COMPARING THE EXPERIENCES OF UNIVERSITY TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN SYNCHRONOUS HYBRID SETTINGS DURING AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT • Among the many innovations, teachers and students experimented widely for the first time with synchronous hybrid settings, which took hold in the second year of the pandemic (20-21). Although synchronous hybrid education is nothing new, it was neither widespread among practitioners nor established in the literature. This mixed method study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge about a format which was already studied before the pandemic as a convenient way to make tertiary education more inclusive, which is consistent with the 2030 Agenda goals regarding equity in education. To this end, it compares data collected during and after the pandemic on teacher and student approach towards synchronous hybrid teaching and learning combining quantitative and qualitative data. The opinions on synchronous hybrid education obtained during and after the pandemic do not differ. On the one hand, students and teachers in the three data collections mentioned the same challenges of synchronous hybrid settings. On the other hand, they see the opportunities differently. For teachers, the disadvantages in terms of workload, stress and effectiveness do not outweigh the opportunities in terms of student attendance. In contrast, students tend to favour synchronous hybrid teaching and learning because it could improve their quality of life, if not their learning.

KEYWORDS • Synchronous Hybrid Teaching and Learning; Challenges; Opportunities; Tertiary Education.

The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word "Crisis".
One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity.
In a crisis, be aware of the danger, but recognise the opportunity.
John Fitzgerald Kennedy, *Speech in Indianapolis*, April 12, 1959[1]

1. Synchronous hybrid education: a timely topic in post-pandemic reflections on quality education

When teaching abruptly shifted to the internet due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a combination

[1] John F. Kennedy, 'Remarks at the Convocation of the United Negro College Fund, Indianapolis, Indiana, April 12, 1959', John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum (online archive), www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/indianapolis-in-19590412, accessed 10 September 2021

of asynchronous and synchronous instruction was used to respond to an educational emergency in difficult and unprecedented circumstances (Radić et al. 2021). This massive shift to digital platforms is called Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) and is defined as an unplanned and necessary educational response to the pandemic (Bozkurt et al. 2020). It differs from structured online learning, which aims to create a strong educational ecosystem based on specific infrastructure, consolidated models and research (Hodges et al. 2020; Schlesselman 2020; Tumelius & Kuure 2020). Being an emerging topic, it has attracted a considerable amount of research: on the one hand, studies on ERT focus on the educational emergency that affected cohorts of students and teachers regardless of the availability of devices, adequate broadband and digital skills (Bozkurt & Sharma 2020; UNESCO 2020). On the other hand, scholars suggested that the new phenomenon should be studied as an extraordinary experiment to also recognise the opportunities for teaching and learning (Harari 2020; Zimmerman 2020), which could change the representation of learning during the pandemic in terms of loss and contribute to the improvement of education both in person and online in the long run. Alongside the challenges, higher education teachers and students also experienced opportunities, such as increased digital literacy, flexible attendance, new ways of conceptualising both the teaching environment and the teaching and learning experience, which encourages reflection on education in the post-Covid era (Barbour et al. 2020; Giacosa 2021; Luporini 2020).

Among the many innovations, teachers and students experimented widely for the first time with synchronous hybrid teaching and learning, which took hold in the second year of the pandemic (20-21). This term refers to a format in which face-to-face and online students can learn simultaneously (Priess-Buchheit 2020): teachers teach in a physical classroom to students who are present in person and simultaneously stream the lesson to students who attend from home. Although synchronous hybrid education is nothing new, it was neither widespread among practitioners nor established in the literature. For example, no name has yet been established for it internationally, although it is attracting growing research interest. Common terms are "hybrid learning", "fluid learning", "mixed f2f and online", "synchromodal", "HyFlex", "blended synchronous learning environments' (Priess-Buchheit 2020). Recent studies on learning experiences during the pandemic refer to instruction that takes place simultaneously in a physical classroom and a cyber-classroom as "synchronous hybrid learning" (Priess-Buchheit 2020; Raes et al. 2020; Triyason et al. 2020). To describe the phenomenon from the perspective of teachers and learners, this study uses the terms synchronous hybrid education and synchronous hybrid teaching and learning (SHTL).

SHTL has been explored as a suitable format to address the economic challenges in education worldwide since before the pandemic. As Priess-Buchheit (2020) notes, concerns were raised as early as 2010 that higher education facilities were inadequate to meet the demands of a growing student population, which made SHTL the subject of several trials (Bower et al. 2015). In addition, this format was seen as capable of meeting the demand for personalised learning and flexibility, which helped to reduce student anxiety (Li et al. 2020). In addition to the opportunities, research on this format also pointed to critical problems for distance learners, such as lack of engagement and support, and the resulting low learning efficiency (Hill 2014; McKenzie et al. 2013; Szeto, Cheng 2016). However, pre-pandemic research on SHTL referred to learning environments that were specifically designed to enable teachers to teach geographically dispersed students by drawing on specialised technologies and training (Bower et al. 2015; McKenzie et al. 2013). However, during the pandemic, synchronous hybrid teaching faculty often lacked experience with this format, specific training and equipment, which increased the pressure on them (Priess-Buchheit 2020). Despite these difficulties, universities managed to survive the second and third years of the pandemic (20-21 and 21-22) by providing teachers and students with the means to continue their activities. Although students and teachers have now returned to normality, it seems appropriate to

use the experience gained during the pandemic to be better equipped for future teaching and learning scenarios. SHTL, while challenging, can make education more affordable and inclusive by reducing the additional costs of accommodation and commuting. As such, this format is in line with the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Quality Education (United Nations 2018). Considering that classes have already had to move quickly online due to public health and safety concerns (e.g. during the 2003 Sars outbreak), various forms of distance learning cannot be ruled out (Barbour et al. 2020). As teachers and learners may again interact exclusively or partially via the screen in both emergency and planned contexts, forms of video-based instruction such as synchronous hybrid instruction deserve attention as a new frontier for education. Indeed, research on ERT has highlighted the need for teachers to improve and update their professional skills, such as digital classroom interaction (e-CIC) skills, to meet the needs of new generations of students (Moorhouse et al. 2021).

This mixed-method study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on SHTL by exploring the challenges and opportunities from the perspective of teachers and students collected in ELT courses at different Italian universities in 20-21, 21-22 and 22-23. It addresses the following research questions:

RQ1 To what extent did teachers' perceptions of synchronous hybrid education differ from students' perceptions during the pandemic? (Qualitative and quantitative)

RQ2 To what extent did teachers' perceptions of synchronous hybrid education differ from students' perceptions after the pandemic? (Qualitative and quantitative)

After explaining the methodology, this study looks at teachers' and students' recent first-hand experiences of SHTL to provide evidence-based reflections on the pedagogical implications of a challenging but potentially convenient, inclusive and affordable teaching setting.

2. Methodology

This study draws on qualitative and quantitative data collected from October 2020 to March 2023 at 14 Italian universities. It focuses on ELT as a touchstone for SHTL, as this could be a challenging context for interaction, which is a key factor for second language learning (Atar, Seedhouse 2018; Nakamura 2008; Walsh 2014). To gain a comprehensive insight, two different types of courses are examined: English language and linguistics lectures and practical English courses. The former are given in English by native speakers of Italian or English to large groups of students and deal with theoretical descriptions of general or specific areas of English, such as English linguistics, translation, pedagogy. The latter are given by native speakers or bilingual teachers to small groups overall and focus on the development of English competences and skills. Due to space constraints, this study does not address the differences between the two types of courses and interactants are referred to as teachers, online and face-to-face students without further specification.

On the one hand, it is based in part on three years of data collection for a doctoral dissertation on interaction in distance learning English courses, involving a total of 39 teachers and over 1,847 students. However, to answer the research questions, this paper only analyses data on synchronous hybrid education from two rounds of online questionnaires for teachers and students in 20-21 and 21-22. Thus, as far as the first research question is concerned, the data examined in this study comes from the responses of 6 teacher informants and 101 students in 20-21 and 17 teacher informants and 500 students in 21-22. This difference is due to the fact that SHTL was introduced in only a few universities in 20-21, while it was widespread in 21-22. On the other hand, the study draws on a new data collection conducted in March 2023 to provide a more comprehensive and up-to-date insight into SHTL from the perspective of teachers and students. Regarding the second

research question, data for this study was collected through a follow-up questionnaire for students and one for teachers to cover the post-pandemic period. The same teachers who had participated in the PhD study were contacted and asked to complete the follow-up questionnaire and send the link to the students who had participated in their classes during that academic year. The data set related to this round of data collection was answered by 10 teachers and 186 students.

In summary, the teacher-informants are the same in the different rounds of data collection, while the students represent different cohorts. This is not a limitation of the study as the students were included to represent the learners' perspective as compared to the teachers. In fact, the aim of this study was not to observe possible changes in the perceptions of the same students over the years. On the contrary, the focus is on the dual perspectives of teachers and learners rather than on changes in individual perceptions. A QUAL + QUANT approach was adopted for the data analysis. Since the number of informants varies considerably in the three rounds of data collection, the quantitative reflections on the responses to the questionnaires are complemented by qualitative data derived from the responses to the open-ended questions.

3. Findings

This section first presents data on SHTL in two academic years affected by the pandemic (20-21 and 21-22) from the perspective of teachers and students (RQ1, par. 3.1. and 3.2). Secondly, the findings on teachers' and students' approaches to SHTL in the post-pandemic period (22-23) are presented (RQ2, 3.3.)

3.1. A first bite of SHTL (20-21)

Compared to pre-pandemic classes, all teachers who had experience of SHTL in 20-21 (N=6) were satisfied with the quality of their classes (3 were fairly satisfied, 2 were very satisfied and 1 was extremely satisfied). This is consistent with findings on ERT that shed light on how effectively university staff responded to the educational emergency caused by the pandemic and increased their digital literacy (Radić et al. 2020). In their open-ended comments, teachers stated that they felt more comfortable with technology and received positive feedback from their students. For one of the informants, who declared himself extremely satisfied with it, SHTL was preferable to distance learning, as in comment 1[2].

> (1) I think in 2020-2021 I'm more familiar with the IT tools needed to teach in this emergency situation and I also prefer the dual modality chosen by my university this year compared to full remote teaching. Although limited, the feedback received live on site from the students is very useful.
> Teacher, October 2020

Despite an overall positive opinion of the quality of the teaching, other comments indicate that video-mediated interactions still sounded unnatural and were seen as more problematic than face-to-face or online-only courses, as in comment 2.

> (2) I have managed to teach the dual classes without too many problems. However the classes are not as good as with all the students present or not even as good as with all the students online.
> Teacher, November 2020

[2] Open comments are reproduced verbatim and without editing

When asked about their difficulties in synchronous hybrid environments, the teachers mentioned two critical aspects. First, it was challenging to properly master and remember the various technological aspects involved in SHTL, which requires specific digital skills training (Moorhouse et al., 2021). As explained in comment 3, SHTL involved various tasks, such as remembering the recording of the lesson, sharing slides with students in the classroom and at home, checking the chat regularly during the lesson, which was demanding and stressful, as other studies have also highlighted (Bower et al. 2015; Priess- Buchheit 2020;).

> (3) Juggling lots of different things: two screens, an ebook, a Moodle page, some websites (for games, online dictionaries, YouTube etc), the students, a Word doc or whiteboard; trying to maintain a good momentum and energy (so making sure there are not too many pauses, but not going too fast and switching too much between screen sharing etc)
> Teacher, February 2020

On the other hand, teachers were concerned about the quality of communication and interaction, a crucial aspect in all kinds of digital environments (Moorhouse et al. 2021). As pointed out in comment 4, not all participants were equally active, which was complicated by the fact that they had to address two different target groups at the same time.

> (4) Once you overcome the stress of learning how to make digital tools work properly, the main issue is interaction and keeping the level of attention high of the different participants (in-site and off-campus students).
> Teacher, May 2021

In terms of student opinion, there is a discrepancy between those who have participated in synchronous hybrid classes in person (44%) and those who have either always or only sometimes participated online (56%). In line with the teachers' opinion, the former felt that when they participated in person, they had a better and easier interaction with their teachers and classmates and could avoid distractions, as highlighted in comment 5.

> (5) I prefer to be physically present at university both to meet with my friends and mates and to be more concentrate during lessons and study time.
> Student, April 2021

Students chose to attend from home for personal reasons such as poor health, better time management due to family or work commitments, and the fact that they could avoid the costs of commuting and accommodation, as highlighted in comment 6.

> (6) Since there is this opportunity, I think that it is easier than going to the University. I live far away for it. This way I don't waste money and time on transports.
> Student, March 2021

Although it was not a common practise, some students participated alternately from home and in the classroom and appreciated the opportunity to decide for themselves how to participate, as in comment 7.

> (7) When I have the opportunity, I try to attend In-pearson English classes, but unfortunately, it is not always possible: therefore, sometimes I take advantage of online classes. I personally find it very positive that you get the chance to attend university classes, even though you can not be there physically.
> Student, May 2021

In summary, the majority of teachers surveyed felt that hybrid SHTL brought more disadvantages than advantages, as it was demanding for teachers and offered less interaction for students, two concerns that had already been expressed in studies prior to the pandemic (Bower et al. 2015; McKenzie et al. 2013). In contrast, students show a wider range of opinions depending on how they participated in class. Those who preferred to participate in person emphasised the better interaction in face-to-face classes, while those who participated online always appreciated the possibility of choice and the improvement in their quality of life thanks to synchronous hybrid settings.

3.2. SHTL as a mainstream practice (21-22)

The data on SHTL in 21-22 is more extensive as it was introduced in 13 of the 14 universities involved in the study. The sample of teacher informants is homogeneous, as all respondents have taught synchronous hybrid classes. In contrast, the student informants represent a more heterogeneous sample. Indeed, they could be divided into three groups based on the way they attended classes: those who always attended classes online (37%), those who always attended classes in person (20%), those who sometimes attended classes in person and sometimes online (43%), which provides a comprehensive insight into students' views.

In academic year 21-22, teachers were also satisfied overall with their courses (97% were either fairly or very or extremely satisfied), which is consistent with the positive opinions of students. The most satisfied students were those who had chosen to attend classes online only (85%), although they had the option to attend in person if they felt the need. The improvements from better time management and financial savings may have offset the disadvantages of hybrid classes in terms of interaction, as highlighted in other research on SHTL before and during the pandemic (Priess-Buchheit 2020).

3.2.1. Challenges

Despite their overall positive opinion, both teachers and students reported the problems they face in hybrid classes, partly due to their lack of specific competence for interacting in the digital classroom, a concern raised at the beginning of the pandemic in studies on ERT (Moorhouse et al. 2021). First, teachers found it very difficult to deal with two groups at the same time and with different modes of communication. They were aware that they would favour the students in the classroom over those participating from home, which they felt was unfair but difficult to avoid, as comment 8 shows.

> (8) What I find quite difficult is trying to interact with both the students at home and those in the lecture hall. The latter tend to take precedence.
> Teacher, October 2021

Similar to the teachers, the students (regardless of how they participated in the lesson) also mentioned that it was difficult to interact effectively with both groups at the same time, confirming that interaction is a crucial point for synchronous hybrid teaching, as in comment 9.

> (9) I think it's harder for teachers because they have to follow two different groups of people and create the same opportunities to interact for students in class and students from home
> Student, April 2022

In addition, students from all groups reported that learners who participated from home tended to be less engaged, as lecturers and teachers usually approached participants personally. Consequently, participants attending from home would be more easily distracted and less actively engaged, as lamented by a student in comment 10.

> (10) The most challenging thing is to pay enough attention to both students in class and students at home. Sometimes professors forget about students at home or forget about reading the chat
> Student, May 2022

In turn, teachers found that students who participated from home were less interactive and more passive, merely watching the lessons without asking or answering questions (as in comment 11), which is consistent with the literature on SHTL (Priess-Buchheit 2020).

> (11) I've noticed that compared to the a.y. in which everybody was online, now students from home interact less and understand less too. They feel less pressure and have a more 'relaxed' attitude to the course.
> Teacher, March 2022

While they were aware that it was difficult to divide attention equally between the two groups, teachers complained about the relaxed and more passive attitude of students who attended classes from home and felt excluded from active participation, as shown in comment 12.

> (12) When I teach my hybrid classes I tend to concentrate on my in-presence students and sometimes forget about the students attending online, which is bad. In my experience most of the students attending online do not follow the lessons actively, do not want to participate. They just "watch" the lesson as a show.
> Teacher, April 2022

Teachers were concerned that this would have a negative impact on students' understanding as it was more difficult to seek feedback and identify the need for clarification and further explanation. Given the importance of interaction in enhancing student learning in online and offline environments (Atar, Seedhouse 2018; Moorhouse et al. 2021), this is a problem of synchronous hybrid education, as confirmed by a teacher in comment 13.

> (13) The main challenge is engaging the two groups (in class and online). The online group can't usually hear what the students in class are saying. If the group is large, it's difficult to focus on everyone when doing group/pair work (going around the class and dropping into the breakout rooms).
> Teacher, April 2022)

Another problem was that interaction in the hybrid classes was less spontaneous and more time-consuming, for which there were several reasons, as highlighted in comments 14 and 15. Teachers blamed technical problems for interruptions and delays that made it difficult to work through all the planned steps. Regarding the interaction between students and teachers, it could happen that the devices in the classroom had a bad connection or that students wrote in the chat from home that they had problems participating in class. Due to the poor connection, students' responses from home were delayed, documents could not be shared immediately or videos could not be played or heard. As not all classrooms had proper microphones, teachers and lecturers had to repeat students' answers given in the classroom so that students could hear them from home. These technical problems made interaction difficult for the students at home, who were distracted

and participated less actively. At the same time, it was also frustrating for the students in the classroom as it interrupted the flow of the lesson and was seen as a waste of time.

(14) It's challenging for teachers in case they want to interact with students present in class and online. Also, because of the technical issues (old and very slow computers, slow internet bandwidth, a heavy Webex platform that takes ages to load, changing webex settings each time we need to share multimedia files (videos/audios) we waste a lot of time, sharing the screen for those online makes it hard to quickly move from one file to another and results in covering most of the slides if we want to keep the chat box active.
Student, May 2022

(15) It's harder for online students not to get distracted and technical issues cause wasting of time
Student, April 2022

In addition, teachers complained that students from home claimed they had connection problems and would not turn on the camera, which made it even more difficult to interact with them and gather feedback on their perceptions (see comment 16).

(16) Most of the students claim that they have connectivity problems and don't even turn on the camera. The challenge is also to understand students' perception. If in class, in person, you can see and often read their facial and body language, online it's harder or impossible when they keep their cameras turned off.
Teacher, May 2021

In terms of student interaction with content, comment 17 shows that teachers mentioned the difficulty of creating materials that are suitable for different formats and learning styles. Consequently, they felt that not all participants benefited from attending classes, which was also a problem mentioned by the students, as comment 18 shows.

(17) Preparing and having all the material necessary ready in various formats (e.g. downloadable for students attending remotely, printed for students who attend in person); interacting effectively with students attending remotely.
Teacher, April 2022

(18) The lesson structure has to fit both modes (student) sometimes they do not suit all learning styles.
Student, May 2022

In addition, teachers knew that some activities such as role-playing were not equally effective for students in the classroom and at home. For example, theatrical activities to explain certain ideas or meanings could not be done with students at home, who could not engage as actively with the lesson content as students in the classroom, as stated in comment 19. As a result, students were regrettably distracted, causing concern among both teachers and students about the possible negative impact on understanding and learning.

(19) The small screen also cramps one's style considerably: I often theatrically act out certain situations, or to illustrate particular lexemes, or I get the students to do so. Not very feasible to get them to act online, and probably far less effective for them to see these little sketches on a screen than IRL (in real life).
Teacher, March 2022

In terms of student-student interaction, both teachers and students emphasised that it was difficult to get students at home to interact with each other and with students in the classroom (see comments 20 and 21). This made it difficult for teachers to create a sense of community and belonging for everyone, but especially for the students at home who almost completely lack the social aspects of studying and learning from their classmates.

(20) Engaging students and creating a sense of community between students in the classroom and students at home.
Teacher, March 2022

(21) Students stay at home missing the social aspects of going to university.
Student, May 2022

Students who participated from home stated (see comment 22) that they could not hear their classmates' questions and answers, which affected their learning as they felt that interacting with others was an important part of the learning process.

(22) Interaction with the teacher and with my classmates is for me part of the learning process.
Student, May 2022

In summary, the opinion of students who participate (always or only sometimes) in classes from home is positive. However, they find the interaction between students very challenging as they feel that an important part of their learning experience is missing, as in comment 23.

(23) The only thing I am missing is studying with classmates, i'm always solo and sometimes it's hard not to share the studying process with someone.
Student, April 2022

3.2.2. Opportunities

Teachers and students agreed that SHTL increased attendance, which is consistent with previous studies of streamed instruction (Bower et al. 2015). Compared to pre-pandemic times, all teachers noticed that more students attended classes because they had more options and could choose how to attend their classes, as in comment 24.

(24) Being able to involve large group of students who attend classes in different places.
Teacher, November 2021

As shown in comment (25), students confirmed this observation.

(25) It can help people who (for whatever reason) cannot attend classes in person (even sometimes) not to lose a lesson.
Student, May 2022)

However, there are discrepancies between the opinions of teachers and students. On the whole, according to the teachers, the advantages of this setting do not compensate for the disadvantages. Teachers acknowledge that this setting allows students to contribute to the interaction from home by answering questions, even in front of students in the classroom who are sometimes shy and afraid to speak, as underlined in comment (26).

(26) Everybody can be there, even those who cannot normally attend classes in person. Plus, for shy people it is an opportunity to ask questions without fear or with less fear.
Teacher, April 2022

Indeed, comment 27 shows that they found that being physically absent from the room seemed to encourage students to participate more. Yet it did not seem to have any significant advantages over online-only or face-to-face sessions. Teachers found SHTL very stressful, so they preferred pure online or face-to-face teaching, as stated in comment (27).

(27) One advantage I noticed is that students at home are less self-conscious and afraid of talking, so they often break the ice. Having Webex open, it is possible for the students in class to also connect to the meeting and share their screen with the other students both in class and at home. Other than that, no real advantages. Online teaching does have advantages, but in its hybrid form, I see more challenges than opportunities. I would prefer online (or face-to.face) for everyone. Hybrid teaching is stressful for the teacher and wastes a lot of time for students
Teacher, November 2021

By contrast, most students (70% of the respondents) evaluated SHTL positively primarily on the basis of practical considerations and improvements in their living and studying conditions in financial terms and in terms of quality of life. In their opinion, savings on accommodation costs and commuting were the most important benefits overall, as in comment (28).

(28) I like to follow the classes live because I can interact and I have to stay focused or I'll miss some parts, so I usually use the records only when I missed sth. Also I enjoy the fact that I can follow classes from home, it's the best for me, even if it means I won't know new people
Student, December 2021

According to the students, students from home tended to answer fewer questions than students in the classroom and students in the classroom had more chances to answer. This point was raised by students from the different groups into which the sample was divided based on the type of teaching. Indeed, sharing the same physical environment with teachers proves to be a key factor in facilitating and encouraging interactions. However, learners are aware and appreciate the fact that they can access more tools to interact from home, and sometimes the quality of communication is better for those who follow lessons via stream, as underlined in comment (29).

(29) Personally I don't feel stimulated when attending classes online, and it's also quite boring to be completely honest. Nonetheless, I have to admit that oftentimes it's difficult to hear questions asked by other students in the classroom because we do not have any microphone, whereas for students from home it is definitely easier to talk.
Student, November 2021.

Another aspect to consider is the experimentation encouraged by hybrid learning environments, confirming that ERT encourages teachers to try new strategies to engage students (Zimmermann 2020). As confirmed in comment (30), in the new digital environments, teachers had to try activities aimed at two different audiences at the same time, which can be seen as a springboard for more engaging and up-to-date teaching strategies.

(30) I tried to use the new tools available to adapt to an approach that always aimed to have students

actively involved and working on creating a portfolio during the course, rather than just passively participating in class."
Teacher, December 2021

In fact, 56% of teachers planned special activities and 70% used different strategies than usual to support students in hybrid environments. For example, they tried to have them interact more actively with the content by encouraging them to create a portfolio or participate in surveys or games.

Apart from behaving differently and selecting targeted activities, 46% of teachers helped students interact with the content from home by supporting them (in small groups or individually) during additional office hours or via email. In addition, teachers became more familiar with breakout rooms to encourage student interaction and appreciated the fact that it became easier to use them, as stated in comment (31).

(31) The Microsoft Teams software have been constantly updated and some new tools have quickly become available and very usefully so - for example attendance reports and break-out rooms, as well as gallery view to have all students shown if their camera is turned on.
Teacher, December 2021

The breakout rooms were much appreciated by students (see comment 32), especially those who participated from home, as they encouraged interaction between classmates.

(32) The teacher put us in breakout rooms so we can compare the exercises or we can talk with other people at home, and also in class they work in pairs or in groups.
Student, February 2022

Finally, both teachers and students (comments 33 and 34) emphasised that working on shared documents that students can edit is a great way to have students collaborate from home with students in the classroom, which could increase the number of digitally supported activities (Moorhouse et al. 2021).

(33) I found breakrooms+shared docs (with editing ON) a very effective way of organising group work in the virtual classroom. Have not used it yet in blended classes.
Teacher, November 2021

(34) The teacher put us in breakout rooms so we can compare the exercises or we can talk with other people at home, and also in class they work in pairs or in groups.
Student, December 2021

3.3. Teacher and student post-pandemic opinions on SHTL (22-23)

In the current academic year (22-23), all the teachers interviewed (N=9) taught their classes in face-to-face mode. The majority of them (N=7) believe that face-to-face teaching is the best option for both teachers and students. In contrast, only a minority of them (N=2) think that synchronous hybrid mode is preferable for both teaching and learning. Their opinion seems to be based on their practise and first-hand experience with the different forms of digital teaching during the pandemic. In fact, even the respondents who are against SHTL are not per se against a digital approach. Most of them (6 out of 7) continue to use tools (such as Moodle, Padlet, Wooclap, Webex) that they have already used extensively during the pandemic.

Detractors of SHTL justify their responses by saying that face-to-face teaching makes it easier for teachers to build a relationship with their students. This helps them gather feedback and tailor lessons to students' needs, which positively impacts learning (Walsh 2014), see comments (35).

> (35) I feel I'm in front of human beings and not little windows. I understand immediately if something is going wrong with someone. The rapport that can be established with students when you teach in-person is completely different: you actually get to know the students in more depth and you have immediate feedback of how effective your teaching is. You can then adapt your teaching style and the materials you use more easily and quickly based on their responses.
> Teacher, March 2023

As comment (36) shows, participants from home were perceived to be more passive, especially when the lesson was recorded, as they might prefer to watch the lesson again rather than ask questions. By contrast, participants were more active on-site, which enhanced learning.

> (36) While I was teaching hybrid I had the impression that some students were not following the lesson, let alone participate in it. It was even worse when they knew that the lesson was being recorded. The responsiveness of the group is unparalleled in an on-site setting. Learning goals can be achieved quicker.
> Teacher, April 2023

All the comments in favour of face-to-face teaching revolve around the same idea, as in comment (37): students on site are more responsive, interact more and better and therefore give more and immediate feedback, which ultimately makes teaching more effective and learner-centred, which is line with literature on second language acquisition (Atari, Seedhouse 2018; Walsh 2014). In addition, teachers can observe them working in groups and may have the opportunity to talk to them in informal contexts, e.g., waiting for the lesson to start or immediately after the lesson when everyone leaves the room. This helps to strengthen the relationship between teacher and learners and makes teaching more effective (Nakamura 2008).

> (37) Meeting students in person also means having a chance of talking to them outside a classroom, which offers an extra opportunity to communicate with them and understand whether what you are doing is right as well as gather information on what they really need in a more informal way. I also see it as a way to build mutual trust.
> Teacher, February 2023

A slightly different and more nuanced comment (see comment 38) comes from a teacher who prefers face-to-face teaching but acknowledges that online teaching also has some advantages in terms of efficiency, such as the ability to share the screen with students to better monitor them. Therefore, this teacher would like to be able to alternate between face-to-face and digital teaching depending on the activity. This sheds light on the need to rethink education to meet the needs of the new generations of students (Harari 2018).

> (38) I selected 'in-person' but, in fact, it's difficult to tell. Being face-to-face in a physical setting has the advantage of creating a more direct rapport with the students, but for some parts of my course, having the students all connected was more efficient, as I would ask them to do some activities online and share their screen. So, I'd like a flexible format that does not constrain lecturers to one or the other modality but allows them to choose the best one depending on the topic or class. I know it isn't easy to implement, and probably students wouldn't want that either. However, it may become a feasible op-

> tion by planning the timetable well in advance and letting students know when online sessions will take place. I dislike the hybrid format using live streaming and on-campus classes.
> Teacher, March 2023

Even when asked about SHTL, the teachers who are against hybrid teaching seem to reject digital teaching altogether and in any form, as in comment (39). In contrast, the teachers who are in favour of synchronous hybrid education gave reasons that relate specifically to this teaching setting. For example, they state that it is student-friendly and encourages participation in class. It makes universities more inclusive as students can participate from home. However, they recommend that students who participate in this format are provided with additional material on Moodle. They did not explain why. Therefore, it is safe to assume that they believe that SHTL is deficient in some respects, which requires further research.

> (39) This format is meant to be student-friendly as it offers students who cannot attend lessons in person the possibility to follow them from home. However, this mode is to be complemented by the possibility for students to access a repository of additional online materials, e.g. a Moodle linked to the course.
> Teacher, March 2023

In addition to the shortcomings, teachers also cite some advantages, such as the fact that working on platforms like Microsoft Teams allows teachers to better monitor some activities and provide personalised feedback, as in comment 40.

> (40) A few activities can be better monitored via Teams (e.g. home assignment and teacher's feedback).
> Teacher, March 2023

As far as students are concerned, SHTL has proved to be a welcome option. The data shows that even though in the current academic year (22-23), the majority of students surveyed (78%) only attended their courses in person, 91% believe that universities should offer synchronous hybrid courses on a regular basis. This issue seems to be perceived as important by students, as the open-ended question asking for their opinion on SHTL was not compulsory. Not only did 61% of the respondents express their opinion, some even wrote a long and detailed paragraph in favour of SHTL, as in comment (41).

> (41) Not every student can regularly attend classes, some students also have a job. They study and work, and because of that they are penalised, since usually the non attending students are given a considerable amount of extra reading to compensate for the fact that they are not able to attend. This is a paradox.
> The pandemic taught us we can do many things online thus saving a lot of time, that otherwise would have to be used for commuting, and eventually reducing our global carbon footprint. University classes switched to online mode, lessons were streamed and recorded and that was helpful for every single student, for the first time attending and non attending students were on par. Now that the pandemic seems to have died out Universities decided to go back to the old ways, most classes are in person only and non attending students are once again discriminated and left to their own devices. Furthermore attending students who live far away have to resume their long commute thus increasing their carbon footprint that is now the same as before the pandemic. Generally speaking we learned nothing from the Pandemic.
> After the pandemic Universities should have opted for a hybrid mode: the students who want and can attend in person should be allowed to do so but at the same time lessons should always be streamed

> and recorded so that those who cannot attend regularly (or those who skipped a few lessons because of unforeseen circumstances) don't have to miss out.
> Student, March 2023

This student mentioned that SHTL could help working students to attend their classes and thus avoid the extra work required to compensate for missed classes, which is an additional burden on them. In addition, universities should also offer recordings of face-to-face classes so that students can make up the hours they missed, as was the case during the pandemic. This could have the added benefit of reducing pollution from commuting, which would have a positive impact on the whole community. The student is upset that the technological advancement he experienced during the pandemic has been pushed aside and universities have simply reverted to the "old ways" which were discriminatory to both working students and commuters. These considerations seem relevant to the educational goals of the 2030 Agenda in terms of educational equity (United Nations 2018)

Although respondents recognise the value of face-to-face teaching, they emphasise that an inclusive university should offer synchronous hybrid courses to increase attendance and meet the diverse needs of students, as in comment (42).

> (42) I certainly prefer be in class than follow it from home, it helps my concentration and it's useful for the relationships with the fellow students and the teachers. But it's useful to have the possibility to follow class on streaming for situations where you are not capable of coming to the University (for example sickness or if for some reasons the "fuorisede" student needs to come back home). I think this is an incentive and a help for students and allows them to not skip class when they are not physically capable of being in it.
> Student, March 2023

Apart from the financial problems of some students, they mention difficulties related to health (disabled, mentally ill, temporarily disabled students), family responsibilities (taking care of children, disabled parents). Synchronous hybrid education could offer a "university experience" (albeit in a different and less drastic way) to students who would otherwise not receive an education, as in comment (43).

> (43) Hybrid courses can be a useful tool to build a more inclusive university. Many students HAVE to work to pay for their studies and other necessities, they may have situations at home that require their time, they could have problems (e.g. economic, physical or mental health related problems) that prevent them to physically attending classes every day, and i do not think it's fair to take away from them the opportunity to still have a "university experience". I don't think allowing these students to attend courses online takes away from university at all, if anything, it allows people who would not be able to do so otherwise, to feel included and have the same resources as other students (e.g. attending classes, listening to the professor's lecture, be granted the same opportunities to take exams early, have partials and so on). This would of course be a "temporary fix" in a system that is broken, but I think it's a good first step towards a more inclusive education.
> Student, February 2023

This would not diminish the quality of face-to-face teaching for students who can attend in person, but it would at the same time include those who cannot attend classes in the traditional way. It would also help students who normally attend classes in person to catch up on classes missed due to strikes or delays, organise their schedules and learn more efficiently. Only 10% of the students surveyed think that universities should not offer streaming courses. Open comments

(e.g., comment 44) emphasise that synchronous hybrid courses were useful during the pandemic but are not needed in normal times.

> (44) There is no longer a need to offer synchronous hybrid courses since the pandemic emergency is over.
> Student, February 2023

For others, SHTL is less effective because it does not involve human relationships that make teaching and learning more effective, as in comment 45, which confirms the opinion of some teachers (see teacher's comment 37).

> (45) nothing beats face-to-face learning. in my opinion, traditional classes are the most efficient and useful. Direct human relationships involve fundamental aspects that are lost with the use of media and tools that place a distance between the interlocutors.
> Student, March 2023

In addition, synchronous hybrid courses, although better suited to students who find themselves in a difficult situation (temporary illness, overlapping courses, scheduling difficulties), can be chaotic and not motivating enough, as in comment 46.

> (46) If students have the chance to follow online, it might not motivate them enough to go to class. However, it may be helpful in some cases, such as sovrapposizioni with other lectures, for very late/early schedules, severe illnesses etc. Streaming classes are often chaotic and time-consuming
> Student, April 2023

Finally, comment 47 sheds light on another crucial aspect of SHTL that might make the difference from the students' point of view: the lack of specific training for the teachers.

> (47)I do not think universities should offer streamed classes unless lecturers/instructors get proper training in delivering this type of classes
> Student, March 2023

4. Conclusion

The pandemic is now over: students are back in class and teachers can use as much technology as they want without being forced to stream their lessons. Some of them have simply returned to the classroom, while others are still using tools they became familiar with during the pandemic. SHTL in particular is an aspect of the pandemic experience that few really miss, even though it was introduced before the pandemic as part of educational experiments at the university level to provide quality education to geographically dispersed students. When the pandemic was over, it was replaced by face-to-face teaching. However, it seems appropriate to explore this option to capitalise on lessons learnt during the pandemic, as SHTL, while challenging, seems to have potential. Not only can new waves of the pandemic bring education back online, but it also seems to be in line with the goals of the 2030 Agenda, which seeks, among other things, a more sustainable world and greater equity in education.

Students are aware that SHTL is a challenge for teachers who are not always trained to make the most of it and avoid shortcomings in terms of student interaction and involvement. As the students interviewed pointed out, SHTL makes universities more inclusive as it allows students to

choose how they participate in their courses depending on their needs and opportunities. As a result, students are overwhelmingly in favour and believe it should be offered on a regular basis. These benefits were mentioned by learners in all data collections: regardless of how students attended courses, the majority of them believe that if universities want to be modern, inclusive and sustainable, they must offer their students the opportunity to choose how they attend courses. In their opinion, this would increase opportunities for working students or those who cannot afford the cost of accommodation or commuting to attend face-to-face courses. Although they would miss the on-campus experience, these students would still receive a quality education. For example, they have the opportunity to communicate from home through various channels, which could potentially enhance their active participation, although they indeed tend to interact less than students in the classroom. On the whole, students are in favour of SHTL as they feel that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. They also believe that universities should use the digital tools they experienced during the pandemic. Finally, they do not think that streaming courses would disadvantage students who are present in person, although they admit that it is demanding for teachers.

In contrast, the teachers and few students disagree. While they have noticed that attendance has increased, they are not in favour of the regular introduction of SHTL. In their opinion, the disadvantages outweigh the advantages for several reasons. First, SHTL is very tiring for them as they have to juggle different tools and interact with two types of audience at the same time. This could have a negative impact on learners, especially those who participate from home, as teachers tend to pay more attention to those who are present in person, as indicated by both teachers and students. Secondly, it might encourage students to participate from home even though they could be present in person, which might deprive them of the full university experience. Not only would they miss the interaction between students, but they would also lose the opportunity to build a human relationship with their teachers. Although the tools tested during the pandemic, such as breakout rooms, could be helpful in this regard, opponents of SHTL among students and lecturers believe that nothing compares to face-to-face interaction. Moreover, lecturers would have to be specially trained to cope with the complexity of SHTL and to provide adequate support to students participating from home, which is also advocated by students.

In summary, the research questions addressed in this study have a similar answer. The opinions on SHTL obtained during and after the pandemic do not differ. On the one hand, students and teachers in the three data collections mentioned the same challenges of SHTL. On the other hand, they see the opportunities differently. For teachers, the disadvantages in terms of workload, stress and effectiveness do not outweigh the opportunities in terms of student attendance. In contrast, students tend to favour SHTL because it could improve their quality of life, if not their learning. Given the widespread endorsement of SHTL, further research should be conducted to identify best practises and tools to facilitate teachers' work. It also ought to gather further data on the impact of SHTL on different subjects. Although this study focused on English university courses, it did not address the differences between lectures and language courses, which have different goals and require different levels of interaction. In addition, this study collected opinions and did not measure the impact on learning outcomes. These two aspects could be fruitful in further research. Since SHTL was already considered practical before the pandemic and is in line with some of the goals of the 2030 Agenda, it seems reasonable to find opportunities for improvement in future teaching scenarios. Indeed, teachers should include these skills in their professional baggage to be prepared for the diverse needs of learners.

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