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

KATHERYN ANDERSON
Iowa State University

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

---

\(^1\) 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:* Provide information that leads to instruction

*Goal 2:* Prepare students with genuine conversation

*Goal 3:* Produce 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.
THE AUTHOR

Katheryn Anderson is a MA of English student and Graduate Teaching Assistant at Iowa State University. She has taught French for seven years and college writing and speech classes for over eighteen years in both public and private settings. Her main interests are affective learning and student engagement. She and her family live in Urbandale, Iowa.
REFERENCES


