Virtual Culture Shock: Understanding Your Online ELL
by Anne Alexander

The dynamics of the American classroom have always niggled international students, but, thanks to the web, the potential to flummox vast numbers of English learners has never been greater. For many of these students, an online course may be their first brush with certain tenets of a Western-style education that, to us, are second-nature: participation, student-to-student interaction, and opinion sharing. To boot, they have to adapt to this new "culture of learning," defined as the "taken-for-granted frameworks of expectations, attitudes, values, and beliefs about how to teach or learn successfully" (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006, p. 9) while operating in the context-reduced environment of a laptop.

Culture shock isn't restricted to students sitting in traditional classrooms; it strikes online students as a kind of *virtual* culture shock. It is important for English language teachers to increase their own awareness of the classroom-related cultural travails of far-flung English language learners and to acquaint themselves with a few strategies on how to help students adjust.

Set the Level of Formality

The American classroom is more casual and informal than elsewhere, but it has an abstruse hierarchy: It may look flat, but it's not.

- Much as you would like to engender a relaxed and collegial environment, be aware that students familiar only with a rigid classroom structure may conflate "informal" with "not credible."
- Tell students how you would like to be addressed. Caution: being on a first-name basis with a teacher is likely to make many EFL students uncomfortable and perhaps ding your respectability.
- Establish the level of language decorum you expect: Is slang acceptable? Textese *(r u goin 2 b online 2 nite?)*? Do students need to thank others for responding to their posts? Is friendly banter in the forums appropriate?

Add Context to Low-Context Communication

Online students are trying not only to learn the English language, but they are doing so in a context-reduced environment (Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009). Because most online courses are conducted exclusively in writing, students can't make inferences about their instructor's or classmates' intended meaning from body language or tone of voice, nor do they a have a teacher who can clarify meaning in real-time.

- The best way to add context to an online course is to add video. Present your syllabus, lectures, assignments, and announcements via a free video conferencing platform like Google+ Hangouts. You can share your PowerPoint slides and "write on the board," streaming your image and audio from your webcam. Your students will be able to watch your facial expressions and hear your tone of voice as you discuss your material, helping them to decode your meaning. Upload the recorded video so that students can view it as many times as they need to.
- Better yet, present your material before a live, virtual audience. Even if your students are 12 time zones away, invite them to attend your presentation, scheduling your broadcast

using a group Google Calendar in GST. With everyone "live," you can entertain questions and hold discussions, if you choose. You might be surprised at the turnout: online students may be quite eager to be in the "studio audience" of a recording by their cool, English-speaking teacher. Even if there's just one student online with you, your lecture will be more energetic and authentic. Immediately afterwards, upload the recorded video for the rest of the class.

Facilitate Productive Relationships

Online students are separated geographically and temporally from their instructor and one another. Those from field-dependent cultures in Latin America and Asia may be unaccustomed to working individually and can feel lonely (Tan, Nabb, Aagard, & Kioh, 2010). Combat isolation by creating a virtual community.

- Break the ice by getting students to interact with one another as early in the course as possible (Murugaiah & Thang, 2010).
- Provide opportunities for students to work together either asynchronously or synchronously using Google+ Hangouts.
- Be aware that the posting of personal bios and photographs, as well as undirected "chat" (Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009) and the "getting to know you" activities ubiquitous in traditional English language courses may seem frivolous to online students (Tan et. al., 2010). Instead, ensure that interaction between students is purposeful, assigning activities such as peer editing or pair-shares; personal connections will come later, naturally.

Model and Provide Examples of Supported Opinions

Online students may be unaccustomed to initiating discussion, taking a position, critiquing others, and asking questions. Create a dynamic and respectful virtual environment in which your students can thrive.

- Provide a sample portfolio (written and video) of the kinds of opinion-based posts you expect.
- Be direct and nonjudgmental when explaining linear Western rhetorical conventions, as your students may be familiar only with styles of communication in which meaning is implied or conveyed circuitously (Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009).
- With peer editing, don't settle for exclusively positive feedback (E.g., "That was great!")
- Be direct: Couching constructive criticism in the form of praise for the good and "suggestions" for the not-so-good may be interpreted as mere advice that need not be followed (Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009).

Respect Your Students' Time Investment

Personal accountability is higher in an online course than in traditional classes; would-be slackers can't skate by without reading the material and/or participating in discussions. And, because most online courses are conducted entirely in writing, students spend lots—*lots*—of time composing and editing.

- Reduce the amount of writing your students have to do in the first place by assigning tasks that can be completed by video.
- Lessen the anxiety of posting poor writing (Murugaiah & Thang, 2010). If your institution uses Moodle or a similar system which disallows editing after 30 minutes, switch to Google Drive, where students can edit their posts if they need to.
- Watch your colloquialisms: Online students spend a considerable amount of time deciphering slang, idioms, and metaphors (Tan et. al., 2010). In a virtual environment, it's more difficult for English learners to delineate the boundaries of a seemingly nonsensical phrase, making it harder to look up, much less to understand.
- Advise your students to take just one class at a time (yours) if this is their first online class (Tan et al., 2010). This will allow them to become used to the online class format and help prevent them from getting overwhelmed.

Be Technologically Aware

No matter how "techknowledgable" your students are, they may be novices at online education (Murugaiah & Thang, 2010).

- Realize that they are dependent on a technological system that is operated in English (Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009); imagine if you were to take an online Uyghur language course using technology that was itself entirely in Uyghur.
- Resolve any and all technical issues immediately: technology is the online student's lifeline. (Murugaiah & Thang, 2010)
- Learn and explain your institution's privacy policy. Some students may be from areas of the world where it is not unreasonable to have trust issues about who has the ability to read or listen in on their online communication.
- Don't just hit the "send" button: use e-mail receipts, and encourage your students to use them; this will ensure there is a virtual paper trail and increase accountability from all parties.
- Provide an alternate e-mail address, and, if you feel comfortable with it, a phone number, so your students can contact you if the system goes down—or perhaps just to say "hi."

References

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