Setting Up a Discussion Forum

Discussion forums can be a central part of online language learning because of their strong reliance on written language and asynchronous communication. Learners will have time to read, reflect, compose, and respond to classmates and facilitators.

However, the asynchronous nature of discussion forums can also create stress for language learners. Learners may feel uneasy about posting in their target language for everyone to see. They may also feel overwhelmed by the amount of reading and writing that they need to do in order to keep up with the discussion.

Managed effectively, discussion forums can foster the collaboration needed for a community to develop in your online space. Good discussion forums will keep miscommunication and misunderstanding to a minimum. On the next page are a few tips to help you set up a discussion forum for language learning.

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Tips for Setting Up a Discussion Forum

PROVIDE CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS

Discussion forum interfaces, as well as Learning Management Systems, can often be busy places filled with features, language, and other clutter. Be very clear and direct in stating the instructions for the discussion forum. Repeat instructions that may have been posted elsewhere and link to discussion forum support and guidelines regularly. If possible, provide examples of actions you expect your learners to take.

PROVIDE CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Detail the language requirements of the discussion activity, if any. Explain clearly the way you will assess the discussion forum and whether you will formally assess the discussion. Clearly state any posting deadlines or important dates. Post or link to a discussion forum rubric, if you have one. There is a sample discussion forum rubric at the end of this document that you can adapt and use.

PROVIDE SUPPORT

As mentioned, linking to existing support is always a good idea. Also, include short descriptions and reminders about what to do in case of any problems. Short reminders will be useful for learners who are pushing the limits of their cognitive load by studying in another language. Statements like "If you can't figure out how to post a photo, send me a quick email and I can help" will be reassuring for learners sitting alone at their computer.

AVOID MULTIPLE TOPICS OR QUESTIONS

Keep separate discussion forums focused on single topics or questions. Gently remind learners about the goals of the activity when they begin to stray off topic. Each topic can be better explored by having its own discussion thread, and learners will have less confusion when the topic is centered on one single, clearly stated question. As well, keeping your own posts centered on a single topic models good discussion forum communication that your learners can imitate.

PROVIDE LANGUAGE BALANCE

Discussion forums are heavily based in text and focus largely on reading and writing. Ask yourself: *What can I do to lessen the cognitive overload when learning online requires a high demand of written communication skills?* Provide multimedia when you can and when it is suitable. There are many ways to supplement online activity with visual and audio language – try posting a video or audio message instead of a text post.

	Pass	Incomplete
Initial Post	▪ You make at least one intial post of the required length if it is specified in the activity. ▪ The content in your post relates to the topic and demonstrates reflective thinking.	▪ You don't make a post or your post does not meet the required length. ▪ The content of your post is off topic or simply restates the main concepts.
Response Post	▪ You post the required number of responses. ▪ Your responses demonstrate that you have read and considered the orginal post(s). ▪ Your responses contribute new information to or offer relevant feedback about the original post(s).	▪ You do not post the required number of responses. ▪ Your responses are off topic or simply restate the intial post. ▪ Your responses do not contribute to or provide feedback on the orginal post(s).