



3 Approaches to Managing Online Interactions

by [Terence McLean](#)

Many lives have been negatively affected by the 2020 global pandemic, and my heart goes out to all who have suffered physically, psychologically, emotionally, and financially. These dire times have brought difficulties beyond belief. Nevertheless, teaching and learning continue, and we must all adapt. This is especially true for language teachers, who must keep students engaged and prod them to be active participants online.

So, here we are in a [brave new world](#). I have been a career educator for a long time, and this past year and a half has been the most surprising, to say the least. In the middle of March of 2020, just as we were heading into the final few weeks of the semester, we found ourselves facing a trickling dike that eventually collapsed and forced our hand. The ways in which schools met this unprecedented predicament, and the manner in which instructors responded to the challenge has been laudable.

Zoom to the present: déjà vu. I adapted, students have been resilient, vaccines are here, and the sun will shine another day. Though time consuming, the pivot to remote instruction has been both invigorating and successful. Actually, I have been using online platforms for blended teaching and learning for many years, and there are advantages to this approach. Indeed, I now find myself rather liking certain aspects working from home, such as more time for grading, planning, and professional development. I have gotten accustomed to this brave new world. Hybrid is the future.

Since the move to more online teaching, I have noticed a few areas in which I can help students manage their interactions during online lessons. The following observations are subjective, as they reflect my own teaching style, use of technology, classroom management philosophy, and individual student behavior; nevertheless, I hope that a point or two resonate with fellow instructors. I have separated my tips into three sections: technology, participation, and pragmatic awareness.

1. Tackle Technology

Times have changed: wired to the ears, many students have game—they are tech savvy. Well, some students are perhaps still finding their game, but overall, teaching and learning can flourish given the proper support and a dash of patience. Also, English language learners, who come from

all over the world, are the epitome of endurance, especially many newcomers/immigrants/refugees with their families. Most have already experienced upheaval and have overcome this pandemic road bump. With their participation and cooperation, so have I. Moreover, my technological arsenal has become more jam-packed than the original.

First, we must realize that some students (and educators) have difficulty with technology and learning online. Therefore, the first few weeks of class can be trying for both students and instructors. Following are some ways educators can ease the tech burden on both students and teachers:

- **Provide tech support.** Encourage schools to provide staff and students with easy-to-use tutorials, support chat rooms, instructional screencasts, and training. My institution has been outstanding in this regard, so I have been fortunate.
- **Encourage students.** Students need to be encouraged to keep up and learn how to survive and thrive in an online setting—they need to take responsibility and do the extra work necessary for academic success online. “My computer froze during the test!” is not uncommon, nor is it necessarily anybody’s fault; however, a little upfront tech instruction, guidance, and support for students (and instructors) is essential for successful remote courses.

The most valuable tool that I relied upon last year was the tech chat line offered by my institution. The IT professionals have been the unsung heroes, in my opinion.

2. Encourage Participation

Most instructors have experienced the unwelcome silence associated with trying to get all students involved in an online session. Yes, many students thrive online, but others tend to hesitate, sit back, listen, or tune out completely. Therefore, getting some students to participate online can be challenging. Often, the same three or four students answer questions in the chat or verbally. However, students who are not encouraged to use the language will never become proficient in it. Period. Here are a few approaches to improving participation online:

- **Encourage camera use.** Cameras improve participation, so encourage students to turn theirs on, but make it voluntary. As the instructor, I turn on my camera most of the time when talking. When I share my screen or use an e-book, I turn it off. However, I do not insist that students turn on their cameras, and this certainly affects participation (or lack thereof). To be honest, I am uncomfortable forcing students to turn on their cameras; I respect individual choice, especially for students who are not comfortable in an online environment.
- **Be ready to adapt.** Each class is unique. Many instructors have no doubt had the experience of feeling exuberant after a particularly successful activity, only to have it superbly fail later with a different class. It is amazing how this happens. Yes, plans can go awry, and that is just a fact of school life. Different classes are made up of different students with different personalities, moods, tastes, principles, identities, abilities, and, in the case of online courses, learning environments. So, teachers require the ability to

handle whatever the universe throws their way; they need to be flexible and ready to adapt.

In particular, teachers need to be understanding and empathize. This is especially important in online courses because students may encounter interruptions, technology problems, and connectivity issues. Teachers can alleviate stress and frustration by offering students choice, such as uploading an audio/video file rather than doing a live presentation. Assignments and tests can have more flexible due dates. In the classroom, my students write essays at the same time, but online, I give them a window because I know that some have young children and prefer to do work in the evening.

- **Utilize breakout rooms.** One effective way to encourage more active participation is the use of breakout rooms. In the classroom, group discussion is commonplace; however, in an online environment, this can be somewhat difficult to replicate. Nevertheless, breakout rooms can be used to encourage and promote positive online communication with and among students. Use breakout rooms in a variety of ways, such as for
 - giving students the opportunity to talk in small groups.
 - preparation for a future presentation; students can practice in a small group before giving an online presentation to the whole class.
 - mock job interview practice between students.
 - jigsaw activities—assign each group a task (e.g., develop directions for how to make a great pizza; research about a country or person). The group members become the experts on the topic before they are put into a new group to share what the original group had discussed. The cooperative learning activity allows students to both discuss and teach in small online groups. Also, a low-stakes activity like this can promote communicative interactions in a welcoming and inclusive environment, which is essential for successful language development. (McLean, 2021)

I have increased my use of breakout rooms because my students told me that they wanted to have more opportunities to speak with one another. I had been leading too many instructor-focused lessons, and upon reflection, realized that I had to change. As a result, my students have become more willing to participate in both breakout rooms and the main classroom, which has been a pleasant surprise. My goal is to support students on their language learning journey, and providing the opportunity for online speaking practice in groups can help them achieve language proficiency and academic success.

3. Highlight Pragmatic Awareness

English language learners face a myriad of difficulties as they try to develop skills in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. This is exasperated when communicating online, especially in a chat area. I strive to highlight the importance of pragmatics in language learning so that students can have a fighting chance in the real world. The ability to use the appropriate language in a context-specific situation is indispensable. Following are a few ways to highlight pragmatic awareness:

- **Focus on the chat tool.** I have noticed that, at times, some students using the chat tool during a remote lesson come across as naïve or unintentionally rude. For example, some students post irrelevant comments. Others ask questions that were answered just minutes prior. Also, some students, perhaps forgetting they are not anonymous, post unwelcomed or negative comments about grades, the amount of homework assigned, or even another student's answer. Remind students that anything posted in the chat area should follow the same line of respect that we expect in the classroom.

Having talks highlighting pragmatic awareness with students has helped improve the tone and mood of my online classes; in fact, participation has increased because there is less hesitancy to speak up when everyone knows that all questions and comments will be treated with respect.

- **Promote academic/formal writing.** With the popularity of social media, many students tend to use informal language when they type online. I have found that this habit spills over to online written discussions, especially in my grammar and writing courses. Therefore, we need to encourage students to be more aware of writing style so that they are better able to create formal sentences, paragraphs, essays, and email messages. This is especially important if they have to request information, develop a résumé, or apply for a job.

Raising pragmatic awareness can make life easier for the instructor and empower learners with the tools for making better language use choices, which in the long run will help them in future courses or work situations.

Conclusion

The 2021–2022 academic year will be exciting. It looks like most kids have headed back to the classroom, and many universities are looking at more hybrid teaching and learning, which will become the norm, I believe. This can be a positive development if done with sufficient care and planning. I am looking forward to blending the flexibility of working from home with going to valuable face-to-face meetings with students. It could be a win-win.

Reference

McLean, T. (2021). Online breakout rooms: Jigsaw discussions and presentation practice. *English Teaching Forum*, 59(2), 45–48.

Terence McLean has been teaching for more than 30 years. Since 2003, he has been teaching English as an Additional Language at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. He taught in Niigata, Japan before that. He teaches both newcomers to Canada and international students, and he is especially interested in pragmatics in language learning.