



Features to be Mindful of When Constructing the Online Space

When using a Learning Management System (LMS) or another digital space, there will be features of the online space that can either help or hinder the language learning experience. Pay attention to how your space is set up and how it functions to ensure learners can access the course content without confusion and without taxing their cognitive load.

Smaller details of the online space can cause distraction and confusion for language learners who will be relying on the predictability and the patterns of the online space to make navigation easy. Minimizing automatic features and making other features explicitly known to your learners will help them to avoid uncertainty as they access the online space.

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Starting on the next page are examples of features to consider.



Features to Consider

INTERFACE LANGUAGE

For whatever platform or technology you are using, the language of the interface needs to be suitable for the language level of the learner. Anticipate any words that might cause confusion for learners and either change the word (if possible) or clarify the word in a course announcement, email, or activity orientation. For example, learners may not be familiar with the word “Dropbox” and will benefit from you describing it as “a place where you submit your assignment.” Note that online interface language is often borrowed from other contexts, thus learners may not find much help from dictionaries. Provide a glossary of technical and interface language if necessary.

SIMPLE AND CONSISTENT NAVIGATION

The interface language also plays a role in navigation. The vocabulary used in the navigation of an online course or activity should be clear and consistent to avoid misunderstanding. Many online platforms make effective use of icons to indicate similar content or media – point these icons out to your learners to help make their navigation easier.

Navigation structure should be simple, without an abundance of menus or course hierarchy. The use of headers will help to guide and remind language learners about content. As well, advance organizers will provide learners with a quick overview and reference point for content. Below is an example of an online course module advance organizer that you can copy and paste for your own use.

| Topic | Activity | Objective | Apx Time (min) |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|--|----------------|
| Softening language 1 | Self-paced learning activity | Learn about strategies used in Canada to make directives or requests less direct | 15 |
| Softening language 2 | Self-paced learning activity | Learn more strategies for “softening” directives | 30 |
| Understanding softened language | Dropbox assignment | Practice softening directives | 20 |
| Using softened language | Dropbox assignment | Practice softening directives | 30 |
| The importance of softened language | Self-paced learning activity | View a video about how feedback is given in Canada | 40 |
| | Discussion activity | Reflect on giving feedback | 45 |
| | Dropbox assignment | Practice giving softened feedback | 60 |
| Total suggested time | | | 4 hrs |



PAGE DISPLAY

Too much text on a screen can be overwhelming for language learners. Design your online activity or course with less textual and visual clutter to reduce the initial cognitive load of the learner as they enter the online space. Include strategically placed white space to make headers and other important content stand out. Include visuals when necessary; however, be aware that visuals that do not supplement content might end up being a distraction.

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FONT CHOICES

Some fonts may look great on paper but can be subtly distracting on a screen. Learn about which fonts are simple and work best in a digital environment, and adjust the font type if possible. Many technologies also provide users with the ability to adjust font size – find out if your platform does this, and point it out to learners.

NOTIFICATION SETTINGS

Many platforms have notifications settings such as message or sound indicators, new post markers, video conference “raised hand” icons, and others. Learners who are unaware of certain notifications might become confused or worry that they have missed some instruction or feedback. If your online space has a calendar feature, this will also include alerts and notifications. It might be useful to check and adjust your platform notification settings prior to that start of an activity or course, and let learners know about any notifications that are active.

These are just a few of the features of an online space that you will need to watch out for. Be observant about how you set up the online space, keeping in mind the cognitive load of your language learners. Some technologies will let you “view as a student.” Using this feature is a good way to experience your online learning space from a learner’s perspective.

