

Hindi-Urdu through COVID-19: A Three-year Account at UBC

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Abstract

As the impact of COVID 19 is waning and life is coming back to normal, many universities, after weighing the advantages and disadvantages of online teaching, have started experimenting with various teaching methods. A 3-year long period of COVID-impacted teaching has changed the way instruction of foreign language in general and of Hindi-Urdu in particular is delivered. From the initial haste in transitioning the remaining part of the academic year 2019-20 to online teaching, then through full online teaching of 2020-21 and on and off-online teaching in 2021-22, to the returning to normalcy in 2022-23, the three-year period has kept the teachers on their toes to be ready for any sudden changes and adjusting to the changes to the teaching modes. In this paper, I aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the 3-year period how the Hindi-Urdu language program at the University of British Columbia (UBC) adapted its teaching method in response to the evolving challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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1 Introduction

The pandemic of COVID-19 has changed the world in a very profound way. No aspect of life remained untouched or unimpacted by the global pandemic. Academia in general and delivery of instruction in particular, had to drastically change and instructors had to overnight come up with the solutions and new methodologies to avoid risks associated with the in-person contact. At the University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver, the significant shift from traditional classroom instructions to an online scenario was initial achieved through the inbuilt Canvas program “Collaborate Ultra¹”. When the strict lockdowns started in late February to early March 2020, only a little less than month of contact classes left in the academic year 2019-20. The extremely sudden change in the delivery of instruction forced the instructors to quickly reorganize their syllabi, instructional material, assignments, assessments etc. The instructors, through workshops organized by the university and self-education swiftly equipped themselves to switch to online teaching, and successfully brought the session to finish line.

¹ The UBC uses the educational software “Canvas” and it had inbuilt program “Collaborate Ultra” for video conferencing and virtual classroom.

The next three academic years (2020-23) the world had seen different levels of COVID threats through rapidly mutating virus resulting into various variants of coronavirus. Some of the variants were deadlier than others and some were more contagious. To mitigate the risk the universities, including UBC used different approaches; completely closing universities for in-person classes, classes with students and teachers wearing masks, allowing only small classes with social distancing i.e. everybody sitting at least two meters apart. The delivery of instruction also took different forms. The contact hours were conducted via Zoom, many class activities were transformed to asynchronous exercises, for the convenience of students who were in different time zones, many instructors prerecorded their lectures, the synchronous lectures were also recorded so that they could be available to the students for later viewing and consultation.

The second/foreign language classes had very unique challenges during three COVID years. The second/foreign language teaching which heavily relies on contact hours had to be moulded to give the students productive learning experience. There were additional complications for the languages that are written in a script other than Roman as the instructor did not readily have access to the students' notebooks. Specially in the beginning when students are learning how to write in a new script, instructor's intervention is very important so that the shape of graphemes are learnt properly. In later stages when activities are done with real life objects, "realias" that are passed around in the class, such activities had to be reimagined to fit into the virtual teaching environment.

In this paper, while discussing the advantages and disadvantages of online, in-person and hybrid teaching, I will take the readers into my journey of teaching Hindi/ Hindi-Urdu as a second language (HSL) at the university of British Columbia through these 3 years of COVID. I would take year by year discussing the unique problems of the time and what approaches I took to meet the challenges and success and failures of these approaches.

2 Literature Review

Since early days of pandemic through the later stages when the vaccines were largely available, educators had constantly been working on making strategies to continue the education through online means and the educationalists have been publishing about these strategies to help the educators in completing their tasks.

Shrier (2021) has given a complete account of the early shock of complete shut down due to COVID -19 and its impact on education system that led to use of innovative method to deliver instructions. At the same time, he also sheds light on the failure of online education in creating collaboration spaces, teamwork which were heavily emphasized prior to pandemic. Critchley (2021) gives a detailed description of transition of language teaching to online at Durham University in the early stages of complete shutdown. On the similar lines this paper is a description of a broader 3-year account of transition to online, fully online and then gradual transition back to in-person classes.

Bartalesi-Graf and Zamboni (2020) documented the teaching methodologies used by the teachers in North American universities and high schools during the early shock of the complete shut down in the second quarter of 2020. Through their discussion with 14 faculty members and 114 completed survey responses, they analyzed the advantages and shortcomings of various online tools used by these teachers. Kelly & Columbus (2020) felt initial optimism of the pandemic lasting only for a few months as most colleges in North America announced plans for in-person or a mix of in-person and online instruction in the fall of 2020. The financial impact of the shutdown, i.e. online education in this case, was also one of the factors of such wishful optimism as colleges were to lose revenue from sources other than tuition fees such as housing, parking, dining and other economic activities that take place during a regular school year. Such economic reasons in the context of UBC is also briefly discussed in the paper later. In their paper (Kelly & Columbus, 2020), the initial optimism was also followed by the gloomy prediction of closure of many colleges and campuses if they do not reopen for face-to-face instructions. Both the initial optimism and gloomy prediction turned out to be untrue. The pandemic as we know lasted for more than a few months. The majority of the

higher education institutions did not close down permanently although there is well documented dissatisfaction of students and instructors, and a fall of quality of education both in short as well as long run (Dorn et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Ramírez-Hurtado et al., 2021).

Fawns et al. (2020) created a list of practical advices very early in the pandemic (April 2020) how to move to online education making it clear that it is not curriculum that is moved online rather it is teaching. Although their practical tips are based on teaching health professionals in clinical and academic settings, however, as they claim the issues raised are applicable to online education in general.

Moorhouse and Kohnke (2021) did an excellent job of analyzing some 55 papers published since the beginning of the online education due to pandemic until May 2021. They studied the responses of the English language teaching community to transition the online delivery of instruction. The papers they studied ranged from primary to tertiary education from 20 different countries. As one can predict that such analysis of vast resource pool will give very different results. Some of these studies have shown the inferiority of online education in comparison to in-person, others do not find online equally effective as in-person and in some cases even more effective than in-person instruction.

The teaching of a non-Roman script is one of the specific challenges in a HSL classroom. The “Second Language Writing System” as defined by Cook and Bassetti (2005) is an aptly descriptive term in the context of teaching of Hindi writing system in UBC. Although the edited volume very broadly used the term and includes even the other Roman scripts into it, however, the teaching of any non-Roman script including Devanagari for Hindi certainly falls into the category of teaching of Second language writing system. Everson (2011) although does not take Hindi in his detailed analysis, but does mention an additional layer of difficulty for an American student who learns a foreign language that is written in a non-Roman script. Such challenge is not limited to American students, in fact, any learner that comes from a Romance language background finds it difficult to acquire a non-Roman script because of a completely different orthography (Tozcu, 2008). Gupta (2008) describes a few methods to teach Devanagari, the script for Hindi; the traditional phonetics-based method, which is mainly used in India to teach native speakers as well as foreigners who wish to learn Hindi as a foreign language. She also identifies another two methods; teaching through shape similarity and teaching clusters based on frequency. Some institutions experimented with these two methods but there is not much research done assessing their success. The traditional method by far is the most acceptable and used more or less by all the universities.

There have not been many studies done on the impact of COVID-19 on teaching non-Roman scripts. In one of the rare studies conducted by Ahn and Chi (2023), they documented the experiences of Asian language instructors including Hindi. Regardless of the language, be it a phonetics-based such as Hindi or Persian or be it a character-based such as Mandarin Chinese or Kanji Japanese, all instructors reported similar hurdles in delivering instructions on teaching their respective scripts and pronunciation.

3 Academic Year 2019-20: Early glimpse of COVID-19

The academic year 2019-20 started as nothing extra ordinary than other years. The first term from September to December 2019 passed through as usual, although towards the end there were some early mentions of the possible epidemic of a strange flu in China specially in the city of Wuhan (Staples, 2020). The Canadian authorities were cautiously monitoring the situation. Until December 2019, the epidemic seemed very far away and beyond monitoring no specific measures were taken at the level of government of Canada or the provincial government of British Columbia. The university authorities also followed the provincial government’s lead and did not make any specific recommendations. Although the first case of COVID-19 was (CTV news, Vancouver, 2020) was already detected in January, the provincial government of BC only in mid-March suspended the in-person instruction in schools and universities. Based on the lead by the provincial health officer, the

president of UBC, Santa J. Ono announced on March 13, 2020, the transition to online classes effective Monday March 16, 2020 (Email to the University Staff). There were only three weeks of classes left when the announcement came.

The sudden change in the delivery of instructions caught everybody off guard, but seriousness of the situation was apparent. The Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT)² started quickly organizing online seminars how to deal with the changed scenario. The UBC educational software “Canvas” already had an inbuilt video conferencing program “Collaborate Ultra”. The instructors were advised to use it for their online classes and quick training sessions were also provided. The Collaborate Ultra is similar to Zoom but much less functions. The video conferencing program “Zoom” had not become popular yet, and the UBC had not bought the license for Zoom yet.

Fortunately, only a small part of the term remained when the strict lockdown was implemented. For the Introductory Hindi-Urdu (HINU 102) and Intermediate Hindi-Urdu (HINU 200), I had my contact hours conducted via Collaborate Ultra. The students were asked to complete their remaining homework and other written assignments in their notebooks and email the pictures or scanned copy of the assignments (Fig. 1.). The final exam was converted to take-home exam. With all such minor and major adjustments, the academic year was brought to end successfully.

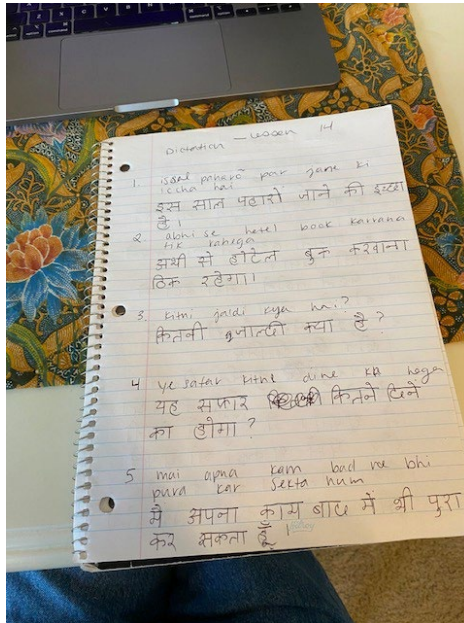


Fig. 1. Student's submitted written work

4 Academic year 2020-21: Strict lockdowns and online teaching

The academic year that started in September 2020 was the first year of full-blown COVID crisis and strict lockdowns. The initial drive of “Flattening the curve” asked the populous to keep themselves inside for two weeks. It soon became apparent that the COVID threat is far too serious to be dealt in two weeks. The ministry of health had already declared COVID-19 as public health crisis

² The Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology at UBC through their training programs, seminars and workshops provides instructors support for their teaching. <https://ctl.t.ubc.ca/>

and to mitigate it, the strict lockdowns were ordered, masks and social distancing were forced, if one had to go outside.

Following the lead of the office of the provincial health officer, the UBC also declared all its premises closed and all instruction to be held online. Since the first lockdown in mid-March till the beginning of the academic year 2020-21 in September, enough time had passed to understand and design online curriculum for the year. The UBC had already equipped itself with the most popular videoconferencing software “Zoom”. Zoom had been added as an inbuilt tool to the educational software Canvas. Although Collaborate Ultra existed side by side, but because of the sophisticated features more suitable to on-line teaching environment, Zoom was preferred by majority of the instructors.

Through the summer of 2020 the CTLT organized many online workshops and seminars to train and prepare the instructors for online teaching. The concept of “Synchronous and Asynchronous e-learning”³ that has existed for more than a decade (Hrastinski, 2008) was revived and revisited during the pandemic and promoted largely to compensate insufficient contact hours. The instructors were advised to increase the quantity of asynchronous activities and be lenient with synchronous sessions.

In this new teaching and learning scenario, the second/foreign language courses were uniquely affected. The contact hours for the introductory Hindi-Urdu (HINU 102) and the Intermediate Hindi-Urdu (HINU200) at UBC remained the same, but the curriculum had to be modified and delivery of instruction, assignments, quizzes, dictations etc. were adapted for the online environment. Although online delivery of classes had many limitations and disadvantages, it did have some unique advantages too.

One of the biggest advantages of the online course was the lack of geographical restriction. A student could attend the class sitting anywhere in the globe. The HINU 102 of the academic year 2020-21 had students attending classes from three different countries, two continents and several different cities. Apart from majority of the students attending the classes from Vancouver, there was a student taking class from Tehran, Iran, a couple from different cities from the USA and I also had student from Okanagan campus⁴ attending the class. Similar was the situation with HINU 200. Along with students in Vancouver a student each in Singapore and India also took HINU 200. There were several adjustments made for the students that were located in very different time zones and were to attend the synchronous sessions during very odd time in their respective countries, for example Iran (+ 10 hours), Singapore (+ 15 hours) and India (+ 12 hours). These students were offered more asynchronous learning environment. The video recordings of the synchronous sessions were also uploaded for the students who could not attend the classes so that they can stay updated with what had happened in the class. For assessments such as quizzes, dictations, presentations etc. these students had to attend the synchronous sessions in their odd hours. The students attending the classes from different cities in the US and Canada did not have a significant time lag and were expected to attend and work as if they are in Vancouver.

In a regular year, I ask students to make two notebooks; one for quizzes and dictations and the other for homework. Since Hindi is written in a distinct script, significant writing practice is a very important component of HSL. In the fully online environment, the delivery of physical books was

³ A synchronous e-learning session is when the instructor and the students meet via videoconferencing directly speaking to each other or exchanging messages through chat box. The physical presence of both at the same time is the main component of a synchronous sessions. An asynchronous e-learning session is when learning is taking place via take-home assignments, video recording of the oral assignments, discussion board posts etc. The main component of an asynchronous learning is that the instructor and the students do not share the same physical/virtual space at the same time.

⁴ The UBC has two main campuses, Vancouver and Okanagan. The Okanagan campus is around 500 km away from Vancouver. The students are usually not allowed to take courses from the other campus. However, because of the unusual circumstances the university authorities allowed the student from Okanagan campus to take HINU 102 which is offered only in Vancouver campus.

impossible, but the students were still encouraged to make the notebooks so that all their quizzes, dictations, and other assignments can be kept in one place. The UBC educational software Canvas has some useful features that eased to pass the written assignments to another person and back. An assignment is created on Canvas and its submission could be made as a picture or a .pdf file. Once a student completes the assignment, s/he uploads it as a picture or .pdf file on the canvas assignment and the instructor can check the assignment and make comments on the assignment using stylus pen and a touch screen computer (Fig. 2). Quizzes, dictations and other written assessments were also completed in the same fashion.

Below are the screenshot of a submitted assignment and its checked version.⁵

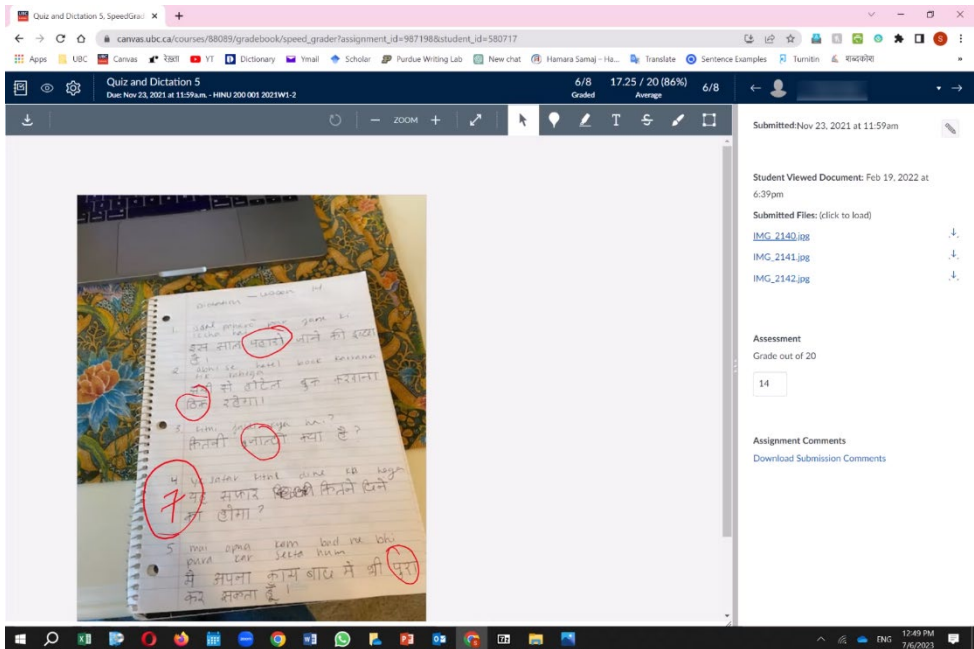


Fig. 2. Student's written work checked by instructor

The oral assignments were also submitted through audio files and comments from instructors were given both in the text forms or audio file forms.

As I mentioned above that the Zoom became the main software for synchronous online sessions. The "breakout rooms" feature of Zoom proved to be very successful way of making pair/group work exercises. Although the instructor could not be present on every breakout room, but relying on the students' enthusiasm to learn the second language, one can say that a pair or a small group separated from rest of the class seem more workable than in-person class where the groups or pair can overhear the conversation made by other group or pair and can get distracted. I as the instructor hopped on from a breakout room to another to control and take part in the exercise.

The online synchronous sessions had some severe limitations too. The UBC followed the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA)⁶ which allowed the students to opt out

⁵ Fig. 1 is how student submitted the assignment and the Fig. 2 is how the assignment is checked and graded on the educational software Canvas. In my teaching practice, I do not correct the errors in students' assignments, I simply indicate them (Fig. 2) and the students correct them by themselves.

⁶ https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/96165_00

of using the camera to maintain their privacy. For language instructions it is rather challenging to practice with a student who has his/her camera off. A significant part of the language learning is also through facial expression, which obviously lacked when the cameras were off. The second biggest challenge for me was not to be able to look into the students' notebooks. Learning and writing in a new script needs to be constantly controlled at least in the beginning. In an in-person classroom, I walk around and look into the notebooks of the students and make sure that they are writing the graphemes correctly i.e. the shape of the graphemes is correct. And in later stages the instructor needs to constantly check if the spellings of words are written correctly. Looking into the notebooks is essential for controlling the errors before they get fossilized. This type of control is very limited in the online class through video-conferencing. On top of it if the student has the camera off, it is impossible to control the learning of the script at that time. I tried to replicate the in-person experience by asking the students every now and then to show their notebook pointing to the camera. The errors had to be verbally explained as I could not write on their notebooks to correct the error. The other way to deal with this issue was to ask the students to upload or email the picture of their class notes so that I can go through them and asynchronously point out and correct the errors.

Another significant limitation I found in teaching Hindi online is the use of Realia. The use of realia and its positive impact on a second language teaching is widely researched. Realia is also equated to authentic material in second language teaching (Berwald, 1987). The effective use of realia to enhance vocabulary (Sukrina, 2010; Patmi and Sabaruddin, 2021) and to teach culture of the target language (Bala, 2015; Berwald, 1987) is well documented. A substantial part of the classroom activities for communicative language teaching approach involves Realia, real life objects and activities with them, such as bringing a bag and passing it to the students to put a thing into it and doing communicative activities with them. A physical presence of the instructor and the students is absolutely necessary for working with realia. The limitation forced me to organize more communicative activities that do not need realia or use "Virtual Realia". The oxymoronic term of "virtual realia" is coined by Smith (1997) long before the pandemic of COVID-19, and since then it has also been around and widely used in scholarly literature. The idea of the virtual realia became relevant as the entire teaching had been forced to go online. Wherever possible, instead of bringing a concrete object, for my online teaching I brought a digital image of the object and asked the student to pretend that they have the concrete object.

The full year of online teaching had both positive and negative aspects. As previously mentioned, online teaching overcomes the geographical boundaries, however, this unique advantage presents a challenge of the significant time zone differences. Some students are required to attend synchronous sessions in odd times of a day. Not having readily access to the students' notebooks to make instant interventions is another limitation of fully online instruction. And finally, the real objects that are usually used in the class to conduct communicative language teaching activities are also not feasible in online classes.

5 The academic year 2021-22: in-person teaching with limitations

Through 2020, the COVID-19 vaccine development and trials were underway and by December 2020 the first COVID vaccine had been approved under Emergency Use Authorization (EUA). Canada had also secured vaccines and started its vaccination drive in December 2020. By September 2021, the beginning of the next academic year, a very significant part of the population had already been vaccinated. A survey was conducted to find out the vaccination status of UBC community members. As of August 16, 2021, 92% of the responding students (16,093 participated) are partially

or fully vaccinated and 83% are fully vaccinated, with the majority of the remainder intending to be vaccinated before the start of classes (Internal UBC email)⁷.

All the positive news on the vaccination front encouraged the university authorities to open its premises for in-person work, including in-person classes. At the same time, the authorities were very cautious and did not want to take a risk of the community spread. The academic year 2021-22 started with in-person instructions with mandated non-medical masks in public indoor settings that includes classrooms. UBC also implemented a process for confidential self-disclosure of vaccination status for all those who access the campuses, including students, faculty, staff and visitors (Internal UBC email). With all these mitigating measures in place, the UBC started in-person instructions after one and half year of complete closure.

The Hindi-Urdu language courses (Introductory Hindi-Urdu (HINU 102) and Intermediate Hindi-Urdu (HINU 200)) had some specific challenges. I want to first discuss the intermediate Hindi-Urdu (HINU 200). The HINU 200 is the continuation of HINU 102. Majority of the students in HINU 200 are those who complete HINU 102. As I mentioned that a significant number of the HINU 102 in the previous year were not in Vancouver and many of them were not even the UBC students, they could not have continued if the course was offered only in-person. Since this year was transition back to in-person, the university and departments were open for other suggestions if in-person course was not possible. Convinced by this strong rationale, the department allowed me to teach HINU 200 online. Some UBC and two non-UBC students from one from a US university another from Toronto took the HINU 200 taking full advantage of online mode of classes.

The introductory Hindi-Urdu (HINU 102) went ahead with in-person classes. Since the mask mandates were in place, all the students and the instructors wore mask all the time. A second language course with masks on the faces was an extremely challenging situation. In the beginning of the course when the alphabets and sounds are learnt, it was extremely difficult to teach the students with masks on my and their faces. The biggest problem was that the sound coming through the mask gets distorted. It was not very easy to make a simple communication and on top of that the teaching a sound system of a foreign language was even more challenging. One way of teaching the correct pronunciation of Hindi letter is to show the position of the vocal apparatus how to produce the sound. Since I was also mandated to wear a mask, this was not feasible either. Similar limitations have also been documented in the study by Ahn and Chi (2023). In the study, all 10 language teachers (Hindi, Hmong, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin Chinese, Persian, Thai, Tibetan, and Vietnamese) from a university located in the Midwestern United States mentioned severe limitations in teaching pronunciation as they were not able to show the position of mouth in making some specific sounds.

“It is evident that wearing masks hindered the effective teaching and learning of pronunciation. The teachers noted that showing and modeling how the mouth works as well as checking and correcting students’ mouth positions are crucial when teaching pronunciation. However, due to the mask-wearing policy, students were deprived of opportunities to practice pronunciation and receive feedback from their instructors.” (Ahn and Chi 2023, 10)

Fortunately, there are many online resources, including the videos on YouTube to show the place of articulation of a particular sound. With the help of some good videos on YouTube we managed to overcome this problem. I, in the second year of my TLEF project⁸ “Learn Hindi Script with Sunil

⁷ Rapid testing was offered for UBC community members who have not yet been vaccinated against COVID-19, or who choose not to disclose their vaccination status (Internal UBC email).

⁸ Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF) at UBC is a grant given to the instructor to produce innovative teaching practices. In my multiple-year TLEF project “Online resources for teaching Hindi grammar”, I had created videos to teach Hindi Grammar along with the teaching Hindi script, Devanāgarī.

Bhatt², created videos to teach Devanāgarī. The first 10 videos in the playlist teach the Hindi alphabets and their sound with diagrams showing place of articulation. These videos have become integral part of the Hindi-Urdu courses at UBC.

Teaching with masks on presents an evident challenge as it hampers the non-verbal communication in the classroom. In a second/foreign language classroom, a significant part of learning happens with body language (Gregersen, 2007). Facial expressions specifically along with the uttered language contribute considerably to communication (Knapp & Hall, 2006). With the facemasks on, the non-verbal cues to conduct a meaningful communication were completely lost. In a second/language class, where the students are limited in their vocabulary and the knowledge of grammar, contexts, facial expressions and body language play a very important part in language acquisition. The lack of such non-verbal cues directly effect the all three modes of communication; interpersonal, interpretive and presentational. Mheidly et al. (2020) have discussed the impact of masking on interpersonal communication and also proposed remedies to mitigate these negative effects.

Addressing the challenges posed by masking in alleviating the lack of communication proved to be a complex issue with limited viable solutions. Apart from the video lectures (as mentioned above), some other common-sense strategies were employed. Students were encouraged to speak louder and slower, and repeat themselves if other students faced difficulty comprehending their words. I personally adhered social-distancing protocols and lowered my mask while speaking to the students when I was physically far enough. If I required to approach a student, I would raise my mask up to follow the safety protocols. Certain activities that allowed to maintain social-distancing were carried out without masks, so that non-verbal cues were not lost during communication. Students individual presentations were also conducted without masks as the presenting student could effectively maintain recommended social-distancing from both myself and the other students.

With the surge of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 coronavirus in December 2021, the university decided to again close its premises for majority of in-person classes. The online classes were again put in place until January 24, 2022 that was later extended to February 4, 2022. The remaining part of the academic year 2021-22 was in-person with masks and vaccine mandates until June 30, 2022.

6 The academic year 2022-23: the COVID crisis in the rearview mirror

The beginning of the AY 2020-23 in September felt like the pre-COVID scenario. All the COVID restrictions on campus were lifted. The vaccine mandate had been lifted, the masks were also made voluntary. The international travel was fully allowed without any COVID related restrictions. The air travel and travel in other public transport was also brought back to the pre-COVID lifestyle. The campus was fully open. The restaurants, food courts, libraries, front offices of the department and other administrative units were fully functional without any restrictions. The COVID-19 was in the rearview mirror. Although instructions were given to both instructors and students that if they have any flu symptoms, they were strongly advised to stay home, however the atmosphere in the university was more or less came back to the pre-pandemic scenario.

Although the life had come to fully normal, a significant number of students and also the faculty members had grown very comfortable with the online teaching. One full year of online teaching and the other with on- and off- online teaching with significant restrictions on in-person teaching had made the campus community feel easy sitting behind the computer at their home setting attending and delivering the lectures. A significant number of students and faculty members showed interest in continuing the online education. The previous year (AY 2021-22) had given the glimpse of mixed online and in-person education. The university administration realized that there is an economic downside of allowing a substantial number of courses go on-line. The university premises were not fully used, there was a lack of students' activities on campus, the restrictions were keeping away the people from engaging in social activities in the university premises.

To boost the lively atmosphere, the university administration encouraged more and more in-person instruction and also social events on campus. The university showed reluctance in allowing fully on-line delivery of instruction. To find a balance between students' and faculty members' choice for online instructions and the need to bring back the dynamic campus life, the UBC offered four modes of instructions for the AY 2022-23. Below is the text from university website⁹:

"In the Course Schedule, each course activity will show a "Mode of Delivery", which describes how each individual component (e.g., lecture, lab, tutorial, discussion) within a course is going to be delivered.

UBC offers the following course modes of delivery for the 2022/23 Winter Session:

- **In-Person:** The course activity takes place in-person.
- **Online:** The course activity is fully online and does not require any in-person attendance to complete.
- **Hybrid:** The course activity has a mixture of mandatory in-person and online activities as designed by the instructor.
- **Multi-Access:** The course activity gives students the choice to attend either in person or online, as designed by the instructor.

In some courses, one activity may be delivered online while another activity is in-person, so simply selecting "online", "hybrid", or "multi-access" as the Mode of Delivery for a course does not guarantee that all the course elements are fully online. For example, a course may have an online lecture, with the lab component conducted on campus."

Fig. 3. Four modes of instructions for the AY 2022-23

The in-person courses were highly encouraged and the instructor needed to take an approval from the department to make the course fully online. The university severely limited the number of courses allowed to be online.

The Introductory Hindi-Urdu (HINU 102) was offered as in-person course, however the offering of the Intermediate Hindi (HINU200) needed some unusual considerations. Some students from the Introductory Hindi of the fully online year of 2020-21 showed interest to continue their Hindi-Urdu language studies in 2022-23 after taking a gap in 2021-22. For some personal reasons or other they were not able to take HINU 200, right after finishing HINU 102. The main issue with these students were that they were not located in Vancouver and they could take the course only if it is online. On the other hand, the students who took Introductory Hindi-Urdu last year (2021-22) wanted to continue with in-person with very little interest in fully online course.

In such scenario where some students want to attend the classes online and others prefer in-person the best mode of delivery was "Multi-Access: The course activity gives students the choice to attend either in person or online, as designed by the instructor". The multi access delivery of course meant that most students will be physically present in the classroom and remaining will join the course online via zoom. There won't be separate classes held for in-person and online students. This challenging method of conducting the class was the only way to organize the class with such different students' preferences.

The Faculty of Arts at UBC has a separate unit that dedicates to finding the technological solutions for various challenges pertaining to teaching and delivery of instruction. The unit Arts ISIT

⁹ <https://students.ubc.ca/enrolment/courses/course-modes-delivery>

(Arts Instructional support and information Technology)¹⁰ helped me to find the solution to this unique problem. They offered a few solutions to the Multi-Access delivery issue.

6.1 Collaboration Learning Space¹¹

The collaboration learning space (Fig. 4) can be used as sophisticated language lab with the possibility of group discussion. Here all the students will have to bring their personal laptops and have them connected to the system using Zoom. The students accessing the class remotely will also join via zoom and will be projected on the screens. With the arrangements of breakout-rooms function in Zoom the instructor can make an online and in-person student communicate and do the language practice. Although there are students who are present in-person in the class, they would still feel being on-line because they will have to have their computers on and the headset put on. Alternatively, the only the online students could communicate with each other and they will not be able to interact with in-person students. The experience of the instructor would be as if he is teaching two separate groups that cannot take part in each other's activities. The instructor would be distracted shuffling between two groups.



Fig. 4. Collaboration learning space

The use of collaboration learning space (Buchanan-B125) did not meet my needs to organize the multiaccess class and I dropped the idea of using it.

6.2 Mobile Zoom Cart

Another option offered by the Arts ISIT was Mobile Zoom Cart (Fig. 5) to organize a multi-access classroom. The instructor creates a zoom meeting to which the zoom cart is connected via a tablet. The zoom cart stands at the corner of the classroom and the field of view of its camera captures the classroom with all students. The camera has a very wide-angle lens (180°), a big part of the classroom is covered. The instructor and the classroom are already two participants in the zoom meeting and the students joining remotely will be additional participants. If there are two students

¹⁰ <https://isit.arts.ubc.ca/>

¹¹ <https://isit.arts.ubc.ca/buchanan-b125-teaching-lab/>

attending the class remotely, that means there are four participants in the zoom meeting. The students in the classroom do not need to be on zoom individually, and the remote students will join in via Zoom. It has a microphone that captures the sound in the classroom and rejects peripheral noise. With the different view options the remote students can make the zoom cart (as a participant) the main view on their individual screens and that can give them a better feeling of what is going on in the classroom.

Since one camera covers the entire classroom with its 180° camera, for the remote students, the in-person students look very far away. In that scenario, if an in-person student is talking, it is hard for an online student to recognize the participating/speaking student. Although the microphone is very high-tech, the sound quality is always not the best to capture the speech of in-person students. The interaction between an in-person and an online student is possible, but it is not so easy for the online student to clearly hear the in-person student's speech. Yeselson (2023), in her student paper, gives a comprehensive account of a student's perspective on using a mobile Zoom cart.

Although it is possible to create a multiaccess classroom with the mobile Zoom cart, there was a better option available (the Meeting OWL) to execute it. For that reason, I decided to not take up the option of the multi-access class with the mobile zoom cart. In the next part of the paper, I will be describing the Meeting OWL and how I used it to create a multi-access classroom.



Fig. 5. Zoom mobile cart

6.3 The Meeting OWL

The final solution offered by the Arts ISIT is the Meeting OWL (Fig. 6). For the purpose of having a small language class with students attending the class in-person and also remotely, I find the Meeting OWL the best solution. I will explain here in details how the Meeting OWL works and how I used it and what were the advantages and disadvantages of using the Meeting OWL. As mentioned above that I offered the intermediate level Hindi-Urdu course (HINU 200) in the multi-access

format, here I will be reporting on that course. A few studies have also reported the use of the Meeting OWL in a teaching environment. Jacobs et al. (2022) and Drahnak & Katrancha (2022) have used the Meeting OWL as a means of delivering instructions to students of Management and Nursing, respectively.



Fig. 6. The Meeting OWL

The Meeting OWL is equipped with a 360° camera and microphone and it has a fairly strong speaker. It also has effective sensors to detect the people and sound. One of the most important features of the Meeting OWL is cropping of the participating individuals and at the same time have the two-dimensional view of entire classroom as a strip on top. All these picture frames are on the same screen. The sensors detect the sounds made by a speaking individual and camera focuses on him. The last three speakers are cropped and placed under the 360° strip. If one of the three individual moves in the room the camera also moves along with the speaker. This function enables the instructor to freely move around the room come closer to a student in the class or go the white board or go to the projected screen in the room, the camera would follow the instructor as he is speaking. If a language practice activity is going on in between the instructor and a student or between two students, they both will appear in their cropped frames. Below the strip of the 360-degree frame on top, there can be three cropped frames of speaking/participating individuals. The camera automatically detects who is speaking and focuses him in the cropped frame below the strip (Fig. 7).

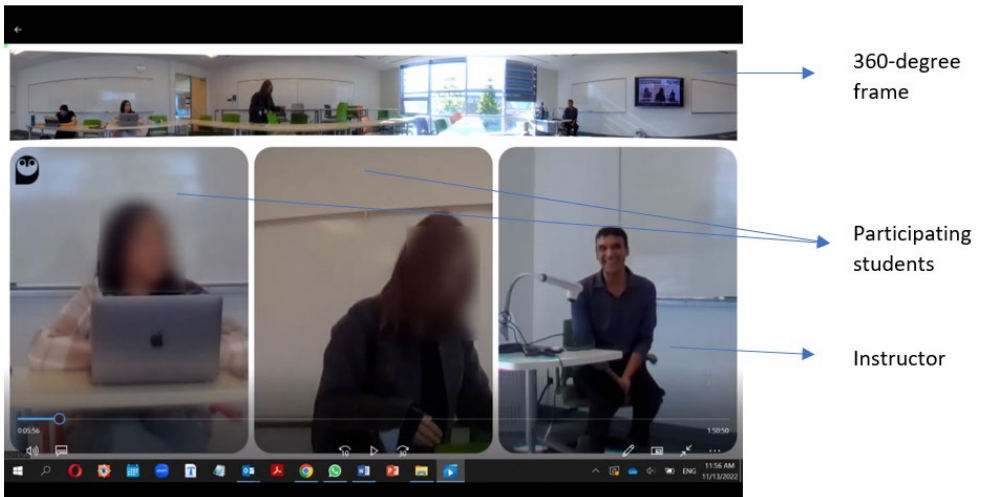


Fig. 7. In-person class on Zoom screen

The scenario I have mentioned above is when everybody is attending the class in-person. In case of the multi-access classroom where some students are taking class remotely via zoom, the scenario is not very different from joining the class as it is fully online. On the screen of the online students the entire class will appear as one participant in the zoom meeting (Fig. 8). And if there are more than one online participant, their screen will show the class as one participant and the other online participants as individuals. The frame in which the classroom as one participant appears, will have a few smaller frames where the online students will see the participating individuals and at the same time the entire classroom on the strip on top. When the instructor wants to show the PowerPoint slide in the class, the remote students will see it as they see it in usual zoom session. The slide will cover their entire screen and they themselves and other participants will appear on pic-on-pic on the side of the screen (Fig. 9). The in-person students will see the instructor’s screen as projected in the classroom screen.

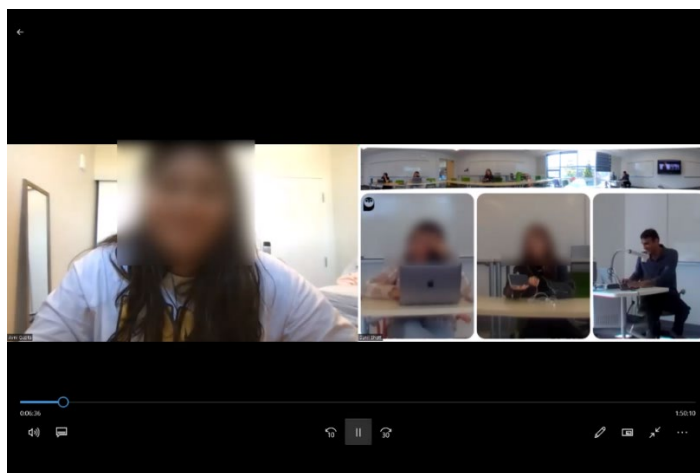


Fig. 8. One online student and in-person class on zoom



Fig. 9. One online student and in-person class on zoom with PowerPoint slides

This type of arrangement of having a multi-access delivery of instruction is the most effective for all students; in-person as well as on-line students. The in-person students get the regular experience of physically being present and interact with others in the classroom and the on-line students get to be virtually in the in-person classroom at the same time being virtually present with other online students.

Although the multi access classroom widens the possibility of inclusion of both online and in-person students and brings in all the benefits of the course being offered online, however, it does pose some limitations. Here I would like to discuss some of these limitations and how they can be mitigated.

The online students get to see what is going on in the classroom through their computer screens, but some important features of the in-person delivery of instruction is not accessible for them. The instructor was not able to look into the notebooks of the online students and correct any spelling or grammatical errors right away. One way to solve this is to ask online student email the pages of class notebook so that the instructor can point out and correct the errors or the instructor can in brief intervals ask the students to show their notebooks via their computer cameras. The drawback of the first solution is that it is not the instant intervention into correcting the error. The time gap between the error made and the error corrected might delay learning. The second solution is time consuming. Since the instructor does not have the physical access to the notebook, and he cannot write or point out exact error, he has to explain.

Another significant limitation was that the instructor was not able to make a pair or group activity between the students attending in-person and online students. When an activity is common for all students, it does not matter whether a student is in person or online, but for a group or pair activity the instructor needs to make a group or a pair of only in-person students and of only online students. That means that there should be at least two students online, so that a pair or a group can be made of them. The single online student gets isolated in such activities. The only way to deal with it by either giving some individual activity to the online student or asking another student to go online and join the other online student.

Another limitation of the multi-access classroom is the reception of the quality sound for online students. In our multi-access classroom experiment. The online student complained that they could not hear clearly thought the in-built microphone on the Meeting OWL. In our particular class, the

reason was that the classroom was quite big and the student were sitting a little away from the OWL. Although the OWL has a very sensitive microphone, but it does not catch the sound well if the person is away and if the person not facing the OWL. The solution of this issue is quite straight forward. One can use a small and compact room to organize multi-access classes where the sound can be easily caught by the OWL microphone.

7 Conclusion

The sudden rage of the COVID-19 pandemic shocked the entire world, including academia. The educators need to quickly find way to keep educating their students. The real meaning and the practical application of the proverb “The necessity is the mother of all inventions” was visible on all the three years of the pandemic and its implication both positive and negative trickled down to the post COVID era. In this paper I shared my experience of dealing with the situation in all the years since the beginning of COVID, how I taught the Hindi-Urdu Courses at the University of British Columbia. Now when the COVID is fully over, we can look back on each of our years and learn from the issues we faced and solutions we found to deal with the situations. The post-COVID academia has now a unique outlook on how to deliver instructions. Some parts of the online delivery will become a regular feature of future teaching, such as recorded video instructions and some will be used occasionally, as I planned with the multi-access delivery.

Disclaimer:

Images used in the paper are either mine or taken from the UBC website.

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