

Engaging Students in Effective Online English Teaching

Lê Thị Tuyết Minh, M.A

Introduction

Online education has grown dramatically over the past decade, especially during the spread of the coronavirus pandemic in the past 6 months, schools and universities have moved towards online teaching. 'Online learning carries a stigma of being lower quality than face-to-face learning, despite research showing otherwise' (Hodges et al., 2020). Online teaching and learning have their own possibilities that instructors can take advantage of and enhance new learning experience for learners. In this paper the writer first gives an overview of online teaching, then suggests ideas for promoting effective online English teaching.

An overview of online teaching

Online education, including online teaching and learning, has been studied for decades. Numerous research studies, theories, models, standards, and evaluation criteria focus on quality online learning, online teaching, and online course design. What we know from research is that effective online learning results from careful instructional design and planning, using a systematic model for design and development. The design process and the careful consideration of different design decisions have an impact on the quality of the instruction. This medium requires new modes of presentation and interaction.

Advantages of online teaching and learning

Online learning offers a variety of educational opportunities:

- Increasing flexibility of time: Learning and teaching can occur at times that are more convenient and productive for both students and teachers. Students can work at their own pace within a given framework (McIntyre & Mirriahi).
- Providing learners with a flexible learning environment from any location as long as they have a good internet connection.
- Student-centered learning: students must learn to take responsibility and have self-discipline
- Experiment learning through multimedia presentations. The variety of online tools can enhance the student learning experience by providing opportunities for individual learning styles and helping students to become more versatile learners. New technologies can be used to engage and motivate students. Technology can also be used to support students in their learning activities. Online teaching can allow teachers to experiment with techniques only available in online environment.
- Information sharing: the instructor and students can access and share information more easily and readily when joining online communities.

Challenges of online teaching and learning

- Familiarity with the online environment
- Capacity to use the medium to its advantage
- Providing quick responses and feedback to students
- Little or no face-to-face interaction
- More work
- Intense requirement for self-discipline

Theoretical background of effective online teaching

The theoretical model developed by Garrison, Anderson, & Archer (2000, as cited in Anderson, 2008) views the creation of an effective online educational community as involving 3 critical components: cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. The work has been referenced by hundreds of scholars and is arguably the most popular model used for both the research and practice of online learning. It postulates that deep and meaningful learning results when there are sufficient levels of 3 component presences. The first is providing a sufficient degree of cognitive presence, such that serious learning can take place in an environment that supports the development and growth of critical thinking skills. It is the content of the course. The second, social presence, relates to establishing a supportive environment in a collaborative context so that students can express their ideas. Finally, in formal education, teaching presence is critical for the process of learning, in which teachers design and organize the learning experience.

According to Gold (2001 as cited in Cardullo, 2003), online facilitators serve their students in three important ways. Organizing involves setting the objectives, procedural rules, and timetables for the experience of learning. The facilitator also serves a socializing function by fostering a friendly environment. Specifically, effective facilitators send out welcome messages, use a personal tone, and seed their

feedback with specific examples and references. Instructors also provide social role-modeling of appropriate online behavior, even assisting students in becoming better students. Instructors, in the intellectual role, guide the students' journey to understanding. This is accomplished by probing and questioning students about their responses, by summarizing main themes, and by linking these to assignments such as readings, written responses, and independent and group projects.

Oliver & Herrington (2003) demonstrated the constituent elements of online learning setting as in the figure below.

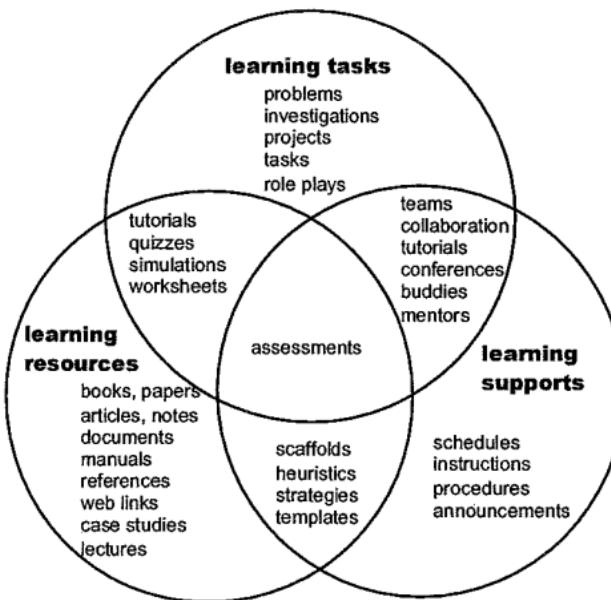


Figure: Constituent elements of online learning setting (Oliver & Herrington, 2003)

May & Short (2003) used the metaphor, gardening in cyberspace, to talk about creating an environment that fosters learning and personal growth. The practices of good gardening—positioning, conditioning soil, watering, and controlling weeds and pests—all serve as useful analogues to good online pedagogical practices, including addressing individual differences, motivating the student, providing feedback, and avoiding information overload.

Some ideas on engaging students in effective online English teaching

According to the writer's observation, online learner engagements are influenced by the following factors: content, tasks, teaching method, technology, teaching tools, incentives, encouragement, and supplementation. Six core items for effective online English teaching are identified as: the course content, the learning activities, the teaching methods, the learning incentives, the supportive learning environment and the supplementary materials. Interaction is the most crucial element in online learning. No one denies the importance of interaction in education. It is even more vital in online teaching, with its special characteristics, different from face-to-face education. Teachers need to promote teacher-student as well as student-student interaction as much as possible, employing all kinds of vehicles at their best.

In addition, building an encouraging and supportive learning environment/ community is also crucial for effective learning to take place.

Therefore, instructors can facilitate online courses with four primary dimensions: structuring an effective course design, creating community and engagement, facilitating online interaction, and supplying adequate learning supports.

Course design

- Organize course content and activities in a clear, short and simple way. Try to think like a student. Long lectures fail to engage students in a face-to-face class – and are even more ineffective online. So, break the lecture into some small chunks.
- Design courses in a way that can promote students' autonomy in online learning settings.
- Create a schedule for meaningful and active involvement in online classes.
- Add visual appeal. Something pleasant, interesting is more likely to attract viewers' attention. The appearance of the interface and the PowerPoint slide affects students' enjoyment and therefore their engagement.
- Make teaching more engaging by using a variety of activities.

- Give students chances for presentations, project sharing, etc. Give some small topics for students to look out for information and they will share with one another in the next class meeting. Student collaboration leads to a sense of community and higher learning outcomes.
- Make the most of the tools of the platform like: forum, chat, polls, and so on. Try to take advantage of the learning opportunities afforded by the online technologies that a face-to-face classroom cannot have.
- Make use of current events/ news. Discussions and links to hot news are often motivating to students.
- Incorporate with other websites for assignments, supplementary resources.

Community and Engagement

- State the objectives of the activities clearly so that students can understand and have motivation to fulfill the tasks.
- Make the lessons appealing with games, videos, etc. These activities should be well integrated into the lesson as students always expect a fun, friendly learning atmosphere. Have fun! There are many games and resources on the Web that teachers can utilize to enhance virtual classroom experience. Try to find new ways of engaging your students.
- Try out peer-teaching.
- Bring foreigners into the lesson with videos, YouTube, ...
- Show the teacher's warmth and care with soft words, voice and intonation.
- Frequently give praise and encouragement.
- Construct a reward system of points: roll call, bonus marks for assignments or participation in the lesson, etc.
- Build a supportive environment: Teachers give scaffolding, clues to help students. Students can also give mutual help.

Interaction

- Design a balanced course with three equal components of interaction: teacher to student, student to student and student to resource.
- Maximize teacher-student and student-student interaction in all ways by frequently asking small questions, or discussions with pairwork and groupwork.
- Create multiple opportunities for making students and their work visible on the course platform such as posting in discussion forums, making opinion polls. There is also an idea that all students should turn on their webcams so that they see the faces of other students, which helps create an atmosphere like a face-to-face classroom, not feeling lonely.
- Do reflective activities. Ask students for feedbacks on the course as early as about week 3. Also encourage students need to track their progress themselves.
- Frequently utilize opinion polls. It is a way to get students opinions and also a chance for teachers to interact and evaluate students' engagement in the lesson.

Learning supports

- Well supply students with learning and supplementary materials, exercises, references.
- Give some small review exercises on LMS after each lesson to help students consolidate the knowledge.
- Assign homework for each lesson and give responses
- Available to give help and support students with both learning content and technology
- Upload lectures after each lesson so that students can review when necessary

On the other hand, in order to promote learning online effectively, teachers also need supports from the Faculty/ school in some aspects like providing user-friendly online learning platforms and workshops for instructors and students to facilitate the teaching and learning experiences. Students also express concerns related to internet connection and LMS slowdown. Students like having a foreign teacher to join in the lesson. Besides, they also suggest integrating with another website for listening as the audio files sometimes are not clear when being transmitted from an online teaching platform.

Conclusion

Online education emphasizes an interactive learning environment, therefore effective online instructions have to facilitate and enhance interaction with three equal components: teacher to student, student to

student and student to resource. To engage students in online teaching, teachers must pay attention to four primary dimensions: structuring an effective course design, creating community and engagement, facilitating online interaction, and supplying adequate learning supports. This requires a great deal of effort from the teacher. The online process requires both instructor and students to take active interactive, collaborative roles to co-create a productive learning process. An effective online classroom is not a lecture classroom online, but it is an active learning classroom online, which is the blend of teaching and learning tools.

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