Learner Activity

Discussion Forum Tips for Learners

When participating in a discussion forum, language learners will need to attend to the language they are reading, writing, and posting in. In addition, they will attend to the interface language which is likely also English. A discussion forum can be overwhelming for language learners. Learners who are new to online learning may also have the added barrier of not being familiar with the norms of communicating in a space like a discussion forum. Even learners who have online experience might not readily distinguish between the casual use of text communication and the academic space of the class discussion forum.

Providing a reminder to your learners about effective practices for discussion forums will help them to reduce their cognitive load and it will set clear expectations for participating in a discussion. Ideally, you want learners to focus on their use and development of target language, rather than spending the bulk of their effort on the technology and culture of discussion forum communication, or on deciphering instructions and expectations for the discussion activity.

On the following pages is a set of discussion forum tips and reminders that you can share with your learners at the start of a course or activity to help them communicate more effectively and clearly. Adapt the information to suit your situation and distribute it to your learners as needed. This information is also presented in video.

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Discussion Forum Tips

A course discussion forum can be a useful space to develop your language skills and to build social relationships in an online class. For many of your classmates, your activity in a discussion forum will be the main way that learners know about you and interact with you. It is important to be prepared, to be professional, and to be clear when communicating in a discussion forum. Here is some advice for participating in a discussion forum for language learning:

BE PREPARED TO PARTICIPATE

- If the discussion is based on a reading or assignment, the assignment should be understood and the task should be completed before comments are posted. Review and understand the assessment criteria at the onset of the activity.
- It is important to stay on topic. Comments made should be relevant and encourage further discussion.
- Comments should make positive contributions to the discussion. Participants should be willing to ask questions and share knowledge with others on the discussion board.
- Read the assignment or discussion question early and contribute an initial post early. Posting initial thoughts early will give classmates a starting point to build conversation. As you check in and respond throughout the duration of the activity, these early posts will enable more robust discussion to develop.

BEFORE YOU POST YOUR COMMENTS, ASK YOURSELF THE FOLLOWING:

- Does this comment say what I want it to say?
- Will everyone understand what I mean?
- Have I reviewed and edited my response?
- Would I be comfortable saying this to someone face-to-face?
- Does this comment meet assignment criteria?

BE RESPECTFUL AND PROFESSIONAL

- A discussion board is used to facilitate online discussions among language learners in a professional setting. Posts should be professional and respectful in tone and content.
- Double check your posts before posting to avoid typing and spelling mistakes. It is good practice to craft your posts in a Word document, then copy and paste them into the discussion forum.
- Humor, irony, or sarcasm in posts can be easily misunderstood and should be used sparingly. Without tone of voice or body language, it is easy for readers to misinterpret the meaning of such posts online.

BE CLEAR AND CONCISE

- Answers should be kept to a reasonable length. Posts should adhere to any requirements set by the facilitators.
- It is generally a good idea to include only one point per post. Use multiple posts for multiple topics that you want to discuss.
- Short responses such as "I agree" should be avoided. Responses should add to the discussion.
- Acronyms, such as LOL, should be avoided as not everyone may be familiar with them.
- Typing in capital letters should also be avoided. It is regarded as SHOUTING when communicating online and may make posts seem aggressive.

DEVELOP YOUR LANGUAGE SKILLS

- Try using discussion forum techniques, like ending with open-ended questions or posting relevant multimedia to enhance your discussion.
- Use the discussions to experiment with language. Try using vocabulary and phrases that you have encountered in the class.
- Get in the habit of reading your classmates' posts out loud, to yourself. Reading posts out loud will give you speaking and pronunciation practice, and it may help to understand the tone of the post more easily.
- Notice the language that your classmates and facilitators use and try to adopt any language that you feel is effective.

Example Posts

Here is an example of a bad discussion forum post, followed by an example of a good discussion forum post:

DISCUSSION POST 1

I agree with your whole post. Also, in the other discussion you said something about having dificulty talking to one of the people in your neiborhood. Maybe you should talk to them more, or you should let them know what you think.

But, this reminds me, can someone tell me about our homework assignment for last week? I wasn't able to log into the course.

Reply 💬

Hi Zoe,

I agree with you on this maybe because we come from the same culture. I wonder if our views are similar because of the same cultural background that we share.

However, I also think that learning a language becomes more difficult the longer we are in a country because we have to learn the deeper cultural meaning and the slight nuances of the language that we use. Also, we might need to learn more work-specific language.

Do you or does anyone have any experience with workplace language learning? Did you find it very different than learning language for everyday use?

Jane

Reply 💬

In the first discussion post, notice some of the mistakes that the author makes:

- There is no greeting.
- She states agreement only.
- There are multiple topics in a single post.
- She is referring to a different discussion topic.
- When asking about homework, he is off-topic and should have notified the facilitator.
- She does not include a reflection question.
- The post contains spelling and grammar errors.
- He does not add anything to the discussion for this topic.
- Some of the suggestions are vague and not well-explained.

The second discussion post is better constructed. It includes a greeting and it is friendly. It gives reasons for agreeing and it extends the discussion into a new area. The post is focused on one topic only and it ends on a question to help bring other classmates into the discussion.