English Language Learners' Preference for Asynchronous, Synchronous and Hybrid Modes of Online Learning

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Lawrence Knowles

Abstract

This study examines student opinions on, and preferences for, three modes of online language learning: asynchronous, synchronous and hybrid. The study took place at a Japanese university in Spring 2020 and involved 37 English language learners in two freshman humanities classes over a period of three weeks. Students received one week of instruction in each mode and then completed a survey in which they stated their preferred mode and reasons for their preference. They also rated their overall experience with each mode and reported its strengths and weaknesses. Results reveal that students most preferred the hybrid mode of instruction because they could both go at their own pace and listen to the instructor each class. In contrast, they least preferred the asynchronous mode because they could not get help in a timely manner.

Keywords: Asynchronous, synchronous, online, language, learning

1. Introduction

Since online language learning (OLL) appeared in the mid-1990s, the medium has continued to develop. In its advent, due to technological limitations, OLL existed mostly asynchronously, that is, without the traditional time-bound class period (Hockly, 2015). Instead, students completed the coursework individually and at their convenience. However, with advancements in computer technology, such as broadband, streaming video, and Webcasting, came advancements in OLL. Whereas synchronous learning, or a course in which students and instructor are online together for a set time period, was once a rarity, it now predominates the online learning landscape (Hrastinski, 2008; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020). Broadly speaking, live video applications like Zoom and Blackboard Collaborate Ultra have enabled educational institutions to begin to approximate the face-to-face experience.

To date, though, the story of OLL has largely been binary, meaning courses have been

offered either as asynchronous or synchronous, rarely a blend of the two (Hockly, 2015). The reason may lie in that curriculum developers singularly focus on the most obvious strength of one mode to the detriment of the strengths of the other. For instance, students may not be able to be online during typical class times, so the school offers an asynchronous course (Picciano, 1998). Or perhaps students desire an instructor's presence (Brinkerhoff & Koroghlanian, 2007), so the school offers a synchronous course. The most obvious advantage seems to drive the decision making. The prevalent thinking appears to be that the course must be "either or," but a third mode exists, that of the hybrid, which combines a partially synchronous class with selected elements of an asynchronous one.

Of these three modes, however, which one do students favor? Though limited research exists on the topic, determining factors include technological capabilities, time constraints, learning styles, and motivation. This paper first reviews existing literature on the advantages and disadvantages of the three modes primarily from a language learner's perspective, then presents a study on the preferred mode of EFL students at a Japanese university, followed by a discussion of the results.

2. Literature Review

Regarding the student benefits of asynchronous learning, studies show that it lowers the affective filter and increases student willingness to communicate (Bakar et al., 2013; Tateyama, 2015; Perveen, 2016; Hussin et al., 2015; Aslan & Ciftci, 2019; Hadjistassou, 2008). Due to the inherent emotional distance between course participants, students feel less anxiety about turn-taking and tend to speak their mind more. In discussing Pakistani EFL students, for instance, Perveen (2016) states that shy students felt less intimidated by communication with the teacher. Meanwhile, in a meta-analysis of 52 scholarly articles, Aslan and Ciftci (2019) reported that students found writing to be "less face-threatening … without spatial and temporal constraints" (p. 111). Additionally, Bakar et al. (2013) found that students who were able to record and review oral exchanges before sending them off to classmates felt less pressure and anxiety. Finally, in examining the asynchronous aspects of an EFL course in Malaysia, Hussin et al. (2015) noted that students experienced little anxiety when communicating via Facebook and blogs.

A second advantage of asynchronous instruction is that students tend to communicate with more complex grammatical structures (Abrams, 2003; Tateyama, 2015; Bakar et al.,

2013; Sotillo, 2000). For example, in a study involving German-language learners, Abrams (2003) reported that students working asynchronously wrote with more subordinate, relative and infinitive clauses than students in a companion synchronous class. Similarly, Bakar et al. (2013), in comparing asynchronous and synchronous student productivity, stated, "When low proficiency learners are provided with more time to construct and develop their ideas or thoughts, they are able to develop and express more complex perspectives on the topic compared to the time when they have to do it in real face-to-face discussion" (p. 232). Finally, Tateyama (2015) found that students in an asynchronous online Japanese-language course rated their communication skills as having improved more than their counterparts' did in a face-to-face (i.e., synchronous) course. The author attributed this to the fact that the asynchronous group received voice recorded feedback, which students could listen to multiple times, while the synchronous group only received momentary oral feedback.

A third benefit of asynchronous learning is that students appreciate the ability to proceed at their own pace (Hamad, 2017; Tateyama, 2015; Picciano, 1998; Gyamfi & Sukseemuang, 2018; Gunes, 2018; Birch & Volkov, 2007; Hrastinski, 2008). In a study involving a blended EFL course in Saudi Arabia, for instance, Hamad (2017) found that students overwhelmingly supported the ability to download and watch the lectures whenever they wanted. Further, in a study of an asynchronous university Japanese course, one student noted, "I do like the online course. It allows me to do things at my own pace. It does take a more significant amount of motivation and dedication to take an online course but I feel it has helped me do better thus far" (as cited in Tateyama, 2015, p. 351). Similarly, in a study of Thai EFL university students, participants acknowledged the convenience of asynchronous learning, with one stating, "I enjoyed using the program because … I can choose the lessons I want to study on my own. It is flexible to use" (as cited in in Gyamfi & Sukseemuang, 2018, p. 192).

A fourth advantage of asynchronous learning is that it often results in more equal student participation than synchronous learning (Tateyama, 2015; Birch & Volkov, 2007; Sotillo, 2000; Lapadat, 2002). Tateyama (2015) and Birch and Volkov (2007), for example, conducted studies in which they required students to contribute a set number of postings per online discussion — a democratization of turn-taking that rarely occurs in face-to-face conversations. Lapadat (2002), meanwhile, points out that a certain freedom of turn-taking occurs in online discussions, stating, "[R]eal-time linearity and capacity constraints are relieved, easing the pressures of bidding for and trying to hold the floor" (para. 28).

In contrast, asynchronous language learning presents three commonly-reported disadvantages. First, a teacher's social and cognitive presence is often lower than students desire (Perveen, 2016; Gunes, 2018; Birch & Volkov, 2007; Ge, 2012). In a study by Perveen (2016), for instance, students rated their inability to interact with the instructor as the single biggest weakness of the mode, and in a similar study by Gunes (2018), only 2 of 13 students recommended asynchronous language learning, citing a lack of guidance, monitoring and face-to-face instruction as primary reasons. Additionally, in a survey of ESL and EFL students who participated in an online discussion board, respondents assigned "opportunity to gain feedback on my opinions from their instructor" their lowest score (Birch & Volkov, 2007).

The second disadvantage of asynchronous learning is that the discourse lacks continuity (Shintani, 2015; Shintani & Aubrey, 2016; Abrams, 2003; Yeh et al., 2019). In a study involving Taiwanese EFL students' use of a discussion board, Yeh et al. (2019) reported that one of the subjects gave little more than terse acknowledgements to peer feedback, leading to conversations stalling out. Similarly, in a case study involving Japanese ESL learners receiving both asynchronous and synchronous written feedback on writing tasks, Shintani (2015) found that the former method proved less effective due to the students' inability to consolidate information from one class to the next; the latter method, meanwhile, resulted in greater grammatical accuracy and production of the target structure. Further, Abrams (2003), in looking at student discussion board behavior in an asynchronous German-language course, found that students often had to wait for days for classmates to participate. "Such delays," said the researcher, "interrupt the discursive momentum and could reduce motivation" (p. 164).

A third disadvantage is that students can experience enduring technical difficulties (Gyamfee & Sukseemuang, 2018; Olesova et al., 2011; Tateyama, 2015). Gyamfee & Sukseemuang (2018), for example, reported that learners often could not connect to the internet to access Tell Me More, an interactive language program, and subsequently gave the course lackluster scores for student satisfaction. Further, Olesova et al. (2011) found that students consistently struggled with downloading, accessing and comprehending audio (i.e., mp3) feedback due to problems with their computers and internet connection. Third, Tateyama (2015) noted that several learners struggled to adjust to the technical demands of assignments until well into the heart of the course. "Structured learner training at the beginning of the semester," the researcher recommended, "might have alleviated student worries about the course and familiarized them with some technical and procedural aspects

of the course" (p. 351).

Regarding synchronous language teaching, one of the most commonly reported advantages is that the students have an opportunity to interact with the instructor (Ge, 2012; Bailey et al., 2020; Perveen, 2016; Ene & Upton, 2018). Ge (2012), for example, in a study comparing asynchronous and synchronous EFL instruction, found that nearly all of the students (94%) wanted to have greater interaction with their teacher even though they lacked confidence in their English ability. Perveen (2016) echoed Ge's findings, revealing that students regarded real-time communication with the teacher as the greatest single benefit (28%) of synchronous instruction. Finally, Ene and Upton (2018), in examining students' perception of teacher feedback via live chat, reported that most students found the sessions to be useful (73%) while also helping them to notice their mistakes (64%). Only 6% believed this type of synchronous communication to be a waste of time.

A second advantage of synchronous teaching is that it often results in more successful uptake and production of the target structure than asynchronous teaching (Lotfi & Pozveh, 2019; Shintani, 2015; Shintani & Aubrey, 2016; Ene & Upton, 2018). Lotfi and Pozveh (2019), for example, compared the vocabulary-test performance of Iranian EFL students in asynchronous and synchronous (classroom) classes and found that the latter group significantly outperformed the former. The reason, they proposed, was that by having an instructor in front of them, the synchronous class could work efficiently and stay on task. In the same vein, Shintani (2015) revealed that writing students produced more grammatically accurate revisions when receiving synchronous computer feedback over the asynchronous variety. The researcher posits that the immediacy of real-time communication enables the learner to more readily connect the feedback to the relevant error.

A third advantage of synchronous teaching over asynchronous is that it better suits dependent learners (Lotfi & Pozveh, 2019; Gunes, 2018; Shintani, 2015). Lotfi and Pozveh (2019) asserted that Iranian EFL students performed better on assessments in a synchronous course than an asynchronous one due, in part, to the instructor's social and cognitive presence. The researchers succinctly stated, "Iranians are still dependent and using dependent procedures gets better results" (p. 1592). EFL students in a study by Gunes (2018), meanwhile, reported that they *needed* the structure and guidance of face-to-face instruction, adding that "it could not be possible for them to learn English only through ADL without a teacher actively participating in the process" (p. 234). Finally, in a case study of Japanese EFL students, Shintani (2014) found that subjects with limited metalinguistic skills greatly

benefitted from receiving synchronous electronic feedback as it brought their attention to error detection and self-correction, setting them on a path to independent learning.

As for the disadvantages of synchronous language instruction, one of the most widely reported is that it contributes to student anxiety (Perveen, 2016; Ge, 2012; Chew & Ng, 2021; Satar & Ozdener, 2008). In researching Turkish EFL student anxiety levels during voice and text chats, Satar and Ozdener (2008) found that the voice mode elicited more anxiety, due in part to the student's worries about their pronunciation and ability to understand their speaking partner. Additionally, Ge (2012) reported that 74% of EFL students in a synchronous class rated their participation as "low," with the author stating, "Adult e-learners often lack confidence in their English (whether spoken or written), so they are often afraid of showing their English abilities in public" (p. 291). Finally, Yi and Luan (2021) reported that some Malaysian EFL students produced fewer words in synchronous (face-to-face) discussions than in asynchronous ones (online forums) due to anxiety, low self-confidence, and introverted personalities.

A second disadvantage of synchronous learning is that, due to the ephemeral nature of the medium, technical difficulties often have greater consequences (Wang & Chen, 2007; Perveen, 2016; Satar & Ozdener, 2008). Satar and Ozdener (2008), for instance, reported that students experienced problems with their microphones during conversations, which resulted in students not being able to understand one another, thus diminishing the overall quality of the lesson. Perveen (2016) similarly found that only 33% of students participated in synchronous sessions, due in part to technological difficulties, and added that only 52% of the participants believed that synchronous learning improved their English ability. Finally, Wang & Chen (2007) found that Chinese-language instructors on occasion mistakenly changed the settings on their computers, thus cutting off their ability to hear students and connect to the course. "Although these problems were incidental and eventually solved," the researchers stated, "some valuable online time was lost" (n.p.).

A third disadvantage of synchronous learning is that the communication can be frenetic and distracting (Ene & Upton, 2018; Shintani, 2015; Sotillo, 2000). Ene and Upton (2018), for instance, reported that students often (1) endured misunderstandings because they were all trying to speak at once, and (2) had to vie with other students in real time for the teacher's attention. Shintani (2015), meanwhile, found that synchronous teacher feedback at times distracted writing students and disrupted the flow of their compositions. Finally, Sotillo (2000) asserted that synchronous chatting frequently resulted in students lapsing into social

conversation while losing the chronological order of the lesson. "Because there were many rapid fire responses and a great deal of socializing among students," the researchers stated, "both instructors experienced difficulty keeping the discussions focused" (p. 94).

Finally, while literature also exists on the efficacy of hybrid learning, two issues in reviewing the mode exist. First, the term "hybrid" means different things to different people and finding studies with two identically-delivered courses has proven challenging. Second, literature often scrutinizes the two elements of the mode, asynchronous and synchronous, rather than the mode as a whole. Thus, for the purpose of this review, the component strengths and weaknesses of hybrid have been slotted into the categories above. Nonetheless, several studies have found that students and teachers preferred a combination of synchronous (or face-to-face) and asynchronous instruction (Gunes, 2019; Perveen, 2016; Ene & Upton, 2018; Tateyama, 2015; Ge, 2012; Riwayatiningsih & Sulistyani, 2020). Ge (2012) and Perveen (2016) found, for instance, that students only wanted 30 minutes of synchronous instruction with the rest dedicated to asynchronous. Additionally, EAP writing instructors in a study by Ene and Upton (2018) found that asynchronous written feedback followed by synchronous feedback in the form of chatting proved highly effective, with one teacher stating that they would never switch to just one of the methods if both were available.

3. Method

The participants in this experiment were 43 first-year university students in Japan studying English as a foreign language who were enrolled in two sections of a core integrated skills course. The L1 of all of the students was Japanese and the average age of the students was 18 years old. Of the 43 students, 37 completed the survey, from which the discussion and conclusions have been drawn.

3.1. The course

The online course took place twice a week for 90 minutes each class and followed the hybrid mode, where the first 20 to 30 minutes of class were held synchronously and the remaining time asynchronously. During the live portion, the instructor and students appeared on video via Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, and the instructor introduced assignments, reviewed homework, answered questions, and socialized with students. For the remaining hour, students were encouraged, but not required, to go to group rooms and collaborate on their assignments. Ultimately, how they worked with one another — whether synchronously

or asynchronously, via video, voice, or text — was left to their discretion. The primary reason for such latitude lay in school-wide difficulties that students encountered with internet connections and device compatibility. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the semester marked the university's first foray into online-only education.

The study took place over a three-week period in the middle of the Spring 2020 semester. First, students were made aware of the study and asked to note what they liked and disliked about the ensuing class structure. The study commenced with one week of instruction in hybrid mode, followed by a week each of instruction in synchronous and asynchronous modes.

3.2 The Survey

At the end of the study, quantitative and qualitative data were collected from participants using an online survey in both English and Japanese. The quantitative portion comprised a multiple-choice question on which of the three modes they preferred, as well as three Likert-scale questions asking them to rate their experience in the course. The qualitative portion included seven open-ended questions, one asking them for the reason for their preferred mode, and six asking for the main strength and limitation of each mode.

In the open-ended questions, students were instructed that they could respond in either English or Japanese. Of the participants, 22 chose to reply in Japanese, which was then translated with the help of software and a native Japanese speaker.

Before being administered, the survey was validated in two ways. First, it was given to 17 ELLs in a course similar to that of the target learners, with responses evaluated for item validity using a principle components analysis (PCA), and second, it was submitted for face validity to two university ESL instructors, with flagged questions either improved upon or discarded.

4. Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. Which format do language learners prefer and why?
2. How would the learners' rank their experience in each of the three modes?
3. What do learners consider the main strengths and limitations of the three modes to be?

5. Results

The first question, "If this course only offered one learning format, which would you prefer?", yielded the following data:

Table 1

	Asynchronous	Hybrid	Synchronous	No Preference	Total
Students	4	21	6	6	37
Percent	10.81	56.76	16.22	16.22	100

For the second question, students rated each of the three modes using the following 5-point Likert scale: Excellent (+5), Good (+4), Average (+3), Not very good (+2) and Poor (+1). Values (in parentheses) were assigned to each level, yielding the following data:

Table 2

	Asynchronous	Hybrid	Synchronous
Excellent	10 *(50)*	18 *(90)*	10 *(50)*
Good	19 *(76)*	16 *(64)*	18 *(72)*
Average	8 *(24)*	3 *(9)*	8 *(24)*
Not very good	0	0	1 *(2)*
Poor	0	0	0

A one-way ANOVA was then performed (Table 3), which resulted in a P-value of less than .05, indicating that there is a statistically significant difference in the students' evaluation of the three modes.

Table 3

Source of Variation	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*P-value*	*F crit*
Between Groups	3.58558559	2	1.79279279	3.53254438	0.03265349	3.08038686
Within Groups	54.8108108	108	0.50750751			
Total	58.3963964	110				

Next, post hoc analysis was conducted using Hsu's MCB (Table 4), a statistics package

that compared the three modes and determined the "best" one based on the highest mean ("upper" column). Results show that the hybrid mode, with an upper value of 0.67, was considered by students to be the best.

Table 4

Group	*Mean*	*Index*	*Center*	*Lower*	*Upper*
Synchronous	4	2	-0.4054054	-0.7260624	0
Hybrid	4.40540541	3	0.35135135	0	0.67200835
Asynchronous	4.05405405	2	-0.3513514	-0.6720084	0

The above information also reinforces the results of question one, in which 56% of the respondents said that they would prefer the hybrid mode for future language learning courses.

Regarding qualitative data, students were first asked to briefly explain the main reason for their preferred mode of instruction.

Students gave 31 reasons for their preference of hybrid mode, with the most common being they could go at their own pace (32%), listen to the teacher (29%), listen to more English (6.5%), speak more English (6.5%), and avoid being computer-bound for the entire class (6.5%).

Students gave seven reasons for their preference of synchronous mode, with the most common being that they could get immediate help on assignments (29%), get to know the teacher (14%), listen to a native English speaker (14%), get an approximation of face-to-face instruction (14%), reduce studying time (14%), and avoid the difficulties of asynchronous study.

Students gave four reasons for their preference of asynchronous mode, with the most common being that they could go at their own pace (50%), do assignments more easily (25%), and avoid connectivity issues (25%).

Next, students were asked to provide the greatest benefit of each mode. Regarding the hybrid mode, students provided 40 answers, reporting that they could easily understand tasks (35%), go at their own pace (10%), work in a group (7.5%), hear English (7.5%), and speak English (7.5%).

For the benefits of synchronous mode, students provided 37 answers, stating that they could listen to English (14%), speak English (14%), get instant answers to questions (14%),

collaborate and socialize with classmates (11%), and be in a class that approximates face-to-face instruction (8%).

For the benefits of asynchronous mode, students provided 37 answers, citing self-pacing (73%), convenience (8%), and independence (5%).

Finally, students were asked to provide the greatest drawbacks of each mode. Regarding the hybrid mode, students provided 38 answers, with "nothing" (55%) being the most cited, followed by group attendance issues (5%), technical issues (5%), teacher availability (5%), confusion about mode of instruction that day (5%) and lack of information or instruction (5%).

For the drawbacks of synchronous mode, students provided 38 answers, with the most common being connectivity issues (24%), followed by "nothing" (18%), not having enough time to complete tasks (16%), difficulty communicating live (8%), and general tedium (8%).

For the drawbacks of asynchronous mode, students provided 33 answers, with the most common being that they could not get help (42%), followed by "nothing" (30%), and a feeling of isolation (9%).

6. Discussion

The present study confirms the findings of Ge (2012) and Perveen (2016), which reported that online language learners prefer a blend of synchronous and asynchronous modes in a single course (i.e, the "hybrid" format defined in the introduction of this paper). Survey feedback indicates that students particularly enjoy receiving live teacher guidance while also having the flexibility to go at their own pace. It's no surprise then that students said that assignments were easier to complete.

Also, though students valued the communicative aspect of synchronous classes, they did not cite this as a primary benefit of hybrid classes. The reason may be that while the synchronous mode emphasized communicative learning, the hybrid mode did not. The former was more student-centered, utilizing breakout rooms for much of the class, and the latter was more materials-centered, emphasizing receptive skills, such as watching videos or reading short passages.

Instead, students stated that the greatest benefit of the hybrid mode was that they could easily understand the assignments, a result which may be attributable to culture as much as class structure. Japanese students tend to be passive learners (Kudo & Simkin, 2003), and if they do not understand something, they often remain silent, frequently to the detriment of

completing assignments correctly. In this way, they can be considered dependent learners — that is, they need a high level of instructor availability and guidance — and the participants' comments seem to support Lotfi and Pozveh (2019) and Gunes (2018), who found that dependent learners appreciate, and in some cases *need*, a synchronous component.

Regarding the primary strengths of synchronous mode, students stated that they could both listen to and speak in English, a finding that is partially backed up by prior research. Ge (2012) and Perveen (2016), for instance, emphasized the satisfaction that students got from communicating with their instructor, without mentioning their sentiments on communication with classmates. In the present study, students were not asked with whom they enjoyed communicating in English during synchronous lessons, but since a significant amount involved teacher-student exchanges, it can be inferred that this interaction factored into their answers.

That the participants overwhelmingly reported self-pacing to be the greatest benefit of the asynchronous mode confirms findings by numerous prior studies (Hamad, 2017; Tateyama, 2015; Picciano, 1998; Gyamfi & Sukseemuang, 2018; Gunes, 2018; Birch & Volkov, 2007; Hrastinski, 2008). A limitation of this study is that students were not asked why they particularly appreciated self-pacing; however, Matsumura and Hann (2004) reported that computer anxiety affects many Japanese university students, so it's possible then that not only being able to study at their own pace but being able to familiarize themselves with the technology, as well, factored into the students' answers.

In the present study, few students reported any disadvantages of the hybrid mode. However, a couple of students noted problems with speaking activities, in particular, the absence of their partner or partners in group rooms. The issue may be unique to the mode because the teacher could, for instance, occasionally assign a semi-synchronous activity in which students work together during class time yet are not under the supervision of the instructor. Absences, thus, become difficult to detect or mitigate, and those students who are present cannot complete the activity.

In addressing the disadvantages of the synchronous mode, students emphasized connectivity issues, a finding that was underscored in Perveen (2016), Satar and Ozdener (2008), and Wang and Chen (2007). Only a couple of students noted the tedium of having to be online at a certain time, an issue that was reported in Ge (2012), Schenker (2017) and Perveen (2016). However, the limited response was somewhat surprising, as the students did not choose to study online but were required to do so due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

When they enrolled in the university, they were expecting to study face-to-face in a highly communicative environment, so their hesitance to criticize anything related to curriculum or methodology may represent a general tolerance under extenuating circumstances. Nonetheless, it's worth noting that the second most common answer in our survey was "nothing," indicating that many students seemed to be genuinely happy with the mode.

Regarding the main drawback of the asynchronous mode, students reported the inability to get help. The answer, though ambiguous, likely refers to the limited social and cognitive presence of their instructor, and thus supports similar findings of Perveen (2016), Gunes (2018), and Birch and Volkov (2007). In this study, however, the issue may have been exasperated by the passive nature of Japanese students. Thus, when a problem arose, though they could have e-mailed their instructor, they may have felt inhibited at doing so; though the help was there, only an e-mail away, it's possible they considered this an overly daunting task.

Interestingly, only a couple of students reported isolation as a drawback of the asynchronous mode. Outside of the study, however, students had lamented the social isolation that they felt since many of them had never met their classmates or set foot on the campus. There are a couple of reasons why this issue may not have rated higher, though. First, the asynchronous portion of the study only lasted one week, likely not enough time for a pronounced stage of isolation to set in, and second, some of their other courses were being held synchronously, so they could still get the social contact they desired.

It bears mentioning that this study contains several limitations. First, a pre-study survey of student preference for the three modes was not conducted, and it's possible that students entered the experiment with an existing preference. Second, certain parameters, such as the length of the synchronous portion of hybrid instruction and the order in which the three modes were delivered, were established by the researcher to maintain course cohesion. Certainly, a more thorough testing of different lengths and orders would have yielded more insightful data.

Finally, a question not addressed in this paper, but worth exploring, is whether learner preference for the three modes affects language acquisition or academic performance. Future researchers of the topic, then, may want to take a more quantitative approach, focusing on student productive skills along with attendant assessments.

7. Conclusion

With language learning increasingly becoming available online, there is a need to research the strengths and limitations of asynchronous, synchronous and hybrid modes. In this study, students preferred the hybrid mode, as it allowed them to go at their own speed while also being able to interact with their instructor. It also arguably best approximates the face-to-face language learning environment, as, after a time, students have the freedom to move about, take short breaks, and focus on objects other than a computer screen. In short, the kinesthetic value of the hybrid mode should not be overlooked.

The mode is not without its limitations, however. Student absence during asynchronous (or semi-synchronous) portions of the class can deprive some students of the ability to properly complete activities. The reality may be that any mode other than fully synchronous may present difficulties in communicative language learning for both teacher and student. Instructors, then, may wish to only assign communicative activities during the synchronous portion of a class and resist allowing them to extend into the asynchronous portion — that is, any part of the course in which the instructor is not online with the students as they are working on the task. These days, with the increased functionality of content management systems, there are many shades to being "online." At first glance, the instructor may welcome the flexibility, but when it comes to communicative language teaching, perhaps a binary approach works best: either the teacher is completely online or completely offline.

The synchronous mode had its proponents, as well, with the main reason that students could easily get help on assignments. This finding suggests that the students who prefer this mode possess largely instrumental motivation, as they placed more importance on completing assignments than communicating extemporaneously in the target language. However, when all of the participants were required to list the strengths of the mode, they did emphasize listening and speaking in English, which indicates a healthy presence of integrative motivation. Language instructors may want to keep in mind that students' preference for synchronous learning may not always be due to a desire for live communication in the target language.

Though the asynchronous mode was least favored, students reached the greatest consensus on its strength: that it allowed for self-pacing. As productive tasks like writing and argumentation require higher order skills, and thus more time to complete, this mode would ideally suit a writing course, or perhaps a debate course in which students argued via

discussion board.

Finally, students have different learning styles so a mode that may work for one person may not work for another. However, students also have the ability to adapt and may thus come to appreciate the benefits of whatever mode they are studying with. In the survey, 16% said they had no preference for mode, suggesting that any of the three would have been just fine.

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（Lawrence Knowles　外国語学部講師）