

Reconnecting With New Zealand: There, Online, and Back Again for English for Specific Purposes Students With a Culture Focus, 2019–2024

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The IAFOR International Conference of Education in Hawaii 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Many programmes taught under emergency then planned online conditions from 2020-2022 are returning to face-to-face or blended teaching modes. This article relates and reflects on student experiences before, during, and after the pandemic, in original face-to-face, emergency-online, planned online, and blended modes, on an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programme with a special focus on developing cultural knowledge and local people-to-people connections. It uses student voice from semi-structured interviews and surveys, and teacher experiences, and compares our experiences with international ones. It describes students' feelings that language and cultural learning aims were achieved by the online cohorts, but that the quality and amount of this were impacted negatively by the online mode, varied digital literacy, and varied accessibility & reliability of equipment & connectivity. The article concludes with reflections after the 2023-2024 face-to-face (mildly blended) programme in its new form and gives suggestions about materials and training for staff and students when preparing courses in future whether online, face-to-face, or blended. Suggestions, most of which apply to education in general, relate to training, skills, resourcing, flexibility, and linking language to culture.

Keywords: Student Experience, Online, COVID-19, Culture

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The International Academic Forum
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Introduction

Education in its various forms, and many other aspects of life, is emerging from the online life associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns. This article aims to narrate the experiences of staff and students on one English for Specific Purposes (ESP, a sub-category of English as a Second Language teaching), programme at a university in New Zealand and reflect upon those experiences, using student feedback. The programme has specific goals of students experiencing and learning about the culture of New Zealand and interacting with its people, as well as the more usual ESL and ESP goals of developing students' language and professional skills. Online, especially under notice Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT, see Moore et al., 2021) conditions with little notice, the culture-related goals were achieved with difficulties. This article narrates the experiences, learning, and innovations of the staff and students on this programme, relates them to wider research in ESOL and education fields, and suggests key learning points for the future.

This article begins with looking at language and culture, and at the online education situation pre-Covid-19, then the ERT situation during 2020, and how online teaching changed with experiences as *planned* online or hybrid courses continued in 2021 and beyond. The article describes our programme and the innovations made for different iterations through 2020 to 2023, and corresponding student feedback. After a hiatus, the programme was taught online in 2022 with a small follow-up face-to-face component in 2023, and a new face-to-face iteration began in 2023 with small blended and follow-up elements.

The topic of teaching and learning through Covid-19 and other disruptive events has been covered by many articles and several books, some in subject areas and some covering education more broadly. Some are cited in this article. A review of all would be a book itself.

This article uses a combination of autoethnographic evidence and experience, student feedback/voice from surveys and semi-structured interviews, and narrative style. It comments on effects of innovations and changes to each iteration of our programme as teaching mode fluctuated from 2020 to 2024. It relates innovations to wider research, and concludes with overall findings and suggestions. For practitioners, it aims to offer ideas which they may be able to integrate into their own programmes, and factors to consider when planning programmes which may need to be of flexible delivery mode.

Context

Language and Culture

Studying a language in a community that speaks it provides opportunities for engagement in associated society and culture(s), with Newton (2009) calling language and associated culture “intertwined and inseparable” (p.2). However, only a few language learning articles focus on learning about and experiencing associated culture and interacting with local people as a specific goal of a programme. Notably, using the local community and environment as resources for learning has been covered by Shannon & Galle (2017), at IICE-Hawaii by Doi (2024), and others discussing Place-Based Learning. Cai (2024) described activities such as bilingual guided meditation to deepen learning and cross-cultural awareness.

Online Education

Distance, open, or correspondence learning has existed for centuries, helped by developments such as the printing press, postal services, telecommunications, and the internet (Li, 2018). Online education has been available since the late 20th Century, and despite some mixed reviews it has been generally recognised to be of good quality and reliable since early this century (Dhawan, 2020; EA, 2022; Li, 2018). Generally, pre-2020, students knowingly enrolled in such education, it was well planned, and taught by choice.

Before 2020, advice and research findings regarding online teaching and learning had several overarching concerns. These especially applied to language education, and included students needing explicit activities and advice to engage with their peers and feel part of a group or community. Other considerations included that not every student has skills using or reliable access to digital devices (including in ‘developed’ countries), that there is a limit to the number of new platforms and programmes which can be learned at once, and that face-to-face activities cannot be simply used online with no alterations (Edwards, 2022; Kiddle et al., 2020; Lodge et al., 2022; Marshall, 2018).

Effects of Covid-19

In early 2020, with the need worldwide to teach online under *unplanned* emergency conditions, things changed. ERT had taken place before (Dhawan, 2020; Dohaney, 2020; Moore et al., 2021), but it had not previously been on a worldwide scale (Pusey & Nanni, 2021). Academic and blog articles, online workshops, and quick reaction research aiming to report experiences and suggest how to cope with the situation emotionally or professionally appeared almost by the day during 2020. Many activities, platforms, methods, and philosophies for teaching under ERT conditions were outlined, and a running theme was that the same teaching quality level as in 2019 was not expected. From 2021 onwards, common findings and suggestions from different contexts were brought together in books and articles. Space precludes listing all such publications and blogs here, but for a few examples see Chan et al. (2021), EA (2022), Edwards (2020, 2022), Hertz (2022), Kiddle et al. (2020), Lobos et al., (2022), and Ruegg (2023).

The Programme This Article Focuses On

The programme in focus here aims to develop professional language skills and knowledge of mid-ranking civil servants aged 25-45 from low and middle-income countries in Southeast Asia and Mongolia, and concurrently to develop connections with and knowledge of New Zealand's people and its culture. Pre-2020, this latter outcome was achieved in various ways, including a period in homestay families, being on a New Zealand university campus, social interactions with volunteer local conversation partners, and workplace visits. Participants also share flats with classmates of a different nationality.

Feedback about the cultural knowledge and connections aspect from 2019's cohort, the last pre-Covid example for comparison, included repeated frequent effusive praise over conversation partners and homestays, with comments¹ such as, “we have a long conversation about many thing, about the life, and about the plan in the future, about the culture in New

¹ Note: Student comments here are reproduced with their original language errors, with the aim of maintaining genuine participant voice.

Zealand, about the coffee shop...”, and comments on exploring the country, attending cultural performances, and new breakfast discoveries. Further example quotes from participants relating to this goal included:

“the life, the custom and the culture in New Zealand, is very like a mysterique for me before...But after this time I know much about that.”

“My roommate is from Laos...we share cooking styles.”

“in my country...no one is like, hey, you must use your helmet...”

“during my weekend I alway went out...and see how New Zealand and Nelson people are and people communicate.”

“When I just back from New Zealand I shocked, because traffic jam every morning.”

“Apart from English I actually learned a lot...such as custom of New Zealanders...how they cook, food, and also we learn about daily life in New Zealand. Very big difference between our custom and New Zealand custom.”

“In Indonesia we hardly have a chance to do walking in the city or in the bush like tramping.”

“Homestay, they talking about daily life, daily activity”

(NB: permission for this data collection and use was gained from the university human ethics committee and given by the students in consent forms)

2019 and 2020’s cohorts had 59 and 63 participants respectively, with slightly under a quarter of each cohort coming each from Cambodia and Laos, one or fewer participant from Mongolia, and otherwise fairly evenly split between Vietnam, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, and Myanmar. Post-hiatus programmes from 2022 onwards were halved in size (until later in 2024), and Myanmar was no longer in the programme. Otherwise, participant nationality ratios remained similar. There was a roughly even gender split among programme participants.

The 2020 Experience

In March of 2020 New Zealand went into national lockdown, with borders closed and instructions to stay at home. This had been predicted, and both staff and students had received a small amount of training in using Zoom, while several emails with ideas for teaching and learning online had been sent to staff. Some staff and students had taken part in online learning in the past, planned and by choice. From a programme perspective, the lockdown was announced two weeks after our students had moved to Wellington following two months homestays and attending language schools in regional New Zealand.

Our programme received permission from the university to keep going online rather than take a break, as staff and classmates were the only support network our students had in the country. We preferred not to leave them essentially abandoned. Flatmate arrangements were reorganised so students were living with people who spoke the same first language. Following what advice we could find (e.g., Gómez-Rey et al., 2018; Hodges et al., 2020; Mahul-Mellier, 2020; Marshall, 2018), we tweaked a lot of materials and activities to suit Zoom and computer screens, taught in shorter bursts, and set off-screen activities that were synchronous and nonsynchronous for students to do with flatmates. Attempts to simply present classroom-based lessons on Zoom did not work well regarding engagement, connectivity, interaction styles, material format, and timings. In general, three-hour classes became 3–4 hour learning sessions with a mix of online and offline activities of 30–60 minutes each.

Slightly under half of the conversation partners (but with varying levels of interaction), and workplace visit hosts, and 7/10 guest speakers, volunteered to continue in their programme roles using Zoom or similar. Much like the students and staff, these members of the team were also developing their own abilities in online interactions under home and home-‘office’ conditions that had great variation regarding distractions, lighting, connectivity, etc. In addition to online interaction attempts listed above, several small-group online conversation sessions were organised, led by volunteer lecturers, scientists, ministry staff, etc. known to programme staff. Multi-country song-and-dance and cooking demonstrations through Zoom were also run. Examples of the student experience are visible at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGUrQVTiC9s>

We wished to know whether the ERT version of the programme had been effective in building students’ knowledge of and connections with local people and culture. To investigate this, the author collected student feedback at or shortly after the end of the course, collected by anonymous survey of all students and through semi-structured interviews with eight students from the 2020 programme and nine students from the 2019 cohort who responded to an email asking for volunteers to interview online. See Edwards (2020) for greater methodological detail. This initial piece of research became an ongoing tracking of and reflecting on student experiences under different conditions and programme iterations, and comparison of those findings with international ones, likely concluding with a presentation at the CLESOL conference in Wellington, New Zealand, in April 2024.

2020 Findings

The 2020 students did appear overall to feel that they had learned about New Zealand culture and society and had built personal and professional connections, with comments including, “No matter what position no matter what job other people do, I just feel that they are treated equally...because they all human like us not because of other aspects of their lives. But in Asia we still consider others by their age, their ranking...” They also indicated that studying online had negatively impacted the experience, but with some new skills developed. For example, one student said and several students said similar to, “I think face-to-face is better of course...learning online by Zoom...is a new method...I can learn some...new techniques”. Feedback included many mentions of homestay families and conversation partners, and additional quotes such as:

“Even though we could not experience in workplace visits we had a lot of coceptual knowledge through outside lectures/ conversation groups /documents supported by tutor /exploration with [conversation partner].”

“If there was no covid-19 we had a chance to visit these places...virtual workplace visit also happened, but I think it's much better if we have the opportunity to get real experiences.”

“When we lived in a homestay we learnt a lot about the daily life of New Zealanders...my host took us to participate in their parties.”

“I think New Zealander is in the leading way is in promoting the wellbeing of the workers.”

“If we talked about the interesting things, we just forget about we interact by Zoom because we enjoy the conversation. But for the learning, the Zoom is quite not good but is really better than nothing.”

“Isolation of Covid-19 was challenges and make us have to be more innovative.”

“In the beginning, I was afraid that I cannot improve my studying but after all I also can see my ability change compare with my first time that I arrived.”

Our experiences and those of our students’ corresponded with a lot of international findings: that social connectivity or community, support networks, and feelings of belonging are important to student success and motivation (Douglass, 2020; Hubertz & Janowsky, 2024; Lobos et al., 2022); that connecting with locals and learning about local culture can be done online but may be less effective and needs to be done differently (Kauppi, 2020); that most students appreciated some form of programme being available (Chan et al., 2021; Douglass, 2020); and that the equipment and connectivity available to students and staff, and their reliability, and everyone’s digital literacy had noticeable effects on the experiences (Bryson, 2021; Li & Roihan, 2024; Octava, 2021; Peridore & Mcvov, 2024; Ruegg, 2023).

The Hiatus Experiences

The main programme this article is based on was on a two-year hiatus from mid-2020. The staff, however, taught on several online and hybrid programmes focusing on English for Governance and English for Academic Purposes, and alumni reconnection micro-programmes. Feedback and experience gained on those programmes, and contemporary research in the field worldwide, informed the development of a new model for our main programme when it returned via online mode mid-2022.

We included various innovations in these courses. These included using digitally-skilled students and staff to train and mentor students in online learning skills during their enrolment or orientation periods (Moore et al., 2021; Peridore & Mcvov, 2024; Pusey & Nanni, 2021), and time zone-based study groups. Some study groups included mentors who were graduates of the courses. We reorganised courses into shorter blocks with gaps of several weeks between them, created resources that are accessible and more able to be reused in different modes and programmes (Kiddle et al., 2020), and we used shared collaborative documents. We also encouraged socialising among online students, including sometimes with friends they had met in New Zealand previously. Sometimes students led and organised socialising and sometimes we set it up. Gathertown online socialising spaces and Padlet noticeboards for introducing selves were used by us in 2021–2022, but around the world many platforms were used.

From these experiences, we noted that students and staff learned new digital skills and hybrid classroom management skills, (EA, 2022; Hockly, 2020; Steven, 2022), and it became clear that potential offshore students needed clear information about teaching mode and styles, and about workload and technology/connectivity *requirements* (not recommendations), to be able to participate. Students expressed appreciation for courses being available, and that they felt learning outcomes were achieved, but they also expressed a preference to have had the courses face-to-face. Alumni reengagement micro-courses, had positive feedback related both to new content learning and interacting with a wider group of people than locally, being able to, “reconnect with New Zealander, [peers] in different intakes and building more knowledge...By attending this programme I can see how much I have improved include personal capacity and knowledge.”

Alongside the positive feedback above, difficulties continued to be encountered. These included physical aspects such as eye strain related to long hours at a desk, looking at a computer, or simple online learning fatigue, and sometimes trying to do too many things at

once (Kiddle et al., 2020; Marshall, 2018). Lack of human interaction was also a difficulty (including, “sometimes we can’t see each other during class” or similar comments from students). As time passed and students were allowed to physically travel to other countries from mid-2021, we lost some to institutes there. There were also continual difficulties with reliability of equipment and internet connections, and access to them, with family responsibilities, and with workload demands from managers for students on part-time programme – especially if they were using the office computer, or were sent into the field with no connectivity. These were despite students’ best intentions.

As time passed we moved from ERT to *planned* online or hybrid teaching. It had become clear that providing effective language education, connection-building, and cultural exposure online was possible under both ERT and planned conditions, but much more effectively when planned and knowingly enrolled in. It also seemed that, in general, students and teachers preferred face-to-face classroom connections and environment. Inequities in connectivity, equipment, and digital skills existed despite students knowing well in advance that they would study online, sometimes related to local infrastructure conditions. Our main programme returned online in 2022, with a face-to-face component planned for 2023 when we then hoped that international borders would be open.

The experiences in the rest of the world appeared to be similar to ours. Presentations and publications included discussions of trying to do too much, frequent needs for breaks, inequities in access to and skills using digital equipment and connectivity, inappropriate workspaces, and problems with lack of interpersonal interaction (e.g., Bryson, 2021; Chan et al., 2021; Hertz, 2022; Li & Roihan, 2024; Lobos et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2021; Peridore & Mcvoy, 2024; Pusey & Nanni, 2021).

Planned Online, Then Blended (2022–2023)

The full programme returned *online* for three months beginning July 2022, with a small follow-up workplace-based project, and with a planned further symposium in New Zealand in early 2023 (which might have instead taken place in Southeast Asia). The symposium did take place in New Zealand for three weeks in February 2023, and the students were able to make face-to-face connections with local people and each other, present their workplace projects, and visit professional and touristic sites. A visualisation of the three versions of the programme is in Figure 1, below.

This online (then blended) programme used most of the innovations listed above, especially including flexibility of attendance hours, and activities to build digital skills and social connections (EA, 2022; Lobos et al., 2022; Peridore & Mcvoy, 2024). With warning, many conversation partners, guest speakers, and workplace hosts were willing to engage students online. This was an improvement on 2020 ERT, but not at pre-Covid engagement levels. Student feedback following the main online programme, such as, “we not only learn language but we have created the network and learning culture among...participants and New Zealand’s culture”, and, “when we have online programme...we are not standing in the same shoes. Like everyone have their different obstacle or their different problems,” suggested goals had been accomplished, but accomplished imperfectly.

The symposium in New Zealand seemed to, according to student feedback, greatly enhance students’ connections with local people and knowledge of the country. One student reported, “Speaking partner is very good and kind...they help us to travel to visit New Zealand places

on the weekend in New Zealand” and another reported visiting a conversation partner’s house and dog. Participants had also found more opportunities to practice using English, related by one student with, “we don’t have a good time to practice our English outside our time in Zoom meeting. But when we are three weeks in...New Zealand we must using English in every situation”. Community-building was barely needed because students had already got to know each other online. Further feedback suggesting that the connections and culture goals had been achieved more successfully in New Zealand than online included:

“A lot of classmates comment that what they like most in the field trip they choose the Māori village.”

“Beside of English ability we got some cultural understanding not only for the New Zealander or Kiwis, but we can learn another culture from our fellow southeast Asian peoples.”

“The activity that I learned from a New Zealand culture I learned when I went to visit New Zealand. Online is just read as some article, a text article...”

“[workplace visit to Wellington airport] I find it fantastic...I learn more from the custom system. I lot of things very interesting...They have two responsibility, on behalf of the immigration department as well, instead of only the Customs in Vietnamese, is very different.”

“...we could not worry about the computer problem, and I think communicate directly, face-to-face, is more better than online course.”

That said, there was also some feedback noting lack of homestays and minimal time to meet conversation partners.

Up to 2020	2022-2023 blended	2023+
Seven weeks study and homestay in regional New Zealand .		2-3 pre-commencement brief online meetings
Three months in-person study in Wellington (including language and professional knowledge classes, workplaces, guest speakers, cultural activities, extracurricular conversation partners, etc). 2020 programme disrupted by nine weeks of ERT then socially-distanced classes and few social interactions.	Three months study online (including language, culture, and professional knowledge classes, virtual workplace visits and guest speakers, <i>online</i> conversation partners and cultural site websites/virtual tours. etc).	Three months in-person study in Wellington (including language and professional knowledge classes, workplaces, guest speakers, cultural activities, extracurricular conversation partners, etc).
	2-month part-time project online based on a home workplace issue.	6-week part-time project online based on a home workplace issue.
	Three-week visit to New Zealand. Including two weeks in Wellington (present projects, guest speakers, social interaction, workplace visits, met conversation partners face-to-face), and 6-day cultural road trip to Auckland.	Four-day symposium in Thailand , presenting projects, guest speakers, and two cohorts meeting.

Figure 1. Comparison of different versions of the programme

The New Model: 2023 Onwards, Face-to-Face+

In March 2023, the programme returned to face-to-face mode full time, in Wellington. Many aspects of the programme are the same as before Covid-19, however the programme no longer has seven weeks of language learning and homestay in regional New Zealand. New aspects of the programme include a workplace-based, part-time, six-week project with online check-ins once students have returned to their countries, and a four-day multi-cohort symposium in Thailand in early 2024 where students present those projects. The course now includes contact between cohorts, blended components, and what the course funders call 'multiple touch points'. One issue with the new model has been logistical problems delaying the start of the conversation partner programme for several weeks for each intake, despite student feedback being clear that this is a key feature in achieving our cultural knowledge and connections goals.

Feedback from students on 2023's two cohorts showed that 100% of participants felt that they had increased their understanding of New Zealand society and culture and felt more connected to New Zealand, and (for 62/63 respondents), to its people. Anonymised interview and free-text survey comments cited conversation partners and fieldtrips multiple times, such as, "for conversation partner, I always walk or shopping together, and we always discuss what is Kiwi, New Zealand, what do they like, or what do they always do when they have a free time". Around half the students seemed to feel that the new form of the programme was too short. One example comment was, "to learn more about New Zealand culture, homestay would be a good idea to learn understand culture," and another was, "I would love to have more weeks to complete this course because it is too [intensive]". Additional comments from students' interviews and surveys include:

"The thing that surprised me: In parliament when we visit they have [protesters]. In my country the government won't allow to do that."

"I'm interested in Māori culture but we don't have much time for exploring Māori culture here."

"The trip to Rotorua when we can find the brilliant culture of Māori. That New Zealander try to keep it."

"I learn about New Zealand cultural a lot, especially from my conversation partner. After school time I go around and spot how the people live in New Zealand and the way of life going on.."

"I also love to visit a farm. To alpaca farm. We find online, they pick us up at Wellington station. That's what I imagine about New Zealand the about the farm when I came here I see I think it's not New Zealand, but then I see that farm and [laughter]."

"I learned that culture of New Zealand and I really like because they accept you for who they are no matter what you are."

"The workplace visit should be longer"

"We shopping together. I visit her house twice. We cooked together...and I also have a chance to meet her family, like her younger daughter and her nephew."

"When I go outside in my country if I see foreigner, the tourist, sometimes they confused about something so I try to jump in and talk with them.."

"We love each other as friends, without boundary, without race, without difference, I love us."

"unfortunately my CP very busy...we only meet two times. But I can tell my friend and I share a conversation partner with [her]"

In early 2024, both of 2023's intakes (minus a few missing for health or further study reasons), met together in Bangkok with some of our programme staff for a four-day symposium. At this they presented their workplace projects, networked, practiced their English in an immersive environment again, and had some guest speakers from programme-related embassies and government departments. Feedback included repeated reference to enjoying reconnecting with classmates and staff and making new connections, learning from and forming personal and professional bonds with each other, and the opportunity to use English continuously for several days. The symposium was rated highly by 96% of the 57 participants, and 98% said that doing the project had increased their confidence in using English and giving presentations. Notably at this stage, there were no comments about the symposium or time in New Zealand being too short. The general impression from staff was that the student participants were perhaps too happy to be in Bangkok, (re-)connecting, and experiencing the symposium to complain about anything.

Overall Reflections and Key Points

We found it was possible to teach an interactive language course effectively during Covid-19, whether teaching face-to-face, online under planned or emergency conditions, blended, or hybrid. We are far from unique, as many of the sources referenced in this article demonstrate (e.g., Pusey & Nanni, 2021). We also found it was possible to develop students' connections with and knowledge and understanding of local people and culture online under both ERT and planned online conditions. However, these aspects can be achieved more effectively online with good planning, proper skills, and dependable infrastructure and equipment. Further, the cultural elements of the programme are *especially* more effectively achievable face-to-face.

Additionally, new skills have been learned by students and teachers worldwide, and the need for upskilling staff and students and for resilience planning has been made clear. It remains to be seen how many institutions remember this against staffing and budget constraints. Institutes and governments who invested in such things prior to 2020 found that to be advantageous (Moore et al., 2021). What the ongoing demand for online and hybrid courses is, and how many institutions continue to offer them, also remains to be seen due to online burnout, not all young people being digital natives (Marshall, 2018), but a youthful demand for online learning seemingly on varied individualised terms (Hubertz & Janowsky, 2024).

Moore et al. (2021) and Thorkelson (2023) suggest that the adoption of new technologies needs to be encouraged by institutions and enabled by their infrastructure, and that those institutions and staff already familiar with teaching online had a less challenging time in 2020. Dohaney et al. (2020) list effects of and barriers to institutions being resilient to educational disruptions, looking at individual to institutional and system levels and the effects of having or not having community, support, leadership, permitted flexibility, digital literacy, and appropriate and reliable digital systems. Thorkelson (2023) also points out that teachers often become the sole staff member interacting with students during online programmes. This means that they may acquire a larger pastoral and community-building role than on face-to-face programmes. Our experiences were that our brief preparation for ERT was incredibly useful, and that online we did have a greater role in building communities with classes than pre-Covid. We are also grateful for the volunteer workplace and conversation partner connections and pastoral team who continued with us through these years.

Key recommendations for front-line teachers from our experiences are:

- Make sure you and your face-to-face students are able to teach and learn online synchronously and asynchronously, and have reliable software and equipment to do so. This might require permission from managers, and will require practice.
- Promote the value of maintaining these skills even when not ‘needed’. When they are needed, keep forms of learning on offer through adversity.
- Do not try to do exactly the same activities off and online. Instead, consider how the same goals can be met using different or adapted activities. Simultaneously, consider how staff and materials can be used in adapted ways rather than completely recreating a programme or resources.
- Through adversity, retain enough resources, including staff, so that core components of programmes can still be run.
- For language teachers, embed cultural learning and interactions into your language teaching as much as possible, online or in person. Some institutes have separate staff for this, but learning a culture is not done separately from learning a language.

Conclusion

As many others have found in the last four years, online study works best with proper planning, and with staff and students who are both trained in online teaching and learning and have suitable and reliable equipment (Bryson, 2021; Moore et al., 2021; Octava, 2021; Rasiah et al., 2020; Vičič, 2022). Students expressed positivity regarding developing skills to learn online and it is clear that they can develop language skills and cultural knowledge and connections in that medium, but more effectively if staff and students are expecting to be online. However, such learning is achieved most effectively face-to-face, and many staff and students prefer that medium. The most updated, and likely final, iteration of this research will be discussed at the CLESOL and possibly NZALT/FIPLV conferences in Wellington and Auckland, New Zealand, in April and July 2024.

Online, hybrid, and blended programmes are useful to offer and appealing to some, and it is good to have a diversity of offerings and not keep all eggs in one basket. However, most teachers and students appear to prefer face-to-face programmes where possible (Kiddle et al., 2020; Ruegg, 2023), especially those with interactive, communicative, and cultural experience elements, and even more so if face-to-face is what they thought they were enrolling in. As three students who experienced both modes pointed out, “[in] New Zealand we must use English in every situation”, “we could not worry about the computer problem”, and “it changed my life...to communicate with you all and also the classmate, directly in the person, not online anymore”.

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