

Ways to Succeed in Online Teaching

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This paper summarizes the author's contribution to the LLL SIG-sponsored forum "Bridging Social Distances in Online Learning" that was presented at the JALT 2020 Online Conference, co-presented with Andrew Reimann, Joseph Dias, Catherine Takasugi, Jonathon Campbell, Natsuki Suzuki, and Fraser Gould.

Introduction

In my online (emergency remote) teaching during the pandemic in 2020, I aimed for two things: 1) make it as similar to in-person teaching as possible, and 2) add something new which was not possible offline. In this paper I will describe how I collaborated with fellow teachers to formulate a plan for how to conduct a class, which had formerly been conducted in a face to face mode, through online modalities.

It will also be explained how freshmen, and students who struggle with various mental and physical health problems, can be supported to have more successful online learning outcomes. Brief case studies will illustrate the points being made.

Helping teachers prepare for their first online lessons

As a senior teacher in the Integrated English Program at Aoyama Gakuin University, I was called upon to assist with the training of teachers new to the Active Listening class that I had been teaching for many years. Although I had techniques and experience that could inform their teaching, I also knew that I could gain insights about novel ways of accomplishing the same tasks using the technologies we had at hand in creative ways.

I set up a workshop with three teachers and we shared ideas with each other.

- Teacher A (more than 25 years of experience of teaching the course with limited technological skills) explained the concept of the course and the flow of the traditional teaching.
- Teacher B (new to the course and technologically very skilled) told us what we could do or could not do online.
- Teacher C (new to the course) was not bound by old ways and suggested innovative ideas, such as dividing the class into two as it was difficult to deal with 40 students in Zoom at one time.
- Teacher D (second year to the course with limited technological skills) asked many questions. The challenges became clear through those questions.

Later Teacher B summarized the teaching plans and clarified their pros and cons. Then, those summaries were shared with the others. Our background varied and we had different ideas, but we could contribute to each other's success by working as a team.

Helping students (especially freshmen) succeed in online learning

Without friends at the beginning of the academic year, in May, most freshmen mainly depended on the teacher. The following examples illustrate this.

First, the number of inquiries to the teacher from a class made up of freshmen was over twenty, while that from a class of sophomores was only two. The gap may suggest that sophomores could consult with their friends to figure out problems, while freshmen could not.

Another example is the length of time they needed to register on an extensive listening website used for the course. In the usual classroom where teachers and students meet face to face, most students need less than twenty minutes to register successfully. They help those who struggle, and thirty minutes is more than enough time for these administrative steps to be completed.

This year, however, it took two months for the whole class to complete the registration process correctly. The LMS's tracing system shows that one student checked the instructions ten times

and still did not register. He became stressed and had trouble joining the class after that frustrating experience.

Having easy ways for the students to contact the teacher is important. Shy students or students with psychosocial issues often stay after the session if they want to talk to the teacher privately.

Student E, with an integration disorder, sometimes talked about her worries and mental or physical conditions. She had repeated the course several times before, but she felt less anxious this time and could attend the sessions regularly and passed the course. Online teaching was better and easier for some students like her.

Other students preferred communication via the LMS (Fujitsu's CoursePower) or Gmail for quick responses, for privacy, or just to stay connected.

Student F was hospitalized twice because of depression. We corresponded back and forth several times. Later he could talk about his worries after Zoom classes had ended, and afterwards he was able to attend the class regularly. Unfortunately, he was the only student who could overcome depression among those in my classes. There were a couple of students who never contacted the teacher at all.

Promote a friendly atmosphere

The students sometimes were given five to ten minutes to chat in the breakout rooms. They often exchanged contact numbers. Many students said that thanks to that opportunity they could make friends and some had lunch or went shopping together. Virtual interactions developed into real ones.

However, this was only possible when they lived in the same area. Many students still lived in their hometowns—Hokkaido, Okinawa, or Fukushima—so it was difficult for students to “hang out” with each other. Yet, talking with each other weekly helped them a lot.

I set Snack Day and Costume Day. They brought some snacks and drinks and put on a hat, sunglasses, ears etc. They could relax and enjoyed the atmosphere.

Conclusion

I could achieve my goal to a certain extent. I could teach online as I did in-person with modifications. I tried something new which was possible only online, such as Costume Day, since students felt less inhibited wearing costumes in their own homes than they would have on campus. However, the most important thing, “to help students (especially freshmen) succeed online,” was the biggest challenge. Three freshmen out of thirty-nine in one class dropped out. They really needed both technical and psychological support in order to be successful.