

How to manage expectations in online classes: Guidelines and requirements

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Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become incumbent upon teachers to transfer courses to an online environment. However, because of the abrupt transition, many in-service teachers might feel poorly prepared for this change of modality, and therefore need to have a better grasp of the expectations and requirements of an online class. This paper attempts to (1) present certain challenges students and teachers may encounter in an online environment as opposed to face-to-face classes, (2) provide relevant guidelines as well as strategies informed by the findings of previous research studies to address the issues, and (3) present a reflection checklist.

Introduction

Before the strike of the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning was considered optional, mainly for self-motivated and independent language learners. However, due to the migration of classes to an online setting after the lockdown, it has become an incumbent obligation for language teachers in different areas of education (e.g., ESL teachers, college instructors, etc.) to conduct online classes, which seems to have become a challenge for some of them. One such challenge could be due to the lack of information about the nuances of an online class, which include (1) identifying the requirements of an online class—that is the



essential considerations of specific features of online classes—and (2) determining students' expectations. These issues should not be overlooked as they are necessary to better support students in their learning (Luck & Rossi, 2015).

Failing to determine the online class requirements and the students' expectations may lead to students' anxiety and confusion, and thereof, student attrition from an online course (Luck & Rossi, 2015). Ignoring these elements may also prevent teachers from effectively adopting online language teaching design and delivery (Jin et al., 2009), an area of in-service teacher education which has not received enough attention. Therefore, this paper attempts to shed light on what needs to be considered in online teaching and provide practical guidelines along with strategies to help teachers to know how to accommodate to students' needs and the requirements of an online class. To achieve these aims, in the first section, the online challenges posed in three main areas of (1) course planning and preparation, (2) course delivery, and (3) course assessment will be presented, all of which will be followed by guidelines and a set of listed strategies and standards. Then, a checklist of important, yet not exhaustive, questions will be presented, serving as an efficient list for teachers to save time by checking them off so that they can provide a more enriched platform for learning.

1. Course planning and preparation

In this section, first the challenges students may face in an online environment, as opposed to face-to-face environments, will be discussed. Then, a few guidelines will be presented, followed by listed strategies for teachers to be mindful of before starting an online course.

In face-to-face classes, daily interaction is an integral part of teaching given that both teachers and students tend to get to know each other's goals and expectations through face-to-face communication. However, in online classes, due to the lack of sufficient interaction, teachers may not provide enough instructions on the requirements of the online course, making students confused about what is expected of them (Muldrow, 2014). In a study led by Jaggars et al. (2013), after interviewing teachers and students, it was found that while teachers expected students to be more resourceful and self-motivated, students had remarkably different expectations in that they looked for some scaffolding from their teachers to help and guide them to improve their skills. They found that this mismatch in expectations led to students' frustration. To prevent the confusion, teachers should set aside a proportionate amount of time to introduce course expectations and objectives to students through documentation and with more clarity (Gudea, 2008). If all the considerations are described in detail, students' confusions about the requirements and objectives of the online course can be minimized (Thormann & Fidalgo, 2014). In doing so, (a) some samples for assignments can be posted (Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005); (b) the requirements can be posted in the form of instructions before each session; (c) a course calendar can be created for tracking assignment submissions; (d) sample work from



previous students can be posted; and (e) instructional tabs can be used for detailed instructions on every assignment (Armstrong, 2011). The organization of the material is also important. If resources are posted, they should be titled properly and sorted from the most recent to the least recent; otherwise, it may be confusing for the inexperienced online students to find them.

It is not only the expectations that need to be explicitly discussed. Given that some novice learners require familiarization with learning management systems, platforms, and virtual resources, teachers should facilitate a smooth transition to these platforms in order to prevent anxiety (Gilmore & Lyons, 2012). A useful method to avoid confusion is to provide an in-depth orientation which encompasses comprehensive information about the intended tools (Scagnoli, 2001). In doing so, teachers can introduce and familiarize students with the online platform (e.g., Zoom) and the intended Language Management System (e.g., Moodle). This can be done by (a) providing instructional videos, (b) giving students the chance to navigate the platform in a group to be able to seek help, (c) providing information and support in various delivery formats: both synchronously (e.g., one-on-one video conferences) and asynchronously (e.g., emails), and (d) inviting the alumni for sharing their online experience. This thorough orientation may increase students' preparedness to begin the program (Gilmore & Lyons, 2012).

2. Course Delivery

Some novice teachers may not be familiar with how to exploit different resources to teach the content, engage students, and facilitate their interaction in online classes. In this regard, students' engagement and interaction are amongst the most important methods which should not be neglected when it comes to delivering information in online platforms. The two methods are discussed here.

2.1 Students' engagement

Low levels of engagement may lead to boredom and possibly students' loss of interest and focus. As students expect an entertaining and engaging learning environment, teachers should create a friendly atmosphere that can make students feel motivated and energized (Gudea, 2008). To this end, teachers can (a) play external video and audio resources, (b) invite guest speakers, (c) create spontaneous visuals (e.g., pictographs, visual notes, etc.) (Walny et al., 2011), and (d) ask students to post pictures related to the content on social platforms (e.g., Instagram) and give comments. In addition, for retaining students' attention and keeping them engaged, it is helpful to (a) encourage online role playing (Klemm, 1998), (b) introduce ice-breaker activities (brainstorming), (c) use gamification elements (e.g., Kahoot) (Tsay et al., 2018), and (d) put them in breakout rooms and encourage them to do group projects together.



2.2 Students' interaction

Students' interaction with each other and connection to teachers are among the most important reasons why students opt for face-to-face courses (Brace-Govan & Clulow, 2000). Therefore, in order to establish the personal and spatial connections similar to that of on-campus classes, teachers should facilitate learners' exchange of ideas in a more collaborative and interactive environment (Roepnack, 2020). In other words, they should depart from teacher-centered lectures to student-centered activities. A good strategy is for teachers to (a) provide group assignments, in which members of a group can bond and share responsibilities for more productive learning (Thormann & Fidalgo, 2014), (b) encourage synchronous discussions on forums, which facilitate social presence (Schwier & Balber, 2002), and (c) facilitate asynchronous interactions, which provide a suitable ground for students to engage with the material and peers (Roepnack, 2020). For facilitating teacher-student interactions, teachers should (a) provide online office hours for one-on-one meetings and (b) try to be present and responsive when students need assistance (King & McSporran, 2002). This way, they can ascertain that students are keeping pace with others when it comes to learning. Creating authentic online discussions, either synchronously or asynchronously, can spark ongoing and engaging debates, contributing to collaborative critical thinking (Roepnack, 2020). However, conducting them is not easy and requires a special set of skills that are different from the ones expected in the traditional face-to-face classroom (Rose, 2013). Therefore, drawing on previous studies, I will present a few guidelines in terms of expectations and requirements of effective discussion forums.

2.2.1 Expectations around discussion forums

Be a model. As only few students might be familiar with the discussion forums, teachers are expected to first model interaction and critical thinking to inspire conversations and then acknowledge volunteers' contribution to encourage participation and fuel a lively discussion (Roepnack, 2020).

Incorporate students' opinions when choosing the discussion topic. As students' learning needs and interests in various topics vary, teachers should be mindful of individual choices (Mupinga et al., 2006) and create polls and questionnaires to negotiate the topics of the discussion forum (King & McSporran, 2002).

Encourage contribution. Since sometimes only a handful of students may participate in the discussions, teachers should promote their interest and engagement by asking a few thought-provoking questions (Roepnack, 2020). They can also introduce prompts before the class to give some time for students to reflect on them.



Avoid divergence. Sometimes, some topics are so controversial that they may lead to on-going conversations (Gudea, 2008). Therefore, teachers should make provisions and follow a planned course module to slow down the interaction and keep the discussions focused.

Assign roles to students. In order to engage students, teachers can assign the role of “moderator” to students (Thormann & Fidalgo, 2014) as it reinforces student responsibility and promotes group collaboration and cohesiveness (Xie et al., 2014).

Provide timely and constructive feedback. During or after students’ participation, teachers can provide feedback involving students’ strengths and weaknesses along with recommendations on how they can improve their skills (Thormann & Fidalgo, 2014). Also, teachers can have students provide comments on each other’s work as it improves their critical thinking (DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001).

Enhance organization. For more effective online interactions among students, teachers should remind students of basic requirements such as writing within the word limits and before the deadline, writing clearly and concisely, following the rules of netiquette, and developing ideas sufficiently (Gudea, 2008).

Close the session effectively. At the end of the discussion, teachers are recommended to wrap it up by highlighting the main ideas in an organized manner (Thormann & Fidalgo, 2014). In doing so, providing a summary of the students’ posts (Roepnack, 2020), making mention of future needs, and asking a question for more reflection may be helpful.

3. Course assessment

Compared to face-to-face classes, teachers are not able to monitor individual students in an online environment due to technological constraints. This lack of control may trigger students’ (especially the least motivated ones) temptation to resort to academic integrity issues, such as plagiarism. In this case, the grades may not quite reflect their real intellectual property (Gudea, 2008).

To address the above-mentioned issues, teachers can assign different score scales to multiple activities such as written assignments, online discussions, online presentations, formative and interactive quizzes, etc. (Kearn, 2012). In addition, to avoid plagiarism, teachers can divide the assignment into two or three stages (e.g., outline, first draft, final draft). They can also ask students to submit their work through online plagiarism detectors such as Turnitin. Furthermore, to prevent students from hiring ghostwriters, teachers can have students present in class the outline of their papers and the resources they have used, and once they finish their work, students can be asked to write a reflection on the process of writing, describing the challenges and the gains. Finally, to avoid students delegating the test to someone else, teachers can give oral exams and interviews (Kearn, 2012).



Teachers should also be mindful of evaluating students' work. Therefore, it is important to provide a clearly defined rubric which specifies the target performance criteria and the expectations and objectives of the assignment during the first few sessions so that students can use them as guidelines (Kearn, 2012). Also, instead of being the sole grader of all the assignments, teachers can ask students to both evaluate themselves and assess their peers, albeit after the needed scaffolding (Vrasida and McIsaac, 2001). The former may encourage students to reflect on their weaknesses and strengths and enhance their autonomy; the latter may help learners to internalize the goals and requirements better by reading each other's work as a sample (White & Wright, 2015).

A check list of relevant questions

If teachers know how they can manage the expectations based on the temperament of the online environment, they may be able to better facilitate their learners' journey in online learning and help them succeed in a sufficient learning environment (Gudea, 2008). In order to assist them organize their thoughts and review some pointers, Appendix A (below) presents a checklist summarizing the issues raised in this paper, which can function as a reflective tool for teachers engaged in online instruction.

Conclusion and implications

Teachers need to go beyond merely learning about online tools and approaches as they need to be armed with some information about online class requirements and students' expectations to be able to adjust their course planning and delivery accordingly. In this paper, I have attempted to first present the most common issues both students and teachers are likely to encounter in online classrooms, provide certain guidelines and strategies to address them, and finally, develop a checklist based on the previous studies to address the concerns raised in an online environment in terms of requirements and expectations in the hope that it can be useful for in-service novice teachers as well as the experienced who have just started teaching online. As teachers, the goal is to facilitate a smooth transition for students and provide a safe and engaging environment for them, and this paper can be a good start to stimulate teachers' reflection for better professional development.

Appendix A: A checklist of requirements to manage expectations

The checklist can be accessed [here](#).



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