Ideas and Activities for Encouraging Interaction

As a facilitator, you need to keep your online language learning course or activity from becoming stagnant from a lack of interaction. Providing an interactive and engaging environment will attend to learners' motivation, and it will enable community to develop in the online space. An interactive and engaging environment includes ample opportunities for learners to interact with their classmates, facilitator, and course content. Ideally, learners will also feel a strong desire to interact, as the benefits of these opportunities for interaction become apparent and obvious.

An indicator that your online space is rich with the prospect of learner engagement is that you will start to notice learner presence emerging from the course activity. Learners will start following your lead and the lead of others in expressing themselves – their opinions, their reasons for learning, their frustrations, and their successes – in the online space. Learners will actively begin to post questions not only to the facilitator, but to the group as a whole. You will get a sense that learners are starting to realize that their presence is a major component of the learning that happens in the online space.

One of the ways to encourage an interactive environment in online language learning, where learners can build their presence, is to use the discussion forum effectively. For information on discussion forums, see our resource *Facilitating Discussion Forums in Online Language Learning*.

On the next pages are some tips for encouraging interaction and engagement in online language learning, apart from in a discussion forum.

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Tips for Interaction and Engagement

CONSIDER THE LEVEL OF INTERACTION NEEDED

There are different levels of interaction that can be included in an online course or activity – it depends on factors such as the technology available, the type of learner expected to enroll in the course, and the nature of the content. Language, being a socially constructed behavior, naturally requires a high level of interaction. However, learners will still need time to interact with content and to reflect on their own learning. Consider providing options for different levels of interaction for some activities in your online space. See our resource Evaluate an Activity for Interaction.

INCLUDE GROUP WORK

If you have a large group of learners enrolled in your online course or activity, consider putting them in groups and providing an online working space for them such as a separate discussion thread or an online conference room. With less number of people to respond to, group work can increase the number of interactions that learners experience, and it can also increase the importance of each interaction. Assigned roles within groups (e.g., leader, assistant, writer/submitter, researcher) can provide structure and an example of the different roles that learners can fulfill with their online presence.

USE STUDY BUDDIES

Pairing learners up with a "study buddy" can provide learners with the impetus to build social relationships in an online course or activity. For learners who might never have developed online relationships, the required communication of a study buddy pairing can be a doorway into learning what the experience involves. Learners will experience added interaction with their assigned partner, as well as experience an added sense of responsibility and accountability for someone else's ability to learn in a shared space. For language learning, study buddy pairings provide an advantage over group work because target language can be used more constructively and more directly.

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INCLUDE SYNCHRONOUS ACTIVITY

In the text-heavy asynchronous environment of online learning, your language learners will likely feel a desire for more speaking and listening activities. While listening activities can be supplemented by audio or video material, these media are mostly one-way interactions. Synchronous spaces, such as video or audio-conferencing (conference calls) are an excellent way to supplement your course with two-way interactive spaces. Provide these as supplemental spaces and events for additional language practice, or include them as required activities where learners may even have to take turns facilitating the activity. If you are including required synchronous events in your online course, be sure to anticipate any scheduling difficulties – one of the main reasons that learners enroll in online courses is because they cannot attend set class schedules. For more details, see our resource *Planning and Facilitating Web-conferences with English Language Learners*.

TALK ABOUT CULTURE

Invite learners to use their cultural experiences as a way to bring their own relevant context and prior learning into the shared space. Many language learners in a Canadian setting will have the shared experience of moving to a new country and the experience of living in language and cultural unfamiliarity. Classmates will learn from each other's perspectives and will start to develop a sense that their own insights on culture and language can be extremely beneficial for others in the class. Share your own experiences as an example. Ask others directly if they have any stories to share or unique experiences where they felt cultural differences caused miscommunication. A great question to start conversation is to ask about educational differences between their home country and Canada.

EXPLICITLY REFER TO LEARNER PRESENCE

The concept of learner presence, or social presence, is an important part of the Community of Inquiry framework for building community in online learning. The concept of learner presence will likely not be a familiar idea to learners, and it may even take some time for learners new to the online space to grasp. Refer to the concept explicitly in your welcome message or in your conversations with the class. Using the phrase repeatedly will give an impression that it is an important concept to consider. Directly ask your learners what they think it means and what their role is in developing learner presence. Use our resource *Learner Self-Assessment for Participating in Online Language Learning* to help your learners better understand why the concept of presence matters in online learning.