

Best Practices for the Teaching of Languages Online

Department of Hispanic Studies

December 2, 2018

2018-19 HISP Distance Education Committee members: Daniel Delgado, Antonio Perez-Núñez, Marta Ramírez Martínez, Silvia Rodríguez Sabater (Chair), and Allison Zaubi.

Introduction

Teaching languages online comes with some specific challenges as language teachers in an online teaching situation need different skills than those they use in the face-to-face classroom and also compared to skills needed in other content areas (Hampel and Stickler, 2005; Lowes, 2008). There are many resources on how to prepare teachers for online language teaching and the skills needed for this teaching environment (Compton, 2009). However, unless properly trained, some language teachers have doubts as to whether an online course could provide L2 learners with the linguistic knowledge and practice to develop oral language skills (Blake, 2008; Sánchez-Serrano, 2008). The main objective of this “Best Practices” document is to aid in the understanding of how to provide conversation practice, vocabulary and grammar practice, appropriate language input, opportunities for real negotiation of meaning activities among learners and/or other speakers using the appropriate technology tools available.

We all have different levels of expertise when it comes to online teaching (adapted from Compton, 2009):

Novice teachers have the basic technological skills and ability to use a range of technology tools, an understanding of their constraints and possibilities. They have the ability to identify strategies for online community building, strategies to facilitate communicative competence in online interaction, and the ability to identify language learning theories and curriculum design frameworks for online language learning, as well as online language assessment.

Proficient teachers have the ability to choose suitable technologies to match online language learning tasks, the ability to deal with constraints and possibilities of different technologies, the ability to foster online communication to facilitate communicative competence and online interaction, the ability to choose suitable materials to match language learning tasks, the ability to apply language learning theories and curriculum design frameworks for online language learning, the ability to use different assessment methods. They also have the ability to evaluate online language learning courses based on one or more frameworks and to modify tasks or components accordingly.

Expert teachers show creativity in using and adapting technology for online language learning tasks, creativity in using and adapting materials to create new online language materials in class to facilitate communicative competence and online interaction, the ability to create and facilitate online socialization and community building, as well as integrated assessment of language learning. They also have the ability to evaluate online language learning courses based on one or more frameworks and to modify tasks or components accordingly.

Suggested best practices are presented in the following categories:

- A. Overview and Orientation
- B. Content, Organization, and Navigation
- C. Assessment, Feedback, and Anti-plagiarism
- D. Communication, Interaction, and Participation
- E. Accessibility and Usability

A. Overview and Orientation

Create an orientation module where students can find key information for the course since day one. This orientation module should have the following elements:

1. The syllabus. Be sure your syllabus contains at least the following information:

- Instructor contact information
- Office/consultation hours availability
- Expectations for student success and participation
- Student learning outcomes
- Course goals aligned to learning objectives
- A list of required materials
- Grading policy
- Disability statement
- The Honor Code
- Late work policy
- Online attendance policy
- Technical support on campus

****Please remember that the college-wide “Policy on Course Syllabi” applies to all courses taught by College of Charleston faculty:**

<http://policy.cofc.edu/documents/7.6.10.pdf>******

2. Instructions for online platforms other than OAKS (i.e. how to enroll in the Supersite or other type of technology required during the course).

3. A warm welcome announcement. It helps with orientation and helps create a safe trusting environment critical to online course success. It is highly recommended that you create a welcome video so that students can put a “face to a name”.
4. Specific discussion forum for the students to ask general and technical questions about the course. This will help to avoid answering the same questions through individual emails.
5. A forum for the students to introduce themselves. In order to foster community-building and interaction, it is crucial to have an introductory forum and icebreaker in the beginning. Student retention and success in your course are directly related to the interactions that happen in the course. Get your students interacting and engaged from the very beginning of the course!
6. A quiz about the syllabus. Here you can ask students key questions about the syllabus and the important policies that will drive the rest of the semester. This is a great way to make sure your students read the syllabus!
7. Include a F.A.Q. section. Maybe you will not be able to do this by yourself the first time you teach online, but you may want to ask more experienced colleagues for help. As you continue teaching online you will find that students ask the same types of questions, especially at the beginning of course.

B. Content, Organization, and Navigation

1. The course needs to be well organized and easy to navigate from day one. You can organize your course by module, topic, or by week. Try to have a similar structure in every module (topic, or week) so students are familiar with the structure.
2. Each module (topic or week) should have a description of the student learning outcomes and goals telling students what they will learn and why.
3. In addition to the syllabus, include a course calendar with all the activities that need to be done and due dates. You may want to use different colors for different types of assignments. You may need to specify which activities or readings need to be done before others and maybe restrict access on OAKS until completed.
4. Instructions need to be very clear and organized for students to understand what they need to do. Remember you are not there in person to tell them.
5. Make sure the content is delivered in more than one way to address students with different learning styles. Use the textbook, handouts, video lectures, audio lectures, Voicethread, Powerpoint presentations, YouTube videos, etc.
6. Ensure that the links outside of OAKS are accurate, up to date, and easily found. You may want to provide access to links in different places (e.g., OAKS, documents, etc.).
7. One of the most challenging aspects of teaching a second language online is the interpersonal oral practice in pairs or small groups. It is essential that there are interpersonal oral activities on the Supersite between classmates (you can create your own easily), and any other sites such as Talkabroad, Boomalang or En vivo with native speakers. Students can also use technology such as Zoom (which has recording capabilities) to do their pair work activities.

8. Finally, to succeed in an online course, students need to be aware of all the technology requirements. Make a list both in the syllabus and/or inform them via email of what you expect them to have in order to fully participate in the course.

C. Assessment and Feedback

Assessment:

1. Include formative and summative assessments on various components (e.g. speaking, listening, reading, writing, and/or interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational).
2. Give students clear ideas about what is important to learn and the criteria or expectations for 'good' work (e.g., rubrics, models, etc.).
3. Provide detailed instructions and tips for completing assignments.
4. Provide multiple low-stakes assessments that focus on the course and/or student learning objectives (assessment for learning).
5. Include activities using apps or quizzes that provide immediate feedback on student performance (i.e., students receive a score after completing online assignment) such as Google Forms or quizzes on OAKS.
6. Provide regular feedback about student performance in a timely manner on a variety of assignments (discussion board posts, handouts, quizzes, etc.). For online summer and/or express online courses, you may try to provide students with feedback within 24 hours. For a semester-long course, students should receive feedback within 48-72 hours in order to enhance your teacher presence.
7. Use guided peer-feedback in written drafts, oral presentations, etc.
8. Use written reflections that allow students to track their own learning progress.
9. Have students use online checklists on OAKS to help them keep track of their progress.
10. Obtain information from early feedback surveys to identify any issues, adapt and/or change teaching and learning activities to meet student needs.
11. Make sure your summative assessment tools (e.g., tests, quizzes, projects, IPAs, etc.) are aligned with your formative assessment and instruction, and that they include detailed instructions.

Feedback:

1. Give feedback in a variety of formats (e.g. written, audio, video, etc.).
2. Provide timely feedback. You may try to provide students with feedback within 24 hours. For a semester-long course, provide students feedback within 48-72 hours in order to enhance your teacher presence.
3. Use apps or quizzes that provide automatic feedback, such as Google Forms or those included in textbook online sites.
4. If an assignment is graded, provide feedback in a timely manner. You may try to provide students with feedback within 24 hours. For a semester-long course, provide feedback within 48-72 hours in order to enhance your teacher presence.

5. Give specific feedback (e.g., explain grammar concepts and/or source of error), connect it to course content, and include suggestions for ways to improve future performance.
6. Make sure to first include positive feedback and constructive criticism.
7. Be sure your OAKS gradebook reflects the grading expectations in the syllabus.
8. Ensure your gradebook is accessible to students and that the final grade is released in OAKS so that students can keep track of their current grade.

Anti-plagiarism:

1. Arrange individual conferences/interviews (Skype, Zoom, etc.) in the target language to know your student's level within the first week of classes for semester-long courses or within the first two days.
2. Obtain graded assignments from the immediate previous instructor within the first week of classes for semester-long courses or within the first two days for summer/intensive courses.
3. As part of an introductory module, include a section related to plagiarism, a link to the honor code and some sort of assessment to ensure that students understand the implications of plagiarism.
4. Use anti-plagiarism software for written assignments, such as turn-it-in.
5. Place time limitations on exams given online.
6. Protect exams with passwords (if available).
7. Make sure questions on exams are seen one at a time.

D. Communication, Interaction, and Participation

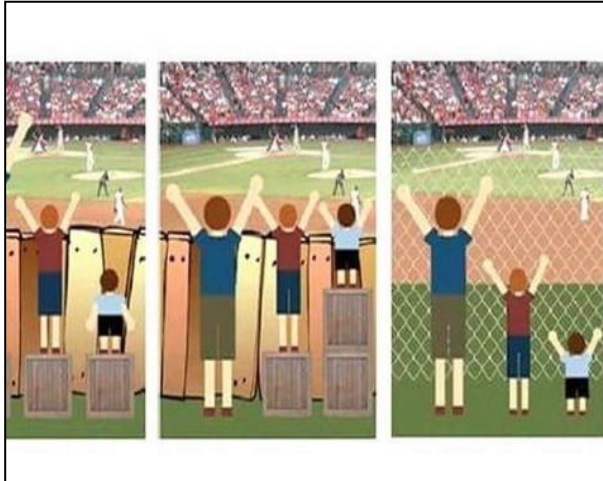
1. Include a variety of ways to communicate class news, reminders and answer questions frequently. Use the announcements section on the main page of the class, emails, discussion boards, etc. You may want to send weekly reminders about assignments and deadlines.
2. Provide clear expectations regarding students' participation, social and netiquette for online discussion and other forms of communication.
3. Be clear about email response times. You may try to provide students with email responses within 24 hours for summer/intensive courses. For a semester-long course, respond within 48-72 hours in order to enhance your teacher presence.
4. Let your students know that whereas, personal queries should be directed via private email, all content-focused, course-related and technical queries belong in the public spaces of the course site (i.e. specific discussion boards for these types of questions) so that all learners can benefit from them.
5. One of the most challenging tasks of teaching in an online environment is creating a sense of community. Do so by encouraging both faculty/student interactions and student/student interactions in every module.
6. Faculty/student interactions: Use module introductions and mini-lectures in text, video, or audio podcasts; announcements that remind, coach, suggest or inspire students; explanations and interactions with the students via email, forums and live classroom events.

7. Student/student interactions: Present opportunities for oral and written interpersonal interaction, such as pair work, group activities in the discussion board or via Google Docs, Virtual Classroom, Voicethread, Google Hangouts, Zoom, etc.
8. Provide opportunities to interact with native or proficient speakers of the language via Talkabroad, Boomalang, En vivo, Zoom, etc.

E. Accessibility and Usability

1. Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act and College of Charleston's Non-Discrimination Policy require faculty to provide equal access to educational opportunities for all students.
2. All course content, external resources (e.g. textbook website) and assessment must be accessible to all students. It is the instructor's responsibility to ensure access to all course content.
3. Utilize the College of Charleston's Center for Disability Services (CDS) as a resource to ensure your course complies with the College's Non-Discrimination Policy. <http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu/for-faculty-and-staff/index.php>. The CDS has an abundant amount of information about accessibility as well as technology resources to ensure equal access for all students.
4. Refer to the department's instructional technologist, Mike Overholt, (overholtm@cofc.edu) to confirm that the course is ADA (American's with Disabilities Act) compliant. He can conduct an ADA review of the course prior to the start of the class and provide feedback to ensure accessibility.

A sound pedagogy that ensures accessibility to course content for all learners (not just those with disabilities) is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). By implementing UDL, course content and assessment is accessible. UDL allows for a variety of ways in which students can engage and interact with the course content and assessment. Consider reading (or listening to by means of a screen reader) this PDF from The Journal of Educators Online-JEO, which explains in detail how to implement UDL in an online classroom. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1068401.pdf> Additionally, this image of three fans of different height watching a baseball game illustrates the basic principles of UDL.



A represents equal.

different height standing on boxes to watch the baseball game over a wooden fence. Only 2 fans can see.

B represents fair.

different height watching the baseball game over a wooden fence. All fans can see because they're standing on different level boxes.

C represents universal*.

different height standing on the ground watching the baseball

*The fence has not been removed but changed so that all fans can see the game without needing individual assistance.

The College of Charleston's DE Certification Course also provides a list of technology tools that allow for seamless implementation of UDL in an online course (adapted from the reading "Creating Online Lectures" by Jessica Smith)

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1068401.pdf>. Here is an abbreviated list of the tools presented:

- YouTube, Movie Captioner and VoiceThread: Free closed captioning. If using a different tool for a video lecture, provide a transcript that contains the written content of your lecture.
- Screen Reading Software: Both Windows 7 and Mac OS X have built-in technology for ensuring visually, hearing, dexterity, etc impaired learners have access to course content and assessment. See the CDS Website for more details about built-in accessibility.
- Adobe Acrobat: After converting a MS Word or Google Doc file to a PDF, tag the document using Acrobat's accessibility wizard. Tagging the document will allow for conversion to an audio file. Adobe's website outlines how to do this in a few, simple steps: <https://www.adobe.com/accessibility/pdf/pdf-accessibility-overview.html>.
- Contrast Checker: A contrast checker clarifies as to whether the contrast between text and backgrounds are clear and easy to see. <https://contrastchecker.com>

Other recommendations for Accessibility and Usability (Adapted from CofC's DE Certification Course, Instructional Designer, Amy Ostrom, UNCW and the University of Washington's IT Accessibility Guidelines.):

- When providing links, simply provide the link address or use a very clear and obvious name. Avoid labeling it with a generic, non-specific phrase like "click here."
- Consider using a more readable font like a san-serif font (e.g. Arial, Verdana, Tahoma, etc) and avoid italicizing. Underline and **bold** the font instead of italicizing.

- When setting time limits on anything graded including assessment, students should be informed of the time limit prior to starting the task.
- Provide a caption with images so that the image can be described in an audio format like a screen reader or tagged PDF. (See the baseball image captions from #5 above for an example.)
- Be sure to limit videos and recorded lectures to less than ten minutes so that students are engaged. (Optimal length is 6 minutes according to Philip Guo, assistant professor of Computer Science at the University of Rochester).
- Ensure that websites or other outside resources used in the class are accessible to all students. If you will be using an app or a textbook companion site, it is your responsibility to confirm they are compliant. (For example, Prezi is not considered accessible, so use Power Point as is it recommended for accessibility.)
- In a visual lecture (like Power Point) avoid putting too much text on one single slide and consider providing an outline of the presentation so that students can actively take notes during the presentation.
- Coordinate with the LCWA TLT specialist, Mike Overholt (overholtm@cofc.edu), or the Faculty DE Coordinator, Doug Ferguson (fergusond@cofc.edu), and seek feedback regarding the accessibility and usability of the course. Additionally, University of Washington has a thorough Accessibility Checklist with links to resources that explain accessibility guidelines compliant with the law. <https://www.washington.edu/accessibility/checklist/>

Conclusion

To conclude, please find some recommendations adapted from Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota Survey (2012):

- Be flexible, very organized, curious, inventive, explore, experiment, be accessible, and be ready to work hard.
- More time is required working online than face-to-face and to do it right it will take a lot of time. Be sure to take a break at least every hour.
- After getting your DE certification, research, observe colleagues' courses, consult with others that have more experience.
- Use backwards design in course development (i.e. focus on the outcomes and build the course backwards), start developing the course early, the pace for online is slower than face-to-face, design with a consistent and repetitive pattern, syllabus and directions need to be extremely clear and detailed, have everything done before the course starts, don't be afraid to ask for help from the liaisons at TLT, know the curriculum well, take your own course as if you were a student.
- Be sure to have reliable tech support for you and your students both for OAKS and the Supersite; do not try to solve student technical problems.
- Know your students, make sure they know how much time it takes to take an online course, prepare time management tips in the syllabus. If you are going to have synchronous sessions make sure they are planned beforehand and show at time of registration.

- Encourage students to speak, demand the same from a face-to-face course, monitor your students' work, give and enforce rules and deadlines, get quality feedback promptly and regularly, have a Plan B.
- The only limit to what can be done in an online class are the limits that you set yourself, offer several ways for students to learn, design a lot of resources for practice, use authentic materials and resources, do at least one synchronous oral interview, have students talk to each other with a variety of online tools.
- Learn a variety of tools to engage your students, start small and do not use all tools at once, use a variety of online tools to better differentiate student learning, create some of your own materials, use the discussion board on OAKS, Zoom, Google Docs, Instagram, etc.
- Connect with your students early and create a sense of community in a variety of ways (videos, discussion board, sharing favorite pictures, songs, etc), answer emails in a timely manner (24 hours on week days and 24-48 hours on weekends), be present in the course so students know you are there and care, communicate clearly in Spanish or English depending on the level and the message but be careful with humor, find what motivates your students and share your experiences with them.
- Do it, learn from your mistakes, enjoy your successes, and understand that if not for online learning some students would not be able to study at all!