

Harnessing Learner Interest: Integrating Interactive Online Learning in The Foreign Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

One of the most difficult challenges instructors face in any teaching environment is keeping learners engaged and interested in the course material; however, this challenge assumes an even greater significance in an online class. In traditional classroom settings, engagement is easily accomplished through interaction integrated into teaching practices; however, in online settings, research underscores the need to provide learners with interactive learning experiences that keep them engaged with one another and with course content that can replicate the interaction that is inherent in traditional course environments (Schroeder-Moreno, 2010). In this article, the author explores the construct of interaction as it relates to the teaching of foreign languages in traditional, blended, or online settings. Topics discussed include: the importance of interaction within a course environment; interactivity and language learning; benefits of interaction to learners; and learner engagement strategies. An activity template illustrates an instructional approach for designing interactive learning activities and a process of integrating online interaction into a face-to-face (FTF) foreign language learning setting.

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Over the last few decades, the development and widespread acceptance of different theoretical perspectives among educational theorists, foreign language educators, and curriculum developers has transformed the process of how language learners should learn a second language (Thomas & Reinders, 2010). Additionally, the rapid development of advanced communications technologies and the ubiquity of Internet-based resources support the need to incorporate diverse methods that facilitate learning (Abrami, Bernard, Bures, Borokhovski, & Tamim, 2011; Groff, 2013). Utilization of these technologies, particularly in the field of mobile applications, has altered the educational environment, offering a quality alternative to transfer the delivery of learning from a strictly face-to-face (FTF) format to blended and distance education settings. The focus of this paper is a discussion concerning the dimension of interaction in traditional FTF and virtual learning environments. An integral element of providing quality foreign language education, especially for

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virtual learners, is the incorporation of learning activities that engage learners and prompt interaction among participants, increase communication, and generate a more satisfying learning process.

2. The Importance of Interaction Within the Course Environment

Distinguishing the difference between interaction and interactivity is important in any discussion of FTF or distance learning. Su, Bonk, Magjuka, Liu, and Lee (2005) identified interactions as “reciprocal events” between at least two objects and two actions; interactions are the result of the mutual influence of each on the other. Interactivity, on the other hand, centers more on the process, focusing on dynamic actions, and provides the active elements necessary for the learning process to occur. To clarify the vague meaning of the construct of interaction, Moore (1989) proposed three types of interaction (learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner), which is a widely accepted definition and focus for research. Using these three types of interaction as a foundation, instructors can direct their teaching approaches and create learning activities aimed at incorporating one, two, or all three types, depending on the complexity and scope of an assignment.

Research underscores the need to provide learners in blended and online courses with learning experiences that keep them engaged with one another and with course content that can replicate the interaction that is inherent in FTF course environments (Schroeder-Moreno, 2010). Lack of interaction is documented as a major contributing factor in student attrition and dissatisfaction in online environments (Hew, Cheung & Ng, 2010; Zydney, deNoyelles & Seo, 2012). In blended and online settings, asynchronous computer-mediated communications, such as discussion or other native content management system (CMS) tools, are often employed to enhance and develop critical thinking processes, as well as to promote interaction among learners (Kim & Bateman, 2010). Recent developments in the field of mobile applications add a useful capability for synchronous interaction among course participants. Regardless of the specific technique or tool utilized, effective interaction should be an inherent element of course objectives and integrated with the instructor’s guidance.

Several studies support the idea that interactivity increases collaboration and cooperation within the learning environment, and that the quality of interaction determines the success of online learning and teaching (Jung, Choi, Lim & Leem, 2002; Chang, 2009; Nandi, Hamilton & Harland, 2012). Effective interaction among students can contribute to meaningful learning experiences when learners efficiently interact, whether it occurs in a traditional classroom or through an asynchronous or synchronous medium. Online learners will need to have clear goals and prepare strategies to reach those goals, either individually or collectively in group environments. Course instructors can utilize various strategies and techniques to monitor and direct their learners’ actions, facilitate interactions, and provide a reflection to learners on their works.

3. Interaction and Language Learning

A great deal of research has been conducted on both theoretical and pragmatic approaches that emphasize the criticality of interaction in language learning environments. Interaction is considered an essential component of blended and online learning (Ge, 2012; Lai, 2012; Qing & Keshan, 2010), without which, as noted by Moore (1989), effective online learning cannot take place. In blended and online courses, interaction provides two important functions: first, it is an opportunity for learners to engage in active learning as opposed to passive absorption of content; and second, interaction provides opportunities for learners to learn from their peers (Lai, 2012). Both functions support social constructivist approaches in addition to providing a pragmatic, content or task-based, directed learning experience.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is one of the prevalent methodologies currently employed in the field of foreign or second language acquisition. The theoretical foundations of CLT are not based on a single theory but draw on learning and teaching theories from several diverse fields. Richards (2006) emphasized that CLT is not a language teaching method; rather, it is a teaching methodology composed of a variety of methods utilizing materials and techniques appropriate to the context of learning. At the core of the CLT methodology is the concept of communicative competence, which can be thought of as an individual's ability to effectively use the language for a wide range of purposes and functions. Various aspects of communicative competence include knowing how to: vary language use according to setting and participants; produce and understand different types of text; and maintain communications despite limitations in language knowledge (Richards, 2006). To accomplish this, current language teaching practices incorporate processes designed to promote interaction and interactivity among learners and collaborative creation of meaning (Aimin, 2013; Meskill & Anthony, 2010; Turuk, 2008). This approach promotes utilization of interactive assignments not just for online classes, but also for integration into a blended setting, by providing a tangible outcome focused on a specific and limited topic or concept.

4. Benefits of Interaction to Learners

A basic tenet of constructivism posits that the learner constructs or generates knowledge through interactions in a learning environment Su, et al (2005). Learners must be involved in meaningful tasks to be motivated to overcome difficult challenges they may encounter in assignments or a project. Participatory interaction by students is a critical factor of success, whether in a FTF classroom or online (Sutton, 2001). In traditional classroom settings, engagement is easily accomplished through interaction integrated into teaching practices. In online settings, instructors can facilitate this by ensuring that learners are motivated to actively engage, exchange ideas, provide constructive feedback, and challenge each other to create a collaborative and successful learning environment.

Three major challenges that students often associate with online courses were noted by several researchers (Lombardi, 2007; McCarthy, Smith & DeLuca, 2010; Van den Branden, 2009): relevance of content; a sense of immediacy; and a lack of spontaneous communications. As reported in numerous studies regarding student discussions (Baran & Correia, 2009; Beckett, Amaro-Jimenez & Beckett, 2010; Hew & Cheung, 2011; Stepp-Greany, 2002), it is important for faculty to address one of the most common concerns expressed by students involved in blended or online courses; chiefly, that activities are sometimes perceived as irrelevant or "busy-work". Online content must be relevant and applicable to the topic, avoiding content that learners may perceive as a major detractor to interest and productivity (Lombardi, 2007). Another major concern is a false sense of immediacy; regardless of the speed of responses from instructors, the online environment produces a sense that the lag time of communication disrupts the learning process. A further challenge noted by students' centers on the lack of spontaneous communication and visual cues encountered in a face-to-face course. These issues are of significant concern to learners and need to be addressed by faculty engaging in online instruction.

5. Engaging Learners Through Interaction

When conceiving and developing activities designed to engage language learners in blended or online settings, it is important to consider not just how to capture their interest, but also how to capitalize on it. The following set of principles proposed by Brandl (2008) provide a framework for implementing CLT practices in instruction and when creating activities to use as engagement strategies for interaction.

- Use tasks as an organizational principle. Emphasis is placed on developing communicative skills, using grammar only as much as needed to support those skills. The central focus is task-based instruction (TBI), distinguished as real-world tasks and pedagogical tasks.
- Promote learning by doing. A hands-on approach enhances cognitive engagement and better integrates knowledge into long-term memory.
- Input needs to be rich. Materials should be authentic in nature, emphasizing real-world scenarios, contain authentic language, and reflect real-world language use.
- Promote cooperative and collaborative learning. In collaborative and interactive settings, learners are actively engaged in the learning process through which they negotiate meaning.
- Provide error corrective feedback. While explicit error feedback is considered an essential requirement for improving learner's language development and progress, Brandl acknowledged that attaining positive effects is a long-term process dependent on application of effective corrective strategies.

Several key concepts need to be considered regarding activity development associated with learner engagement. The idea of relevance is such a critical consideration that the instructional approach should be directed towards an outcome that learners will feel is beneficial, with a tangible and recognizable task-value. Motivation is another important aspect to consider; the more interest learners feel for a task or assignment, the more effort they are likely to invest in producing a more quality outcome. Relevance will catch learner interest, but motivation will drive continued interest. The critical link is authenticity; in foreign language classrooms, authentic activities conducted in a collaborative learning setting have been recognized as an essential method of facilitating learning (Saville-Troike, 2012). Engagement activities should be conducted in as authentic conditions as possible to relate the activity to real-world relevance.

In the CLT methodology, task-based approaches are common practices that most effectively take advantage of the diverse, authentic resources available online. Brandl (2008) delineated TBI into two categories of tasks: real-world and pedagogical. Real-world tasks underscore an authentic aspect of language or culture necessary to interact with in a real-world environment. Pedagogical tasks, on the other hand, connect the classroom and the real world, incorporating a teacher's pedagogical goal and the social contexts of the learning environment.

The integration of internet-based resources allows for nearly unlimited access to authentic source materials. In addition, this principle emphasizes the need for the instructor to incorporate maximum use of the target language in both classroom and virtual activities.

6. Designing Interactive Activities

Various strategies, tools, and types of activities are applicable when devising and designing instructional approaches to create interaction. One approach is integrating an online component, such as asynchronous online discussion (AOD), into an FTF setting, which provides a learning opportunity situated completely external of the classroom. This process addresses two important issues often cited by learners: lack of time, and 'busy work'. AOD is not limited to the role of the formulaic use of the 'discussion board', in which students merely post comments and responses to a given prompt. With proper pedagogical application, AOD becomes a robust communications and collaboration instrument that offers learners a method to actively engage with instructors and peers. Additionally, this approach supports the 'anywhere, anytime' accessibility of mobile applications and social media platforms. Utilized appropriately, this process can allow learners to concentrate solely on one aspect of their foreign language learning, such as writing, without interfering with or taking away from valuable class time and instruction.

Following is a sample activity designed to engage learners with the three types of interaction through an asynchronous process. This approach is applicable to learners involved in traditional FTF and virtual learning environments, as it can be tailored in a manner that sparks interest for current or future jobs, research, or education. It is particularly beneficial to learners who may be doing some form of research or reporting requiring detailed knowledge of authentic sources. In the Analyze and Report activity, learners will interact with the instructor and other learners through an AOD-based assignment using any type of content (CMS) or learning management system (LMS) platform that supports discussion. Depending on the institution, the CMS/LMS platform may be proprietary, such as Blackboard or Sakai. Alternatively, many schools utilize open-source systems, the most common being Moodle, Drupal, and Joomla, to name a few. The key factor here is the availability of a robust discussion capability that can be adequately tailored for use with language learners of all levels. The assignment format is intended for individual work but is also applicable to pair or even small group collaboration, depending on the complexity of the assignment. Inherent in the activity process is each participant's adherence to the established and agreed upon norms of individual participation and contribution. Sections in the template include activity summary, objectives, materials, facilitator preparation, assignment criteria, sequential process, and any amplifying notes for the facilitator. Sections can be included or deleted as necessary.

Table 1
Interaction Activity: Analyze and Report

Analyze and Report
Activity Summary
<p>The Analyze and Report Activity utilizes an asynchronous process to engage learners in a task-based process that incorporates three types of interaction (learner-content, learner-instructor, learner-learner). Learners work individually to complete a two-phase, comprehensive project assignment and produce a presentation or report based on their selected topic using their technology tool of choice.</p> <p>Phase 1 provides learners with introductory and background information on the specified topic; it consists of viewing a video and answering content questions, followed by reading a published news article, paper, or report and answering content questions. All work should be completed in the target language.</p> <p>Phase 2 involves learners conducting facilitator-guided research on the topic, gathering, and organizing information based on specified criteria, and creating a presentation or report using a platform, application, or software of their choice. All work should be completed in the target language.</p> <p>An alternative approach can be an option for learners to work collaboratively in pairs to produce the project assignment; however, all learners are responsible for completing individual participatory tasks.</p> <p>Objectives: During this activity: Learners build effective communication and interaction skills with instructor and other learners in an asynchronous environment. Learners improve individual critical thinking processes. They will explore online sources; find and gather material specific to the appropriate language level; analyze, distill, and organize information. Learners increase skills in reading, listening comprehension, and writing in the target language (TL).</p> <p>Language Level: Intermediate Delivery Mode: Asynchronous Time Required: 7-21 days (dependent on project scope and language proficiency level)</p>

Materials:

1. Access to an online asynchronous assignment tool (CMS) for facilitator and learners.
2. Internet access for facilitator and learners.
3. List of Institutionally approved online sources authorized for educational purposes.
4. Video clip and prepared written report on topic (Source: Palestinian Authority, NGO, SME)

Preparation:

1. Post an announcement in the CMS that includes a brief introduction to the activity and instructions on how to complete the assignment.
2. Create a forum for the assignment in the CMS for Phase 1 and Phase 2 of assignment and a Drop Box for the assignment submission.
3. Create a forum for the reflection posts in the CMS Discussion Board.
4. Prepare an example document for Phase 2 that exemplifies the requirements learners must meet to successfully complete the assignment. Learners should be able to use this example as a reference of how to compile and organize information when creating their own materials, not just for this assignment, but as a standard process. Ensure your educational institute has copyright permissions to utilize online sites and content for educational purposes.

Phase 1 Assignment:

- a. Listening comprehension: create/edit video clip from authentic source (interview, news release, etc.).
- b. Reading comprehension: locate authentic written report (government release, news article, etc.).
- c. Create content questions for listening and reading.

Phase 2 Assignment:

- a. Locate/list minimum of 3 online sites of refugee camps for learners to choose from as primary research site for their project. Sites/sources can be from PA, UN, Red Crescent, or other NGOs.
- b. Detail assignment requirements (demographics, economic conditions, etc).
- c. Create grading rubric for assignments and forum posts (the primary focus is on language features and utilization, not specifically on content).

Assignment Criteria:

1. Topic: Explore situation and living conditions in refugee camps in Gaza.
 - a. Phase 1 assignment: all answers in target language at appropriate proficiency level.
 - b. Phase 2 assignment: the intent is to provide a presentation/report that enhances topic knowledge for all learners; however, the focus of learning is on utilization and accuracy of target language.
 - 1) Learners have option of technology tool (social media platform, application, software) to develop/create presentation/report. Project should include multi-media content (video, audio commentary, text, etc.).
 - 2) Assignment is completed in target language at appropriate proficiency level.
 - 3) Learners select primary research site from provided list. Utilization of additional online resources is encouraged.
 - 4) Copyright citations, if appropriate.
 - c. Learners post a reflection of their experience in the Discussion Board forum and respond/comment on a minimum of two other learners' submissions.
 - 1) Post and response should be a minimum of 100 words and focus on the usefulness of the activity as a learning process.
 2. Evaluation: facilitator provides feedback and evaluation of the project outcomes based on rubric.
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- a. Feedback focused on learner's utilization of language features.
 - b. Error correction on relevant linguistic elements (grammar, forms, etc) in TL.
 - c. Encourage iterative resubmission of assignments based on feedback/corrections.

Process:

1. Post the task instructions in the Assignments section and attach assignment materials and example document.
2. Post an announcement for the activity in the Announcements section.
3. Learners access the assignment instructions and materials.
4. Learners complete Phase 1 of assignment and submit answer document in the Drop Box by assigned date.
5. Learners complete Phase 2 of assignment and submit answer document in the Drop Box by assigned date.
6. Learners post their reflection about the assignment in the Discussion Board forum. Learners view a minimum of two other learner's project submissions, provide observations/feedback.
7. Facilitator provides feedback and evaluation of the assignments in the CMS forums.

Facilitator Notes:

1. Cover copyright legality and the institution's Fair Use policy with learners.
2. Alternative reflection process: pre-assign which projects each learner should view and comment on. This ensures widest interaction among learners and dissemination of information.
3. When assignment is conducted in FTF or blended class setting, all interaction among learners and with instructor is limited to asynchronous process. This ensures maximum use of class time for specific classroom instruction.
4. Option for out-of-class synchronous communications (such as video or text/chat) can be established with a set schedule of availability. This is becoming a more common practice /expectation with many students.

6. Conclusion

One of the guiding principles of a constructivist approach is that knowledge emerges in contexts within which it is relevant, with an inherent link between the context of learning and the embedded knowledge associated with it (Hubert, 2013). Research has shown that when there is a demonstrated applicability of the material to their daily activities, learners are more responsive to course content and exhibit greater motivation to participate. While the flexibility of asynchronous communications is a given component of online courses, that capability assumes a greater significance when transferred to an FTF setting. Given that capturing and maintaining interest is a key element of learner engagement, integrating an online component into an FTF education program fulfills the critical requirement for interaction among learners and is directly applicable to develop specific skills. A key factor of success is the assumption that all participants, faculty, and students, must be willing to dedicate the extra time necessary to adequately take advantage of the asynchronous medium.

In general, today's students are digital natives, and to successfully engage them, educational processes must meet their myriad needs. This concept has important implications for administrators and educators, in that it directly impacts educational policies, teaching methods, development and application of instructional technology, and development of curricula. It should be noted here that while the generalized approach of this article, and the associated activity, are directed towards teaching foreign language, the concept and process are equally applicable for many education topics. Further research can shed light on the efficacy of asynchronous teaching practices directed at specific skills improvement or their

impact on student motivation. Other areas of interest may be exploring the use of technology tools to provide an interactive mobile learning capability, or how open architecture design and differentiated learning can be effectively employed in relation to asynchronous, task-based instruction. For learners, there are many peripheral benefits of introducing online interactive processes into teaching practices, including: reinforcing knowledge acquisition through real-world application, increasing learner satisfaction, refining critical thinking skills, and enhancing learner autonomy, all of which lead toward improved learner engagement.

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