GET IT ONLINE: ACTIVITIES THAT IMPROVE STUDENT AND TEACHER EXPERIENCE IN ONLINE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Online learning is here to stay and teaching through this modality has been and will continue to be part of modern pedagogy. This article offers activities with guided tips for teaching English programs and English as a Second Language (ESL) that refine instructional design to meet the challenges associated with online learning in secondary and higher education. I present activity ideas that aim to further the discovery of efficacious techniques and pedagogical design as a response to dissatisfaction with the online ESL learning experience. This article aims to implement strategies and practices that motivate the student and elevate enjoyment for both instructor and student. These practices emphasize the three Ps: Providing information that leads to instruction, Preparing students with genuine conversation, and Producing a team atmosphere.

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the internet, many people enjoy "getting" items online. Videos, games, shopping: who doesn't enjoy these online activities? These activities are enjoyable because they are visually stimulating, comfortable, and bring a sense of intuitive success with a simple click. Unfortunately, online learning in higher education is not always met with this same enthusiasm.

Why is the online learning experience lacking this enjoyment? Some instructors struggle to effectively engage students online, and at the same time, many students express apathy, frustration, or a disaffection for online learning. From the onset of online learning in the late 20th century forward, studies generally show that "students learn as well when taking a distance education course as when taking the same course in a traditional classroom" (Payton, 1999, p. 54). If scores are comparable, the missing element, then, could be the experience. Teaching English online has endless possibilities, and while online language instruction has increased, "resources on how to build and conduct an effective online language class are scarce" (Moneypenny & Simon, 2017, p. 107). Students often feel isolated and without a sense of community, and it can be particularly difficult for instructors to create an authentic and encouraging classroom culture through a virtual format. I suggest that the answer lies in the strategic development and delivery of activities that enhance the curriculum and reflect an understanding of the intersection between engagement and teaching practices.

Before examining activity ideas, it is important to briefly discuss delivery. Considering emotions behind how online instruction[1] is delivered and received and what motivating factors influence these emotions is essential for progress toward a positive online learning experience. Aldrich, Kauffman, and Rybas assert that "instructor behaviors as well as designing a course structure that supports student communication" are first-order factors that "aid in building the perception of academic efficacy" (2017, p. 13). The task, then, is to grow as instructors by creating innovative activities that will further student engagement and refine delivery technique. While it might seem burdensome to try to "entertain" students, the presentation must, at

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[1] This paper addresses traditional e-learning rather that Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

minimum, possess qualities that gain the attention of the listener. Few students are enthusiastic about listening to a bland presentation or someone reading from a PowerPoint. When looking for entertainment online, the animated speaker gets the most likes and follows. Students often reflect the enthusiasm of the instructor, so entertaining delivery combined with interesting activities is likely to increase student engagement and enjoyment. Therefore, the goal of the next section is to provide useful activities and guidance on implementation to help teachers deliver their instruction so that it may encourage student engagement.

ACTIVITIES

The Three Ps

The following activities aim to facilitate opportunities for students to engage while accomplishing three goals (the three Ps):

Goal 1: **P**rovide information that leads to instruction

Goal 2: **P**repare students with genuine conversation

Goal 3: **P**roduce a team atmosphere which helps students feel connected and less isolated

Activity #1 - Daily discussion partners

The discussion board post is a familiar activity that often falls short of facilitating real discussion. These posts are usually essays that answer content questions and require comments from peers. Studies find that limited student contribution is common in discussions that feel artificial, resulting in a lack of participation (Hew & Cheung, 2012). Instead of essays artificial question/answer design, students can use the discussion board format like messaging on social media. Students work in pairs and message each other daily via text, social media messaging, or

with assigned partners or groups through the learning management system. "It is commonly

agreed upon that interaction is the key to learning a language," and this interaction is most

effective when occurring daily (Moneypenny & Simon, 2017, p. 109). These messages are meant

to be short and function as real conversation. Each week, the instructor provides a topic to

discuss or a question for students to answer about themselves to prompt conversation. Pairs of

students send daily messages (posts) to each other with the instructor monitoring and providing

feedback as needed. Because these posts function much like real discussion, it will require

vocabulary development based on real conversation (goal 2). Deliberate question development

will both enhance the curriculum and stimulate conversation that mimics in-person interaction.

The instructor also has the opportunity to provide quick and immediate feedback which both

communicates interest in the activity and addresses errors in conversational English as needed

(goal 1). Assigned pairings can change weekly or as often as needed. Instructors should make

sure students set their notifications so they know when their partner has sent a message (much

like text messaging). Since ESL students need to develop strong conversational skills, this

activity better develops English speaking abilities than a single post surrounding content.

Additionally, students inadvertently develop connections with classmates (goal 3).

Implementing successful discussion board techniques that encourage genuine conversation (goal

2) can enhance language learning and become an effective tool through deliberate design.

Activity #2 - Begin with recognition

Recognition is a proven motivational technique. Different forms of recognition are highly

implemented in grade-level classrooms, yet it declines as students reach high school and higher

education. Educators sometimes believe that as students get older, they should be motivated by

intrinsic factors or by earning points, even though most motivation theories recognize "the

impact of external rewards on student motivation" (Dawson, 2000, p. 384). Public recognition is

widely practiced with adults in business settings to raise morale, yet the online higher education

classroom seems to neglect this effective practice. When properly facilitated, "verbal praise can

be a practical means of affecting students' motivation to engage in behaviors associated with

learning" (Dawson, 2020, p. 388).

 Instructors can simply give a "shout out" to a student at the beginning of class, recognize

key phrases from a student's work, or acknowledge other desired behaviors. For example, the

instructor could point out excellent use of expression in a student's writing, praise creativity,

visuals, hard work, or dedication. Recognition can take a verbal, written, or visual format and

extend to attendance or quantitative markers. After the teacher has modeled recognition, students

are then invited to do the same. Both teacher and student continue to provide recognition

throughout the course. It is important to keep precise records of recognition so that each student

experiences the benefit of this practice, thereby avoiding adverse effects. This practice can

reduce the affective filter involved in language learning and ultimately lead to further

engagement and appreciation for classmates (goal 3). Time specifically set aside for genuine and

deserved recognition precipitates stimulating and comfortable feelings associated with online

activities that people enjoy.

Activity #3 - Take a temperature check

This activity takes only a few minutes at the beginning of class and checks in with how

the students are feeling. Be creative! Start with a fun phrase each time such as "It's looking good

outside, today. How's the temperature in (class name)?" Name this activity in a clever way and

tailor a tag line or lead in that reflects your teaching style or personality. Give the students a way

to identify the type of conversation that will follow. The idea is to inspire natural conversation

and figurative language (goal 2).

Activity #4 - Open mic for a minute

This activity gives students the opportunity to get to know their instructor and each other

throughout the semester (goal 3). Instructors can reveal a talent or ability, such as playing an

instrument, that provides a glimpse into their life. Added value is created if it connects to class

content in any way but is not necessary. At the beginning of class, a few students are given the

'mic' for one minute, and they have the opportunity to share. This activity allows members of the

class to reveal their personality rather than just remain a name on the screen (goal 3). Follow up

with an unexpected memory game later in the semester that matches the students to the talent

they shared with the group. This activity builds comradery and combats feelings of isolation

associated with online learning.

Activity #5 – Be the narrator

This activity combines a funny online favorite with language learning. The instructor

provides a short video with the audio removed or turned off. Students watch the video and then

plan their 'voice over' script. When the clip is played again, the students narrate the scene using

their script. Comments and conversation can follow to demonstrate understanding. This creative

activity encourages the application of vocabulary and expression in an entertaining way. The

narration also provides a check for intonation and the learners oral communication skills, which

signify a number of features, including fluency, accuracy, and complexity (goal 2). Students can

work in partners or groups and just have fun with using language (or different vocal tones).

Images and creativity bring people together and elicit emotion that can break up the monotony of class structure. Since this activity is shared through oral reading in class instead of just with the instructor, it has a better appropriated amount of effort and impact (DiYanni & Borst, 2020, pp. 135-136). Sharing the work continues to create a connectedness between the students and an engaging classroom climate (goal 3), which could extend beyond listening/speaking classes to a more general online ESL course. The instructor can observe during this low-risk situation, making note of common mistakes that can shape later instruction (goal 1).

Activity #6 – Word/Topic of the week

We have all fallen down the YouTube rabbit hole. Since people enjoy this online video channel, why not apply this model to language learning? Explore a word or concept via video and just keep going. Have students use the google search bar to find videos and see where it takes them. Challenge students to find videos of the concept during the week and share one they found entertaining or interesting. Activities of this nature make language come alive. YouGlish, an online video dictionary, is just one website that would be helpful in this type of activity. Videos are a way to deepen understanding of facial and body cues and how real people express thought in context (goal 2).

CONCLUSION

The learning of the English language in an online context is challenging and no one activity or engagement method will prove effective in all contexts with all students. The objective is to improve language learning by designing a virtual classroom that mimics (or surpasses) our in-classroom aptitude as teachers. If a student expects an unimaginative presentation before class begins, there can be little room for enthusiasm. Online English language learning can be a

challenge for students and teachers alike, but the experience can be engaging through deliberate

practices that replace the need for physical presence. Like all strong pedagogy, it requires

detailed planning and effort to result in greater student appeal. By enhancing the online ESL

classroom through activities that compel learning, greater teacher and student enjoyment is just a

click away.

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