence or interruptions during an online class fairly annoying and unncessarily time-consuming. Additionally, students who perhaps had already been bored during extented hours of sitting online attending oversized synchronous sessions should not be bothered even more with long pauses. Technical issues and uncomfortable intervals could lead to students' disengagement and even drop-out.

Another issue with maintaining students' engagement and motivation during online synchronous classes is to check attendance and elicit answers regularly and randomly. In large online classes, it may be extremely challenging for instructors to know exactly if their students are truly present. Some students would just log in to synchronous meeting rooms and totally focus on their other tasks including playing video games, chatting, surfing Facebook, watching movies, or even leaving their laptops/desktops/mobile phones on and going away. In other words, it is almost impossible for instructors to actually know if all their students are physically and mentally engaged in the lessons. One of the methods I applied to help minimize the level of absentism was to check attendance and ask students to answer my questions randomly. If I call a student's name three times without hearing his or her voice, I would mark that student as being absent and deduct their attendance and participation points. It could be somewhat time-consuming on my end; however, I believed it was necessary to retrieve students' attention and engagement.

Creating and maintaing students' interest and participation in an online synchrous session could also be done by increasing student-student interaction time. Among the three main types of interaction, i.e., student-material, student-instructor, and student-student, I believe student-student interaction plays the most significant role in enhancing their activeness and interest in participating

a class either face-to-face or online. In an online environment, learners might feel isolated especially when they miss all the non-verbal communication signals and social presence of a face-to-face class. Consequently, assigning them to break-out rooms in Zoom could help reduce that possible sense of isolation. Normally, I had no clear ideas whether my students were listening to me attentively when I lectured them or whether they were doing some irrelevant tasks. With break-out rooms, however, not only did I give them opportunities to be actively discussing, speaking and enjoying conversations with their friends, I also gave myself the time to observe, engage, facilitate their progress and give constructive feedback and comments. Although it was quite hard work on my end to go from room to room, my labor is very well worth it because I could mangage their discussion without background noise as in a regular face-to-face class and take careful notes on their common mistakes easily on my computer, one thing I could not conveniently do in face-to-face classes. The fact that I was not able to visit every single room in each session did not appear to inhibit student's motivation to discuss and be interested. Their external motivation was generated by means of my random entrance to their room; if they were not there or did not actively participated, I would make notes and remind them that they might have lost their attendance points if they had kept doing that. As observed, many students were internally motivated and very excited since they were able to talk with their friends and exchange information; sometimes they did speak Vietnamese and I would remind them to switch to practice speaking English. I would have to admit that it was absolutely tiring and somehow overwhelming to mangage the flow of online synchrnous sessions for a large number of students like I did. In such scenarios, I would emphasize the random act of checking attendance and participation in breakout rooms. There is no need to visit every single room; we just need to make it clear to the students that they are constantly connected and could be checked on anytime.

To avoid being burned out during online synchronous sessions, I learned how to relax my eyes and do some light exercise when teaching. Sitting in one place and staring at computer screens for prolonged hours could be very detrimental to our physical and mental health. Our eyes are tired, our shoulder muscles get tight, and humorously enough, our butts get hurt too. Therefore, I limited the time of sharing my videos so that I could close my eyes once in a while to relax, do some stretch, or try to walk around when students were working on their assignments. We have to take care of our health during online sessions where we are very likely to end up being too stagnant and straining our brain and body excessively. Teaching effectively is not only about assisting

students in achieving their target learning outcomes but also about motivating ourselves and maintaining our energy.

Above are some of my experiences of teaching large online classes synchronously during the last semester. I went from being confusingly guided in terms of which platform to use for my classes to being able to learn some techniques for teaching effectively and maintaining interests and motivation for the students and myself. Teaching a large English language class in a face-to-face setting has already been remarkably demanding and tiring, let alone in a completely online environment where most of the social presence and dynamic of student-teacher and student-student interaction are missing. The so-called teaching online improvisation was over and currently we are able to resume our face-to-face and blended classes. That said, if we have to teach completely online again, I truly hope for a better preparation in terms of IT infrastructure, essential training for students and teachers to learn and teach online, and most importantly proper adjustment of class size to a more manageable number of approximately 20 students per class. Although the hope might be vain as there are always profound ideological disagreements between maximizing profits from tuition and assuring education quality, it does not cost anything except for possible repetitive disappointment to keep hoping. Ultimately, it is the quality of educating our students that should be the first priority once the profit reaches its peak and the greed for improving learning outcomes can outweigh that of gaining more of the money.