

Inclusive online course design: Lessons from a pandemic

By Alanna Carter & Shereen Seoudi, Ryerson University

Abstract

Curriculum developers for the ESL Foundation Program at the Real Institute at Ryerson University adapted programming for in-person learning to virtual formats in response to COVID-19. An important consideration when developing the online program was the establishment of an inclusive online environment. Curriculum developers responded to challenges and fostered inclusivity through UDL, flexibility, digital tools, and demonstrating personal interest in students. Overall, a strong sense of community was achieved, and students responded positively.

Introduction

With the onset of COVID-19, language programs across the country had to shift their mode of delivery from the traditional face-to-face classroom setting to virtual learning environments. Designing a virtual learning experience in any subject area requires significant time, care, and planning; however, transitioning a language program to a virtual format poses unique challenges, particularly around establishing and fostering a safe and inclusive learning environment. The authors of this article were members of a curriculum development team at the Real Institute, Ryerson University's English language program, tasked with transforming programming designed for in-person language learning for the virtual context and will describe important learnings from their experiences in building inclusive online courses.



Context

The Real Institute houses Ryerson University's ESL Foundation Program and serves as a bridging program into the university. Depending on students' English proficiency, they are admitted into one, two, or three semesters of language study. Upon successful completion of the ESL Foundation Program, students transition into undergraduate programs at the university, including management, engineering, and new media design. Students are generally between the ages of 18–21 and come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, although the majority are Chinese. Students have a range of experiences living and studying in Canada; some have studied at Canadian high schools, while others enter the program after graduating from high school in their own countries.

Approaches to teaching and learning language

The curriculum in the ESL Foundation Program was initially designed for in-person learning and to be interactive with an emphasis on communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1985). Due to the relatively small class sizes pre-COVID (approximately 16 students), in-person classes were lively, and students and instructors were highly engaged in the teaching and learning experience. The curriculum included many opportunities for group learning, and students enjoyed and appreciated these intentionally designed lessons to use English with their peers. Instructors at the Real Institute cared deeply about the success of their students. This nurturing environment encouraged students to take risks, which is important in all learning environments, but particularly in language learning contexts where students may feel shy or nervous to participate due to lack of knowledge around linguistic and cultural norms. A strong sense of community existed in classes, and students and instructors were happy to be participants in these communities.

The importance of community and inclusivity

The curriculum in the ESL Foundation Program was designed to be inclusive, relevant, and engaging for all students. Given that many students at the Real Institute are new to Canada, Toronto, and the university community more generally, it is important that learning spaces are welcoming so that students can make connections with their peers and instructors. Community and inclusivity are essential in language learning classrooms because students need to feel comfortable to engage with lessons and improve their language skills. Ultimately, safe and respectful environments result in better outcomes. Further, given the ESL Foundation Program's position as a bridging program into undergraduate studies, it is important to teach students about the university community so that they smoothly transition into undergraduate programs and courses with a diverse range of peers and instructors.



Pre-COVID, classrooms at the Real Institute were safe, happy, and productive spaces where students and instructors worked towards common goals. Classrooms and furniture were arranged in such a way that students connected with each other regularly and authentically. Desks and chairs were set up in configurations to encourage interaction and conversation, and instructors intentionally designed activities that required collaborative learning to solve problems and create new learning (Laal & Laal, 2021). Efforts were made to create an environment that was conducive to language learning as well as relationship building.

Challenges in the online environment

When the ESL Foundation Program shifted to a virtual format, the decision was taken to balance synchronous lessons on Zoom with asynchronous learning activities on the learning management system (LMS) and third-party tools. In response to these changes, a number of challenges that threatened the safe, welcoming, and transparent environment that instructors had worked to establish in in-person classrooms immediately became apparent.

1. Geography — As classes shifted to online and virtual formats, many students returned to their home countries, meaning that students and instructors in virtual classes were physically located in countries around the globe.
2. Time zones — As a result of students returning to their home countries, time differences became a major challenge with respect to scheduling. Instructors were situated in Toronto on Eastern time, while many students in Asia were in time zones 12 or 13 hours ahead of instructors. This meant that students were attending classes very late at night.
3. Access issues — When programming first transitioned online, some students, particularly those located abroad, struggled with access issues. Some had difficulty connecting to Zoom calls, accessing the LMS, and logging in to third-party platforms to complete tasks and assignments.
4. Tech glitches — Glitches are inevitable, and, while everyone experiences them, they were initially difficult for instructors and students to navigate due to unfamiliarity with tools and technologies. Tech glitches have the potential to disrupt lessons and negatively impact attitudes towards teaching and learning.
5. Digital literacy — While the vast majority of students in the ESL Foundation Program are digital natives, this does not necessarily mean that they were familiar with or comfortable using the range of digital tools they were suddenly required to. Lack of familiarity with tools was compounded by the fact that, in some cases, students were not sufficiently proficient in English to be able to use the tools easily and correctly.



6. Decreased engagement, motivation, and interaction — As classes shifted to Zoom, students were, unfortunately, initially less motivated to engage and participate in lessons. This was due, in part, to the fact that students were located in countries around the world; felt disconnected from their instructors and classmates; and were unskilled at communicating with others in online, synchronous spaces. Students' mental health suffered as a result of changes to their learning contexts as well as local lockdowns and restrictions used as measures to control the spread of COVID-19.

Given these challenges, careful consideration to the design of the online environment was needed and a focus on creating a sense of community and inclusivity was essential. Below is a discussion of the strategies and pedagogies that curriculum developers at the Real Institute drew upon to create inclusive learning environments.

Creating communities online

In designing online classes for the ESL Foundation Program, the purpose was not to simply mimic or recreate face-to-face lessons, but rather to create online learning environments that are equally effective and inclusive. Accordingly, there were four guiding principles that governed the design process:

- Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
- Flexibility
- Digital tools to enhance community
- Demonstrating personal interest in students

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

The Universal Design for Learning framework is composed of three elements: multiple means of representation, multiple means of engagement, and multiple means of expression (CAST, 2018; Dickinson & Gronseth, 2020). To ensure that classes offered multiple means of representation, they were scheduled to include both synchronous and asynchronous sessions. In the synchronous sessions, students joined classes on Zoom, and instructors explained content synchronously using a wide variety of multimedia and digital tools. In the asynchronous portion of the class, students worked independently on class materials, which were presented in different ways including text, video, and graphics.

This design ensured that students were offered multiple means of engagement. This was accomplished through different assignments and activities. Students worked individually and in groups in order to cater to all preferences and needs. On many assignments, students were given options and were allowed to choose their preference to increase engagement; these options were related to the assignment topic as well as the technology and tools used. Students were also given many opportunities for self-reflection.



Finally, students were offered multiple means of expressing their ideas, thoughts, and the learning they gained. This was done through differentiated assessments which included video and audio recordings, written assignments, discussion boards, presentations, and debates.

Flexibility

Flexibility was very important in ensuring the success of this inclusive design for the online learning environment. The program administration was understanding of the importance of flexibility, and this was reflected in class scheduling. Classes ran at two different times to accommodate students in different time zones. Early morning classes, which started at 6:00AM EST, catered to students in the Asia Pacific region, and regular morning classes, which started at 9:00AM EST, catered to local students. These schedules were appreciated by both students and instructors. Another aspect of scheduling that reflected flexibility was the division of class time into synchronous and asynchronous sessions, which helped prevent Zoom fatigue and offered multiple means of engaging with content.

Office hours were also set to be flexible. Pre-COVID, instructors had office hours at fixed times for student appointments or drop-ins; however, in the online environment, instructors were allowed to use their office hours more flexibly. Some split them over the days of the week, others scheduled them at different times to allow students more options, and some called students in groups and conducted mini-lessons to supplement classroom instruction.

Instructors were also flexible with students regarding different aspects of assignments. This is not to mean that expectations were not clearly set or due dates were not enforced. It is more about having reasonable expectations of students, given the novelty and challenges of the learning environment; for example, instructors were flexible in allowing students to choose the tools they wished to use for their assignment.

Digital tools to enhance community

Digital tools play a pivotal role in building online communities and inclusive learning environments. A wide range of digital tools were used in the program to accomplish different goals.

1. Zoom — Zoom was an excellent choice for synchronous sessions as it allowed instructors and students to interact. The breakout room functionality allowed students to work in groups, similar to what they did in in-person classrooms, which was essential to building relationships.
2. Flipgrid — Flipgrid allowed asynchronous discussions to be more personal and engaging through the use of video recordings and the ability to comment on others' recordings in video or text.
3. Nearpod — Nearpod allowed instructors to create interactive slides to engage students with content



and with each other. The interactive slides included a collaborate board, a drawing board, a quiz tool, and a poll. Nearpod also allowed for elements of gamification to be incorporated in lessons, which offered students more opportunities for community building as they chose their avatars and competed against each other.

4. Padlet and Google Suite — These tools allowed students to work together and collaborate in different ways and on different types of assignments, which was essential for strengthening relationships and enhancing the learning experience.
5. D2L Brightspace — As the university's LMS, D2L greatly helped instructors in staying connected to their students through a wide range of functionalities including announcements, video and audio notes, and discussion boards.

Demonstrating interest in students

The final guiding principle in building these online inclusive classrooms was making sure to show interest in students' lives. With the stresses that came with the pandemic and the lack of in-person interaction, it was easy for instructors to slip into dealing with students as just names on a list or numbers in a register. However, instructors made sure to intentionally show interest in their students by choosing assignment topics and themes that were important to them and relevant to their lives. Instructors also ensured they interacted with students as individuals who have different needs, preferences, and styles. Showing genuine interest in events happening in students' lives was one way of accomplishing this. An example of this was asking students to post photos or videos of their Lunar New Year celebration highlights on a Padlet to share with their classmates. The responses to this small assignment were overwhelming with students posting multiple photos and videos of snacks, decorations, lights, and family gatherings.

Positive Effects

The effects that were seen as a result of this inclusive design were positive and rewarding. Students felt very connected to their instructors and to each other. The different channels of communication allowed them to stay in touch with their classmates and instructors, ask for help, and receive timely answers and feedback. This made students feel supported despite being miles apart.

Through the different interactive activities and breakout rooms, students felt they belonged to a group. Also, they, surprisingly, formed many friendships and built strong relationships with their peers. In one class, students travelled to different cities in China to meet up with their classmates during Reading Week.

Besides connection and the sense of belonging, this design allowed students to make better use of their time. Some students in the Asia Pacific region, whose classes ran in the evenings, took on daytime jobs



to support their personal growth and finances. Finally, instructors witnessed an increased use of English through the different communication channels that were used.

These positive effects were not only noticed by the instructors, but students were also appreciative of all the efforts put into creating this online learning environment. Below is some of the student feedback received at the end of the term through their course and program evaluations:

“I liked all of things that she did to teach us.”

“I like the [listening and speaking] course and [my teacher]! She is really caring and supportive. The course materials are really engaging.”

“I like that the teacher makes many activities to make us speak to each other.”

“I like the way [my teacher] teach because it push me to study and increase motivation.”

“I like Kahoot and Nearpod because they make class more enjoyable.”

It is clear from these comments that students valued their opportunity to learn language in the online environment and connect with peers and instructors virtually. Certainly, then, with care and consideration, language learning can happen successfully and meaningfully in online spaces.

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Author Bios

Alanna Carter is an Educational Developer, Online Learning Specialist at McMaster University and has taught in English language programs across Toronto including at Ryerson University and the University of Toronto. Alanna holds a Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction and a TESL Canada certificate. She is currently completing a certificate in instructional design. Alanna's scholarly and professional interests include supporting international students and fostering environments that encourage culture, diversity, and inclusion. She publishes and presents regularly on interculturalism and digital pedagogies. In her daily work, Alanna strives to create high-quality, accessible, and engaging opportunities for all learners.



Shereen Seoudi is an Instructional Designer at D2L and an English for Academic Purposes instructor at the Real Institute of Ryerson University. She received her Master of Education in Second Language Education and TESL Certificate from the University of Toronto and is working towards a certificate in instructional design. She has taught English for Academic Purposes at several universities across Toronto including University of Toronto and York University. Shereen has been involved in a wide range of educational projects and has held multiple roles including Course Lead and Curriculum Developer. She presents and publishes regularly on a variety of topics related to technology and the language classroom. Her current research interests include digital technologies and instructional design for academic English classrooms.

