Distance Learning

Guidance and Strategies

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Introduction

We're excited to have you as part of the team at Open Mind LLC. You've been chosen to teach ESOL through an online course hosted on our learning management system. The online setting presents many opportunities for students and with them, new challenges for instructors. If you're accustomed to traditional classroom instruction, the general lack of "body language and paralinguistic clues" can feel distressing. It's difficult to ascertain student's backgrounds and aptitudes using only text-based online communication. Add to that an overwhelming selection of platforms and tools that claim to bridge the current gap and, suddenly, the prospect of delivering a comparable online learning experience seems daunting! We'll discuss some helpful tips for new online instructors without assuming familiarity with our platform.

Affordances of Online Instruction

Rather than focus on what is lost in an online exchange, we'll begin by highlighting the affordances of online distance learning. Like most other aspects of our daily lives, online modes of learning lend themselves to flexibility, speed, and spatial advantages. Interaction can happen synchronously or asynchronously—a student can contact you with questions, ask other students in their group, and likewise, you can make announcements without being constrained by office hours. We can think of these as points of interaction. We'll focus on the ways affordances can be leveraged to enhance interactions between students, teachers, and even content. We'll also discuss the educational resources that are available to you and your students. Finally, we'll explore instructional strategies (including Keller's ARCS model).

Online Affordances for Interaction

Ignoring our proprietary LMS for a moment, our instructors and students have access to a wide variety of third-party educational tools: video conferencing through Skype, secure email and messaging, discussion boards, and social media groups. However, different media and communication methods are suited to some interactions more than others. Here are several tips to get you started.

- Research suggests that learner-learner interaction, sometimes overlooked, is extremely valuable (Anderson, 2008, p. 57). Discussion boards and yes, even Facebook groups, encourage learners to exchange information and gain a sense of community which, as language learners, your students require. That said, we advise that you choose just a few modes of communication and media delivery to avoid cognitive overload.

- Use the course landing page to highlight important information such as expected learning outcomes and the curriculum sequence. We recommend using an advance organizer to activate learner's prior knowledge and help new online learners assimilate information delivered in an unfamiliar format. Similarly, when creating or choosing videos and other media, keep materials embedded within the course curriculum when possible—there are tools available to embed instructional videos, content maps, and more into our LMS.

- As online learners, students have access to a wide variety of creative tools but try not to assume prior knowledge. Provide tool-specific guidance to prepare learners to deliver coursework, be it an animation, video clip, or formal essay. For

example, if you wish for students to complete a mind-map in Prezi, be sure that we provide access to that specific tool, otherwise, check if there's a free alternative. Finally, be sure to explain real-life scenarios where their newly acquired skills and knowledge are applicable—help convey skill transference (e.g. correspondence in English could make regional travel a more seamless or rewarding experience).

Online Instruction Strategies

- ARCS, which stands for attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction, is a model that describes factors that motivate learners. The acronym is explain as follows:

    - Begin your lessons with an activity, be it reading a Wikipedia article, watching a YouTube video, or other relevant media item. One such activity might be asking students to post their favorite food in their mother tongue and then provide the translation for all to read.

    - Media should be relevant to the real-life circumstances of the learners. We can't gain an interior view of each student's life, but we can try to find commonalities. Students may be looking to learn English to enhance employment opportunities abroad: emphasize that bi-lingual employees are highly sought after and valued in the workplace.

    - Promote learner confidence by laying content out in a way that gives students the opportunity to succeed. Think about offering a several ways for students to meet the requirements for the same assignment, like writing

a poem in English or uploading a voice clip of them singing a song.

- Encourage users to gain satisfaction by sharing their success in real life. Prompt learners to relate their assignments to their everyday interactions, plans, and aspirations for the future. This can be done through online discussion or reflection assignments.

2) Keep it light with games. Educational games offer a unique way to motivate students and there's a variety of ways to implement them on our LMS. If you're unsure about the many digital options, simple text-based games, like roleplays, are fun and effective ways to maintain interest.

3) Maintain social presence. We've touched on this earlier. As language learners, social presence cannot be overemphasized. Employ group projects to spur cohesion among students and promote a culture of collaboration.

Works Cited

Anderson, T. (2008). The theory and practice of online learning. Edmonton: AU Press.