

Teaching hybrid classes

Since the start of the Covid 19 pandemic, teachers all over the world have needed to adapt, and have found themselves teaching classes in a range of formats: online, face to face but with social distancing and, over recent months, in hybrid, where some students are in class with the teacher and others are attending the lesson online. At the institution where I work, for example, we have moved between all three formats over the last 12 months.

Although *Understanding Teenager Language Learners* was written primarily with fully online teaching in mind, many of the techniques and strategies mentioned can be carried over to a hybrid setting. In this **Downloadable resource** I highlight a few key considerations to take into account when giving hybrid lessons.

Set-up

When I talk about hybrid classes, I am not talking about a class where most students are in the room with just one or maybe two following from home, almost like silent passengers, because they are in self-isolation, for example. For me that is still a face-to-face class. Truly hybrid language lessons are ones where a significant portion of the group is online and a significant portion is in the room, having been designated their positions systematically, perhaps by rotating roster, and where the teacher is trying actively to teach and involve both the online portion and those physically attending.

The most important variation in set-up from school to school or from classroom to classroom will be the apparatus through which the teacher views their online students and where the teacher is positioned in the class. This depends on what will be serving as their own screen and what will be serving as their board.

In the set-up that I am familiar with (see Figures 1 and 2 below), the teacher is seated at the side of the class, between what is traditionally the board area and their learners. The board, IWB, smartboard or TV serves as a giant screen where both teacher and face-to-face learners can see the online platform, complete with online learners via webcam, chat box and any shared screen or central display area. Here, when the teacher wishes to put something on the board, they will use the digital board on their respective platform. The online learners, for their part, can see either just the teacher or the teacher and a portion of the class, depending on where the teacher has positioned their own portable webcam. The teacher has a microphone positioned on their table which will pick up the other learners in the room to a greater or lesser degree.

Another possible set-up might be where the teacher is sitting or standing in a more traditional position, working from a physical whiteboard or blackboard, and where only they can see the learners at home via a laptop or class computer. In this case, online learners will see the teacher's area and manual board work, just as they would if they were in class. In this set up, the face-to-face learners may not be able to see their online counterparts at all.

I have heard some teachers and teacher trainers say that it is best to think of a hybrid lesson as an online lesson, but with people in the room accompanying us. I have heard others say that priority should be given to those learners physically present, as the day they come into class is the most important one for them. My own opinion is that the split should be an even 50/50 between those in class and those at home in terms of all aspects: planning, attention, time and effort.

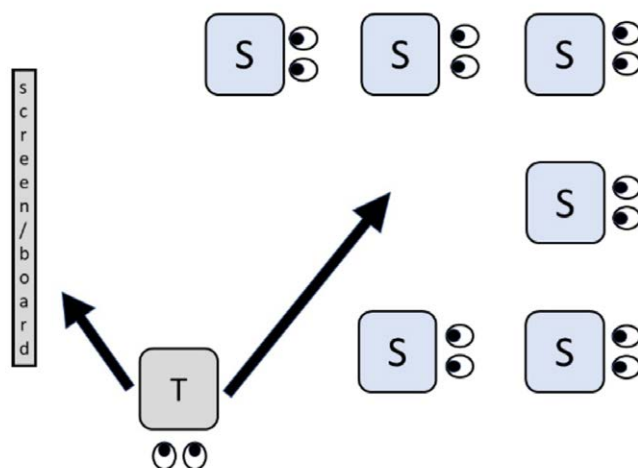


Figure 1: One possible set-up for a hybrid class with online learners appearing on the smartboard and the teacher needing to split their gaze

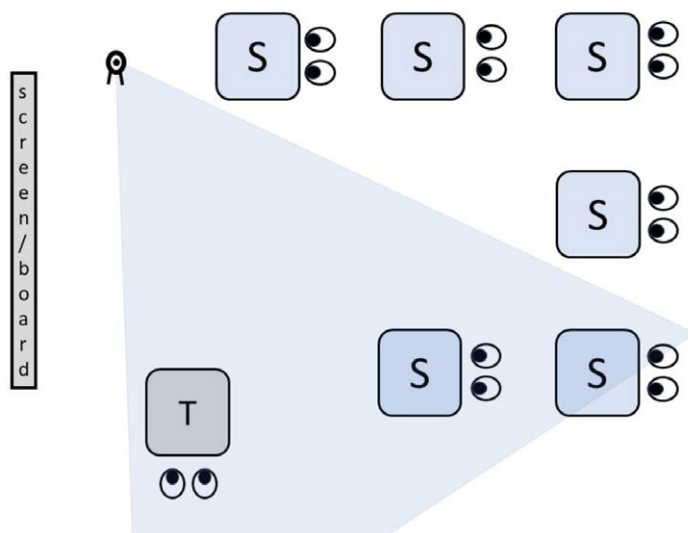


Figure 2: A webcam relays an image of the teacher and/or a few of their face-to-face counterparts to the learners at home.

New teacher roles and priorities

As well as the functions that a teacher traditionally performs, such as giving explanations, setting tasks and providing language guidance, I see the main new roles for us in hybrid lessons as fourfold. These new roles constitute a shift in priority. In fact, they *become* our priority, I believe. They are:

- a. mediating between learners
- b. operating technology
- c. narrating transitions
- d. involving everyone

We shall now look at these roles one by one.

Mediating between learners

In hybrid lessons, the teacher is the glue, or the hub, that connects the two portions of the class. Your most important role is to keep energy moving about. This means both your own and that of the learners.

Splitting your gaze

In hybrid class set-ups like those in Figures 1 and 2, the teacher may need to split their gaze between where the online learners are projected onto the board and where their in-class learners are. In popular musical terms, if a teacher is normally a lead vocalist, facing their audience, they are now a singer and pianist, needing to turn from looking at either their band or their music and keyboard on the one hand to looking at their audience on the other – as pop star Elton John used to do in a particularly pronounced way.

Redirection and classroom management

As well as shifting your own attention about, you need to be regularly, maybe constantly, redirecting the focus of your learners' attention between you the teacher, your materials, and the two class halves. You may, for example, need to draw everyone's attention to a comment from a single learner, and how you do this will differ depending on whether that learner is visible and audible to the rest or not. You are not just managing attention, either. You need to manage language production, how your learners' need for self-expression manifests itself and any tangential behaviours that come along with working in groups – such as restlessness or private conversations.

When quietening the people in the room so that an online learner can speak, I try to de-emphasise the quietening down part in favour of who my learners are going to listen *to* and *for* what, as in:

'Ladies and gentleman, please now listen to... [accompanied by a dramatic dipping of intonation like a ring announcer] Pablo!'

or:

'People in the room [big smile] don't listen to *me*, listen to *Ana*!' [again with dramatic signalling to where Ana's webcam image can be seen].

or again:

'Guys in the room, you're doing a great job but right now, we can't hear Carla from home. Can we all give her a second of quiet please?'

The biggest enemy of your hybrid lessons will probably be background noise from the people in the physical classroom, so this is a technique that you may need to return to quite frequently.

Connecting class halves

You may wish to bring the class together by asking someone at home (the *onliners*) to pick a student from the classroom and ask them a question. This sort of cross-media nominating can take time, but it does get everyone listening to each other. Remember, the students at home may have a limited view of the students in the room, being able to see just the one or two that are close to the teacher. You might therefore need to perform a manual camera sweep across the room to remind the onliners who they are choosing from. In fact, at the beginning of every hybrid lesson, one such camera sweep of the room is always a good idea to allow the students there to wave to the people at home, and vice versa.

Another consideration is that if you have a microphone set up on your teacher's table or at the front of the room, it may not pick up students at the back of the room, so you may have to pass the mic around (if the cable lead on it is long enough and if social distancing regulations do not interfere) or you may have to relay what the learner in the room has said to the onliners yourself.

Avoiding cross-media heckling

Sometimes a student in the classroom will shout something out directly to a student online. I have seldom found such a thing to be beneficial to the overall classroom dynamic, especially when the comment is a joke or in any way antagonistic or critical (for example: 'Pepe, turn your mic down, it's bursting our eardrums!'). So the first time it happens, I employ a standardised response to the heckler of: 'You tell me; *I'll* tell Pepe'.

Splitting learner attention and activity

There will be other times that you need to fragment your class, and to draw your students' attention to different task specifics. For example:

'People in the room, I'd like you to have a look at the handout that was on your chair when you came in. People at home, you have the same handout displayed on the shared screen now. If you hit the download icon in the corner, you can save it as a Word document and use it as a template when you do the homework.'

You may also choose to have learners doing different tasks. Recently, for example, in a short memorisation activity, I had students in the classroom reading short texts to each other several times over and, with each repetition, looking down at their text less frequently. I did not think this would translate so well to breakout rooms for the onliners, so instead of pairing them up with each other, I asked them to each individually record themselves reading the texts, first slowly then at medium pace, and then with more energy, and to send me those recordings via email while the lesson was in progress. The two halves of the class were thus engaged in different tasks, but the learning outcome, increased automaticity of the text content, was the same.

Your students should not have a problem recording audios of themselves, given the fact that they are already online and using a microphone for the lesson. Both Windows 10 and Windows 7 come with a built-in recording app (Voice Recorder and Sound Recorder respectively). On a Mac, there are two such apps (QuickTime and Voice Memos). In addition, and as a back-up plan, all iPhones come with a pre-installed voice recorder, and many Android phones do, too. In the odd case that theirs does not, they can go to their app store and download one for free. From there it is a case of recording and emailing the teacher their audio just the same as on a laptop or desktop computer (or uploading it if you are using a platform). It is worth making sure your students can record and send you audios as this is such a good way to ensure that they are completing consolidation exercises.

Operating technology

During your hybrid lesson, you will need to juggle a range of software and hardware. You may need to access your institution's website or the online learning platform, and then, within that, open up your digital classroom. You will probably need to operate multiple windows at a time and multiple programs to share presentations, documents, digital course materials, audio and clips. You will have some sort of webcam, mic and keyboard to hand. That will all involve many clicks of your mouse and it also means that there are multiple points where

something might go wrong. Most of these procedures will quickly become second nature to you and you will also learn to accurately troubleshoot regularly occurring glitches.

It is generally easier if a teacher has given fully online classes using the same platform before they attempt to give hybrid ones. At least they can then fully concentrate on managing the online technology and learning before they need to split their gaze and attention to take in face-to-face learners as well.

As well as splitting your attention during the lesson, you will also need split it during the planning stage by asking yourself what each portion of the class will see and need at any given stage. This may involve preparing materials across a range of technological levels. As was the case with one of the example sets of instructions above, you may need to prepare a downloadable Word or pdf document for your onliners, but have actual paper-based copies of the same ready for face-to-face students.

Working round problems

In hybrid lessons, you will regularly run into limitations and need to find workarounds. Here are some examples, both simple and complex:

1. **The early days of teaching hybrid**

In an early hybrid class, I started one lesson with my learners unable to see me or hear me. I had forgotten that the webcam, set up on a chair in front of my teacher's table, had a sliding cover to protect the lens and that the teacher before me, quite correctly, had slid this closed. I had also forgotten that the microphone I had on my table also had an on/off switch. This was pure user incompetence on my part. However, a month later, my mic stopped working mid-class whilst switched on and I spent more than 30 minutes trying various solutions, in between setting learners tasks via the chat box, until logging out and back into the platform for a third time righted the issue. The solution was, of course, to check the equipment ahead of class and to check in with other teachers what pitfalls they'd faced so we could all learn together.

2. **Hybrid teaching tweens**

In a tweens class scheduled in winter at dusk, light shining in from the one small window in the classroom, located just to the side of the board, made it impossible for me to see my online learners projected onto the board area or the shared digibook I was working from. Turning the lights in the classroom off solved this problem but then the learners at the back were plunged into darkness and could not see their own books.

One solution involved us first working together from the screen, everyone (at home and in class) with books closed, and then us all working individually from our paper-based books, covering the same material in a kind of 'now-let's-see-what-you-can-remember' consolidation stage. At other times, I allowed learners at the back of the class to use the torch facility on their mobiles to see their books with the lights off. As we face a return to hybrid lessons at the time of writing, I am thinking about an adjustable lamp for the back of the room.

3. **Using the digital whiteboard**

In another class I was using the onscreen digital whiteboard built in as central display area of our platform to put up some sentence-length, complex answers to

an exercise we were correcting. However, the size of the whiteboard area and the small lettering that appeared when I typed onto it meant that learners at the back of the physical classroom could not see.

The solution was for me to maximise the whiteboard area to full screen so that the text on it doubled in size. Whenever I did maximise the online board, though, I could no longer see the faces of my online learners nor the chat box entries several of them were typing into. To confound this, the moment I tried to write on the board in this maximised size, the new text reverted to the smaller font size shown on the half-screen version of the board.

I therefore had to take a contribution from a learner, then type and enter text on the minimised board, before maximising it for the learners in class, and then minimising it once more before starting the next answer. This sequencing was workable but required a lot of concentration.

Reacting to problems

Wherever and whenever we use technology we will encounter technological issues. In addition, the level and array of technology found from classroom to classroom and from home to home, together with the relative newness of such a set-up for most of the industry/profession, means that such issues will be particularly felt in our hybrid lessons. They are inevitable. My next principle is therefore perhaps the most important part of this downloadable resource. It is this: *A technological issue does not require an emotional response.*

A tech problem is not a personal problem. It is not a family problem. It is not a health problem. A technological problem does not require an emotional response – or at least, it will not be resolved *by* an emotional response. You can give it one if you want, but that is not what will right the situation. A technological issue will only ever be resolved by the appropriate and corresponding technical adjustment. You can get annoyed with your microphone or cry in the toilets at break because you have spent the whole morning trying in vain to play audios to your classes (and that is understandable), but neither of those responses will be the technical adjustment that actually solves the issue. So why put yourself through that? In these situations, it is therefore best to engage such emotions as little as possible.

Providing an emotional response to a technological issue is a habit that you can start to train yourself out of today. Of course, we are biological creatures, so this is easier to say than it is to do, but adopting the above principle in bold as a ‘mini-mantra’ may help. Here it is again: *A technological issue does not require an emotional response.*

Providing a technical response to a technological problem is a habit you can start to train yourself into today as well. Again, though, you might not always be able to identify the right one. If you are in the middle of a lesson that is collapsing around you due to a tech or set-up issue, and if you are trying to think (as much as your learners will allow you to and to the best of your knowledge) analytically to find a solution to that problem, then you are doing your job *as best you can*.

At the extreme end, you can have an absolute disaster of a class due to tech issues but not have done your job badly at all. Sometimes telling the difference between these two things can be tricky but I believe it can also mean the difference between taking on damage to your sense of self-esteem or professional confidence due to a less-than-perfect situation and coming out of it relatively unscathed.

Maintaining dynamics

In your hybrid lessons, your online learners will experience all the technological issues they do in fully online classes, such as being unable to hear you now and then, not being able to see visuals or being unable to log in. In a hybrid setting it is important not to sacrifice the face-to-face dynamic by waiting on an individual learner for too long. For example, if you ask Enrique, who is at home, for the answer to Question 4, and he does not respond, just move on. If you ask at-home Jada for the answer to Question 6, but she has no mic, ask her to type the answer to Question 8 into the chat box and while she is doing so, take the answers for Question 6 and 7 from learners in the room. In hybrid classes, your online learners need to up their game as well. We do not want learners who have physically come into class to be having to wait simply because those at home are being sluggish. Of course, real tech issues need to be addressed, but that will be better done out of actual class time. If you do have a learner with an unresolvable tech issue, you may wish to make use of the pre-written message I suggested in *Understanding Teenage Language Learners Online*, **Using the chat box to focus on language** (on page 43).

Narrating transitions

For me, the most marked difference between hybrid teaching and any other is the number of transitions that the teacher needs to make between the various online elements of the lesson. These transitions include: sharing a screen, uploading a presentation, accessing a file on your desktop, opening up another window to check a word using an online dictionary, sharing audio files, putting your students in breakout rooms, opening and displaying a digital version of the coursebook, and minimising or maximising various elements of your online screen, such as the chat box or digital whiteboard. It also involves nominating students and giving instructions and feedback to the various parties. Building on the previous point, you want to avoid making your online students wait for the face-to-face students (and vice versa), and you want to avoid making them all wait for you, the teacher.

When working as a tutor on pre-service and in-service teacher training courses, I regularly remind course participants that there is no need to provide an ongoing commentary by narrating everything that is going on in the class. In hybrid, I think the situation is different, and I would actively encourage teachers to narrate the transitions they are making.

The reason for this is that the face-to-face students will sometimes be unaware of their teacher's intentions. They just know, for example, that at a given moment in time the teacher is clicking and scrolling about and that they are having to wait. Similarly, the onliners cannot see everything that is going on in the class; all they know is that their teacher is now partially out of view (if they have got up to deal with something in-class) and no longer addressing them and that they are waiting.

By narrating your transitions, you keep everyone in the loop. For this, I believe, we can learn from listening to radio DJs, sports commentators, podcasters, the YouTube streamers mentioned in Chapter 6, news anchors and weather reporters. The aim is to carry your two audiences with you and compensate for the fact that nobody has the full picture except you. For example, a radio DJ will not cut straight to a listener calling in but will segue with something like: 'And now let's hear from Marlon in Oxfordshire'.

This gives Marlon a chance to get ready and tells the rest of the listeners what is happening.

Similarly, you can segue to learner answers: 'And now let's go over to Pablo and ask him what he got for Question 4. Pablo, are you there and what did you get?'

That segue gives Pablo a few seconds' notice in which to unmute his mic and locate his answer.

We can provide an ongoing commentary for online learners of in-class events:

'Matias has just come in so I'm going to wait for him to take his coat off and get settled. In the meantime, are there any words in that last exercise that you remembered from unit three?'

or:

'People at home, you may not be able to hear that but about a hundred little birds have just started singing outside the classroom. They must be having a party in one of the trees in the courtyard.'

You can report between classroom and onliners:

'Pablo at the back just made a comment about it not being fair that we have lessons when today should be a national holiday and this seems to have generated quite a debate. Let's see if we can get Pablo or one of the others to tell us how they feel about that and what they have just said, but this time *in English*. Pablo, Lili, Maria, can I have statement from one of you for the people at home? Thank you, Lili, so tell us, what is your position on the matter?'

You can borrow a technique from online chefs to narrate what we are doing either onscreen or in the classroom, or both:

'So I'm just going to maximise this screen, like so ... for the people at home, and while you're having a quick look at that, I'm going to hand out worksheets for the people in the room. People at home, I'll be back with you in 30 seconds.'

Or you can adopt a more strategic or pensive tone, such as that of snooker or chess commentators, to keep your learners updated with what you are doing to try to solve a technical issue:

'So I'm just going to try uploading this ... as a pdf rather than a ppt and ... let's see if the reduced file size makes it workable ...'

As I take my own hybrid and online teaching forwards, I plan to develop and categorise a range of these segues and strategies.

Involving everyone

The final priority is to make sure that every member of the group is included. This is extremely important in any teaching context, but in a hybrid setting it is especially easy for a learner to go unheard and unaddressed for ten, 20 or 30 minutes if you are not careful. So, as you mediate between the two halves of a group and juggle onscreen content, you are looking to tie everyone into the lesson via your commentary.

Throwing names and questions out there

Imagine that Javier is at home without the use of webcam or mic. He is faceless and silent. It would be quite easy to forget about him. To combat this, try tying him into the lesson like this:

'Thank you, Maya. That was indeed the word I was looking for. Javier, did you get the same answer? If you did and you're happy with the rest of the exercise, just let me know in the chat box, which I'll check in a few seconds. Okay everyone, I'd like to move on to...'

Javier now knows you are still thinking about him, and even if it takes some time for him to come back to you in the chat box, the rhythm of the lesson has not suffered.

The diminished role of the chat box in hybrid lessons

Those reading this downloadable resource alongside *Understanding Teenager Language Learners Online* from start to finish will know that one of the things I value most about fully online lessons is the role of the chat box to allow for increased focus on language. Unfortunately, in the type of hybrid setting we are discussing here, if the teacher types entries into the chat box, the face-to-face portion of the class (or at least those sitting towards the back of the room) are unlikely to be able to read them because the type will be so small.

In a fully online class, if learners use the chat box skillfully, they can make up for the fact that their webcam is not on and still make their presence felt. Again, in a hybrid lesson, this is very difficult for them to do because the teacher will not be able to pay the same sort of attention to text entries coming into it as they would in a fully online setting. If the platform is projected onto a larger surface, with the teacher sitting looking at their online learners along with the rest of the class, then the teacher may be too far away from the chat box to be able to read it easily. If the teacher has the digital part of the class on their laptop screen, and is assuming a more classic presenting position in front of a whiteboard that they are writing on manually, they may have to move regularly between their board position and a position closer to the screen where they can see their online learners. Either way, they are likely to miss messages coming in.

There are a number of ways that you can compensate for this.

Insist that webcams are on

For the above reasons, in the recent stint of hybrid teaching that I did, I insisted that online students switch their webcams on. ‘If I can’t see your faces, and I can’t see your chat box entries particularly well, it’s going to be nearly impossible for me’ I told them. ‘If you’re shy, put sunglasses on, or a hat, or your Covid mask, but I need to be able to see when you’re nodding or giving me your thumbs up’. This meant that at the start of each lesson I would have to remind everyone (and also when students came back from breakout rooms and had to reactivate their cameras). They did get used to it, though, and lessons were much more workable as a result. For a further discussion on webcam use, see **Managing your online classroom**, pages 21–42 in *Understanding Teenager Language Learners Online*.

Acknowledge webcam signals

To feel involved in a class, a student doesn’t necessarily have to produce extended answers or swathes of typed text. If you happen to catch one of your online students laughing in response to a joke that has been made, or if you see them nodding vigorously, then by simply acknowledging that, you reaffirm their inclusion.

Comments such as:

‘I can see that clip made you laugh, Paula.’

or:

‘Yes, that’s right ... and I can see Carmen and Claudia agree with me.’

... will do.

You will find a few more considerations on learner webcam images and well-being in *Understanding Teenager Language Learners Online* on pages 33–36.

Appoint a chat box monitor

As your attention will be divided between so many things in your hybrid lesson, appointing one learner as ‘chat box monitor’ is a way of alleviating yourself of a small part of the burden. This works best if you choose a learner in the front row and on the same side of the class as the chat box. It also only works if the chat box is visible to the learners in the physical classroom as well as the teacher. The chat box monitor is then responsible for flagging up any important communications that come in via the chat box that the teacher has not picked up on. When choosing my chat box monitor, I also try to choose a learner who will not become overly distracted by the role.

If you do lose people along the way

We cannot always prepare for as long as we might like to for every class and, in general, planning for hybrid lessons is a little more intricate and ‘fiddly’ because you need to take into account various perspectives. If you do have time to do it, presenting your online learners with a summary of the work to be covered at the start of the lesson, including any coursebook page numbers and exercises, will mean that even if they have connectivity issues during the class they can continue to work on their own, completing the exercises and then correcting them at a later time. You might want to introduce this as standard procedure, including your to-do list for the lesson, at the outset of each hybrid class. It could take the form of a list of page numbers and exercises on the first slide of a PowerPoint presentation or it could be something you type into the chat box. Either way, if your learners note it down, they can carry on should their connection or the platform fail.

What activities from Understanding Teenager Language Learners Online work well in hybrid classes?

I have found nearly all of the content created for this title that is not centred on chat box exchanges to be extremely useful as a basis for the online portion of hybrid teaching. Most of the initial takeaway principles apply, and the discussion in **Managing your online classroom** on basic set-up is also relevant. The most useful part of that chapter is probably the pre-written messages for disruption and tech troubleshooting (pages 24–28). The ‘language checklist’ from **Using the chat box to focus on language** (page 52) is still extremely valuable, but the teacher will need to provide their keyed-in input via physical or digital whiteboard and more of the stimuli for your additional language pointers will be spoken contributions from the people in the room.

In **Explaining things and getting a response** (pages 55–81) the synchronous responses to learner chat box entries are less relevant, but all of the material that deals with staged instructions will be invaluable. Even if you explain verbally to the people in the room what they have to do, your online learners will benefit from the level of detailed instructions covered there.

The show-and-tell activities from **Activities and techniques that work well online** (pages 83–112) can all be transformed into PPT and Word presentations, though they do lose some of the charm that I like about them. The online streamer review and related discussions work well in any setting. Similarly, all of the clips from **Using clips, video and other digital effects** (pages 113–129) work equally well in an online or a hybrid setting. I have used

them all in both. The staged summary of a longer clip (the Zabbaleen community) worked particularly well in hybrid format as did 'It ain't my fault' by Brothers Osborne. Perhaps my favourite technique for hybrid classes under the current Covid restrictions are the teacher-recorded clips, as these allow learners to see the whole of their teacher's face, rather than one that is obscured by a face mask.

Professional development

Things to think about

- In this downloadable resource, I mention the helpfulness of learners being obliged to turn on their cameras in hybrid lessons. Do you feel the same? Think about the last online staff meeting or teacher training session you attended. Did you turn on your own webcam? If so, were you in the majority or the minority and do you think the host appreciated you for doing so?
- In the last section of this downloadable resource, I mentioned some of the techniques that carried over from full online teaching to a hybrid situation most effectively for me. You may wish to take a pencil and, starting from the second chapter of *Understanding Teenage Language Learners Online*, asterisk, or bookmark, those strategies that you think would best carry over to your hybrid teaching situation.
- At the end of this downloadable resource, I re-endorse teacher-produced footage, arguing that it allows your learners to see your whole face. Due to Covid restrictions, do you have any learners who have *never* seen your face? If not, do you see any benefit in their doing so?

Things to try

- If you are currently teaching in a hybrid situation, try appointing a 'chat box monitor' and see if they manage to catch any significant communications from your online learners. If they do, make sure you provide verbal acknowledgement.
- Rewatch some footage from your favourite sports clips or news reports. Alternatively, listen again to some of your favourite radio material. Ask yourself: What are those commentators doing that effectively covers transitions, and that keeps their audience with them even when there is a lull in events or a moment that involves waiting for something?
- In your online or hybrid lessons this week, note down the occasions when your learners are waiting for you or for each other to do something. If in hybrid classes, which portion of the class is it – the onliners or the learners attending face to face? Think about how you can reduce this wait time by staggering tasks, running activities in parallel or preparing for the transitions yourself.